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## Push to reveal time vets wait for care

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Veterans advocates and two key congressional leaders said Tuesday the VA should make public reports that show whether it is providing timely health care appointments for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

The remarks follow an Observer analysis that found recent veterans seeking care for serious injuries and illnesses often wait longer than the VA's 30-day standard.

"That's an alarm bell we can not ignore," said Sen. Patty Murray, a Washington Democrat who serves on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "There's no way we can do our job unless we know the facts."

Murray plans to question the VA's top health official, Michael Kussman, on the findings at a committee hearing today. She also plans to ask the undersecretary for health about making the appointment information public.

The Observer analysis of 283,000 recent outpatient appointments found the VA scheduled 93 percent within 30 days, a key measure of its ability to meet demand.

However, veterans suffering traumatic brain injury, grave wounds or serious illnesses accounted for a large share of those waiting longer. Those veterans represented 10.5 percent of appointments scheduled, but 20 percent of those with longer waits, according to data in VA records. That could signal the VA is struggling to care for the neediest of new veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has disputed the findings, saying the reports are management tools to identify long waits but not an accurate measure of total service. The agency says it is meeting patient needs.

Critics say the analysis shows the system is overwhelmed.

"It's a sign that we're failing veterans," said Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraq veteran and founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "This is the statistical data to back up what we've been hearing."

Problems could worsen. Better military medical treatment means some soldiers are surviving wounds that would have killed them in the past. They come home needing a lifetime of costly care.

The VA does not typically disclose how long veterans wait for scheduled appointments. Those reports, as revealed by the Observer, are red flags of potential delay problems.

"It's tragic and unacceptable," said U.S. Rep. Bob Filner, the California Democrat who heads the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs.