

**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

**Memorandum**

Date: September 15, 2020  
From: Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Operations  
Subj: Changes to Consult/Referral Management during COVID-19  
To: Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Directors (10N1-23)

1. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide guidance to Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMC) about clinical consult/referral management during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and to specifically address the following:
  - a. Clarification of file entry date (FED), patient indicated date (PID) and wait time (WT) eligibility for community care for open consults/referrals;
  - b. Unscheduled consult/referral dispositioning;
  - c. Consult Toolbox (CTB) COVID-19 Priority Options and Specialty Care Prioritization document utilization; and
  - d. Use of Discontinue and Cancel consult/referral statuses in Computerized Patient Record System.
2. As per the VA MISSION Act, Access Standards apply in all circumstances to give Veterans choices about community care (CC) when they are eligible. Below is information that further clarifies the process.
  - a. Veterans are wait time eligible for CC when any unscheduled consult/referral has a file entry date or patient indicated date that is more than 20 (for primary care or general mental health) or 28 (for specialty care) days in the past.
  - b. Of note, if a Veteran is eligible for community care, the opportunities and benefits of receiving care within VHA can and should be provided as long as it does not restrict their ability to choose their preferred setting of care. Suggested scripting is included in an attachment to this document. Enhanced "ChooseVA" scripting for front-line staff can be found in Attachment A.
3. An updated PID on clinician review may guide prioritization of open consults/referrals but *may not* be used to impact wait time eligibility for community care. This guidance supersedes the following previously distributed:
  - a. Memorandum Outpatient Appointment Scheduling Management Moving Forward Post COVID-19, Attachment C: COVID-19 Related Consults released on July 8, 2020
  - b. Updated Attachment C: COVID-19 Related Consults and RTC Orders Management Including Community Care Requirements Around Wait Time Eligibility released on August 3, 2020
4. In March 2020, the Office of Veterans Access to Care (OVAC) issued guidance around management of consults/referrals that could not be scheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Open and unscheduled consults/referrals should now be dispositioned according to guidance as outlined in Attachment B.

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5. In May 2020, OVAC, the Office of Community Care and Specialty Care Services released the COVID-19 updates to the Consult Toolbox which included guidance to prioritize consult/referral review. To ensure that Veterans' care needs are met in a timely manner, the consult toolbox is now mandated to be used for all consults/referrals classified as Priority 1 or 2 for all services. See Attachment C for further details.
6. In order to better facilitate care delivery for Veterans and to enhance interprofessional communication, the consult/referral action **cancel** should replace **discontinue** in all instances. The status **discontinue** will no longer be utilized. See Attachment D for further details.
7. We are enhancing our capabilities to monitor the ability to schedule into our community care networks, particularly given the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. To align with OVAC's Cancelled Appointments and Consult Management Initiative (CACMI), Office of Community Care is mandating that facility community care staff utilize the Consult Toolbox Appointment Tracking tab, specifically the "Return from Community Care Provider" section to track scheduling challenges in the community. See Attachment E for further details.
8. When a Veteran is eligible for community care due to wait time and opts in, the VAMC staff member who forwards the internal consult/referral to community care should place the date of the next available internal VA appointment on the consult/referral when forwarding to community care. This will assist community care staff when discussing appointment availability options with the Veteran.
9. We seek to partner with Veterans to support them in decision making about care delivery whether in the VA or in community partners. For any questions please email at [VHACACMI@va.gov](mailto:VHACACMI@va.gov).



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