**Veteran Appointment Reminders**

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# Action requested

Determine if appointment reminder text message costs should be funded via IT or non-IT funding.

# Background

Missed hospital appointments (also known as missed opportunities) lead to “worse care for patients, the inefficient use of staff, and increased waiting times.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Multiple studies have shown text message (SMS) reminders, “significantly reduce non-attendance” and “are more cost-effective than telephone reminders.”[[2]](#footnote-2) VA has built a text appointment reminder system, called VEText, which is currently being used in five VA medical centers. We recommend the VA use this system nationally. To do so, a determination must be made about whether IT or non-IT dollars should fund appointment reminder text messages.

# VEText Background

VEText is a Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging based VA clinical appointment reminder system developed and maintained by VA developers at the Loma Linda VAMC in California. The graphs below show the missed appointment rates decreasing at Loma Linda after VEText was implemented in September 2016:

VEText is currently in use at 5 VA Medical Centers and has sent about 600,000 text messages this year. Any user at a participating facility with a cell phone number in VistA receives a text message reminder before their appointment with the option to confirm or cancel the appointment by responding to the message. Each message gives the Veteran the ability to opt-out of all future messages; thus far about 0.5% of users have chosen to opt out. Administrators can specify what time appointment reminders should be sent and what the content of the messages should be. No additional software needs to be installed at each facility for VEText to be used.

VEText uses Twilio, a commercial messaging provider, to send text messages. Each text message costs $.0075 cents to send or receive. As one example of cost, in June 2017 at the Loma Linda VAMC, text messages for 29,084 appointments were sent to 17,524 patients at a cost of $1,083.

As an example of cost savings VEText can enable, following full VEText implementation at the Tampa VAMC in June 2017, the missed opportunity rate decreased 13.5% from the previous year. Applying a 13.5% reduction to the number of missed opportunities in FY16, Tampa would expect 17,239 fewer missed opportunities annually. The average cost per encounter for Tampa in FY17 was $283. Using these figures the total potential cost avoidance would be $4.9M annually at a cost of $30K to send the messages.

# Contracting Considerations

Currently when bringing on a new hospital to use VEText, a new contract needs to be stood up to pay for the cost of the messages for that hospital. Each hospital incurs this cost, both in time spent getting the contract and in dollars paying for the messages.

The open question is what type of appropriation should fund appointment reminder text messages. Thus far for the pilots, VHA dollars have been used, but if VEText is going to spread nationally, we want to be sure the proper type of funding is used for this contract.

# Action requested

Determine if VA appointment reminder text message costs should be funded via IT or non-IT funding.

1. Hallsworth M, Berry D, Sanders M, Sallis A, King D, Vlaev I, et al. (2015) Stating Appointment Costs in SMS Reminders Reduces Missed Hospital Appointments: Findings from Two Randomised Controlled Trials. PLoS ONE10(9): e0137306. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0137306 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Junod Perron N, Dao MD, Righini NC, Humair J-P, Broers B, Narring F, et al. Text-messaging versus telephone reminders to reduce missed appointments in an academic primary care clinic: a randomized controlled trial. BMC Health Serv Res 2013;13: 125131. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)