

Central Oregon veterans stymied by new VA program

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Talk to enough veterans about trying to use the cards that are supposed to let them get health care at private clinics, and a theme emerges. After enough phone calls, enough hours on hold, enough being tossed from operator to operator, they give up.

"I will never use the Choice Program again. Never," said 68-year-old Marine Corps veteran Ken Miller, of Bend.

Miller went ahead with his long-overdue colonoscopy in January, but — even after about six hours on the phone — he still doesn't know whether the VA will foot the bill.

That's further than Ron Gordon, a 66-year-old veteran from La Pine, got. He hasn't even been able to make an appointment. He probably never will.

"After getting shuttled around, kicked around the barn a couple times, I do exactly what they want," he said. "I give up."

It's a similar story with 46-year-old Iraq War veteran Mark Webb, of Redmond, who says his care was first approved and then denied.

"I think a lot of veterans just give up," he said. "They say, 'I don't need this.'"

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs began mailing out cards for the so-called Veterans Choice Program last August, and the program officially launched in November. It's yet another VA program designed to allow veterans to get private care if they face long waits or travel time. But this one, carried by the momentum of a nationwide scandal over long wait times, was looked to as a sweeping solution.

The excitement around the Choice Program has more than fallen flat. Among some Central Oregon veterans, it's generating downright outrage. Many cite breakdowns in communication between the VA, the contractors leading the program and private health care providers. Simply put, the information necessary to obtain the care doesn't make it to the providers.

Conversations with local veterans groups turned up many people who had attempted to get care through the program, but none successfully. Data from the VA Portland Health Care System quickly showed why that was. The system, which provided more than 905,000 outpatient visits last year, has only covered about 1,000 appointments under the Choice Program, said Portland VA spokesman Daniel Herrigstad.

Nationally, 8.6 million Choice cards were sent out, but only about 24,300 veterans received appointments as of Feb. 5.

'Irritates us to no end'

Anyone enrolled in VA care received a Choice card in the mail, despite the fact that many are not eligible for care through the program. To be eligible, veterans must have been given a wait time of more than 30 days by their local VA facility and they must live more than 40 miles from the nearest VA facility.

That creates a tricky situation in Central Oregon, where most veterans live well within 40 miles of the Bend VA clinic. But the clinic provides only outpatient services, including primary care and some specialty care, such as urology, audiology and mental health. For the bigger stuff, many veterans still have to travel more than 160 miles to the Portland VA Medical Center.

"That I live here in Bend and I have to put rural guys on the bus to send them to the Portland VA irritates us to no end," said JW Terry, board president for Central Oregon Veterans Outreach.

A group of U.S. senators, including Oregon Democrats Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, took issue with the fact that the VA's eligibility for the Choice Program doesn't consider the type of care available within 40 miles.

"In many areas across the nation, the effect is that those who need services only available at a VA medical center, but who live near a Community-Based Outpatient Clinic, are prevented from using the Choice Care to access specialty care in their local community," the senators wrote in a Feb. 25 letter to the VA secretary.

The problems aren't unique to Central Oregon. Eighty percent of veterans who said they live more than 40 miles from a VA facility and could not be seen within 30 days were not given the choice to receive non-VA care, according to a Veterans of Foreign Wars report (http://www.vfw.org/uploadedFiles/VFW.org/VFW_in_DC/VFWInitialReportonVeteransChoiceImplementation.pdf) released earlier this month.

The VFW identified a lag time between VA facilities approving people into the program and that information being relayed to the program's contractors. As a result, people could not schedule appointments with providers. Another issue has been confusion over what health care service is needed. If the VA doesn't clearly identify the service, the contractor, TriWest, can't schedule the appointment.

'Absolutely a nightmare'

Miller, who lives on Bend's east side less than a block from Vince Genna Stadium, said he retired from the Marine Corps with full disability in 1967. He started getting care through the VA the following year. In close to 50 years, he said, he thought he had experienced VA dysfunction at its worst.

"But I have never gone through anything like this," he said of the Choice Program.

After he got the card in the mail in November, Miller — already two months backlogged for an overdue colonoscopy at the Portland VA — called the number on the card. An operator gave him an authorization number. Not long after, the Bend Surgery Center, where he was to receive the colonoscopy, told him the number was incomplete. Miller called TriWest, the contractor for the Choice Program, to get the full authorization number. That ended up being a 2 1/2 -hour call.

"It was absolutely a nightmare," he said. "I went through nine people."

Eventually, he got the number. All seemed well, until the center called back and said it was still wrong. He called TriWest again and an operator promised to fax the information to the provider immediately. An hour later, staffers at the center said they had not received it.

"They were livid," he said. (The Surgery Center's business office manager said she was not authorized to talk about the situation.)

Then things took a turn. The operators who until now had been polite and apologetic, Miller said, got rude. He said he tried to remain polite.

"They still treated me like I was a piece of nothing," he said. "It was a joke."

Miller ultimately went ahead with the colonoscopy Jan. 28, signing off to pay for it in case the Choice Program didn't come through. He still hasn't been able to get an answer from TriWest, although someone from the company did call him recently to report that his right knee replacement had been approved. Miller's right knee was replaced in 2009 and he had not asked for that procedure.

"I just laughed and hung up," he said.

Now, he waits.

"It's the anxiety part of it," he said. "You're waiting for the hammer to fall."

Miller, who said he badly needs his left knee replaced, plans to use Medicare for future procedures, and whatever supplemental insurance he can find — that or he'll pay out of pocket.

Miller said he doesn't want to discourage other veterans from using the Choice Program. Those who received the cards should call and learn whether they're eligible, he said.

"If you went through what I went through and what I'm sure a lot of vets have gone through, you wouldn't want to do it anymore," he said.

These days, the Choice Program comes up at just about every meeting at a PTSD support group that meets at the Vet Center near Lava Lanes on Bend's east side.

Zin Watford, a 77-year-old retired Marine, attends the weekly meetings. He doesn't need to use the Choice Program because his health care is covered under a different VA program, but he feels for veterans who have no other options.

"They give you the Choice card and then they put so many damn restrictions on using it that they can't use it," he said, "and so they really, really are complaining about it."

Uncertain future

The Choice Program is different from another that lets veterans get non-VA care, called Patient-Centered Community Care, or the PC3, which the VA rolled out in September 2013. Choice has clearly defined eligibility rules, while PC3 left those decisions up to individual VA clinics, said Carlos Fuentes, senior legislative associate with the VFW.

Fuentes said it's good to have both programs, because some veterans choose to stay in the VA system even if they have to travel.

"It should be the veteran's choice," he said, "but they should know when they have that choice."

Rodney Hines, a 27-year-old Marine Corps veteran who lives in Bend, said it can sometimes be uncomfortable to get care in non-VA facilities. When Hines, who suffers from PTSD, goes to The Center: Orthopedic & Neurosurgical Care & Research in Bend, for example, he said he's "constantly on edge." The chairs are so close together he's elbow-to-elbow with strangers.

At the Bend VA clinic, however, the chairs are wider and have their backs to the wall. And the doctors and staff there understand him, he said.

"I don't have to worry about them judging me," Hines said.

The VFW continues to monitor the Choice Program and plans to release another report later this year. In its March report, the VFW said the 40-mile rule should not be measured in a straight-line, "as the crow flies" fashion as it is currently and should instead be driving miles.

The VA announced Tuesday it plans to change the 40-mile rule to driving distance.

Following news of the Choice Program's low utilization rate, President Barack Obama's fiscal-year 2016 budget calls for money to be removed from the program and diverted to others within the VA. But several veterans who were interviewed for this story said the low utilization is not because people don't want to use the program but because they were turned away or gave up.

Then there's people such as Steve Kompir, a 73-year-old Army veteran who lives in Bend. After hearing about his friends' struggles trying to enroll in Choice, he's not even going to bother. Last week, he spent a half-hour on hold with the VA just to make an appointment to have his hearing aids cleaned and repaired. When it comes to the VA, everything is a source of frustration, he said.

"I've heard two people that I trust say that the program is so faulted at this point — unless you want to put in some more frustrating times and calls, get stuck on hold, you might as well stick with what you've got or use private insurance," he said.

That's why Kompir has commercial insurance and relies on private providers for much of his care, including much of his treatment for prostate cancer.

"I have enough frustration just getting the basic stuff done," he said. "All I need is another layer of frustration."

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Andy Tullis / The Bulletin Ken Miller holds his Veterans Choice Program card while standing in the living room of his home in Bend last week. The card, given out by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, is supposed to allow veterans to get private care if they face long waits or travel times, but many local veterans say the program has been difficult to navigate.