

Fresno VA hospital to use \$20 million to hire 86 and improve specialty care

By Rory
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Veterans Affairs medical center in Fresno

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE

The Veterans Affairs medical center in Fresno announced at a town hall meeting on Thursday that \$20 million of additional funding will be used to hire 86 new employees, most of whom will replenish a specialty care department that both VA officials and veterans say is lacking.

About 75 veterans and community members gathered in the Clovis Veterans Memorial District building to listen to local and regional Veterans Affairs representatives and respond with questions.

Dr. Wessel Meyer, director of the Fresno VA hospital, said the new hires will staff areas like podiatry, urology and other specialty services that often have long wait times for veterans. Although the average wait time of one day for primary or mental care in Fresno is well below national averages, the typical wait for specialty care is 14 days — twice the U.S. average.

Lee Self, a Navy veteran who served in Vietnam, said he has waited more than a year to see a dermatologist. Meyer

said that a national shortage in the dermatology field has made it difficult to replace the Fresno VA's dermatologist, but the hospital is in negotiations with a replacement.

Meyer also discussed a need to "reclaim and keep the trust of our veterans." The local hospital will undergo a series of policy changes and a full retraining of staff members to provide better, more efficient care, Meyer said.

Appointment wait times have been an area of drastic improvement at the local VA medical center, Meyer said.

"In June 2014, we had over 750 veterans who had been on a wait list for longer than 90 days," he said. "Now, we have only 16, and we are in constant contact with them."

Other items covered on the agenda included plans for a three-story parking garage, where construction will begin in December, and the implementation of [MyVA](#), a national program that allows veterans who would have to wait longer than 30 days for care to seek it from a third-party provider.

Michele Kwok, assistant director of the Veterans Affairs regional office in Oakland, answered questions about long waits for benefit claim reimbursement.

"When I first joined the Oakland office in 2012, it was in a tough place," she said. "We had thousands and thousands of claims in our backlog. Now, about 92% of claims are settled in 125 days or less."

Several audience members told Kwok that 125 days wasn't a satisfactory number, saying that many of their private claims were solved in 90 days or less. They asked Kwok exactly how the regional office plans to expedite payouts on claims.

Kwok said that the regional office is working to facilitate better communication with the local branches and that VA offices nationwide are converting to an all-digital claims system that should speed up the process.

However, these changes may be too little, too late for some local veterans.

"I've been in the appeals process for a claim related to losing my sight for 37 years," said Marcus Alvara, a Vietnam veteran who wore heavy sunglasses and carried a cane. "My claim has reached Washington, D.C., and they told me it could be another four or five years before it's settled."

"I don't know if I will be on Earth that long."

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