
Veterans Choice Program

Initial Report: Executive Summary

Compiled by the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

In August 2014, Congress passed and the President signed into law the *Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA)* with the strong support and insight of the VFW. This critical law commissioned the new Veterans Choice Program, which now offers critical non-Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) care options to veterans who cannot be seen by VA in a timely manner or who live more than 40 miles from the nearest VA medical facility (40-milers).

In order to allow veterans to take advantage of the new Veterans Choice Program, VA has issued Veterans Choice Cards to veterans who were enrolled in VA care as of August 1, 2014. VA is also working with two health care contractors, Health Net and TriWest, to stand up community networks of doctors who will accept patients for non-VA care, as well as operate 24-hour call centers to help veterans identify whether or not they are eligible to receive care through the Veterans Choice Program and schedule non-VA care appointments.

The Veterans Choice Program became operational on November 5, 2014, meaning VA and its partners only had three months to stand up a new veterans' health infrastructure. As a result, the VFW knew there would be issues for veterans who sought to take advantage of this new program.

In an effort to mitigate problems and to gauge the pulse of the veterans' community, the VFW continues to publicize its national veterans' help line, 1-800-VFW-1899, has built a new web page where veterans can learn about this important program, www.vfw.org/VAWatch, and commissioned a direct survey where affected veterans could share their experiences.

As expected, the VFW found that the Veterans Choice Program has experienced initial implementation problems. The VFW has worked closely with VA, Health Net, and TriWest to identify and resolve such issues. Fortunately, those efforts have started to yield results. Several initial implementation issues have been addressed, but much more needs to be done to ensure veterans who face geographic challenges or wait-time barriers in obtaining VA health care have timely access to high-quality care in their communities.

This report includes highlights and data trends that the VFW identified over the first three months of the Veterans Choice Program's implementation. It includes detailed analysis of participation, wait-time standard, geographic eligibility, and non-VA care issues that must be addressed to ensure this important program succeeds in increasing access to health care for our nation's veterans.

In an effort to continue to hold VA accountable and to keep the VFW's pulse on the Veterans Choice Program, the VFW has launched a second round of the Veterans Choice Program survey, which is available via www.vfw.org/VAWatch. As the program's implementation progresses and veteran experiences change, the VFW will continue to issue reports on what is working and how VA and Congress can improve this important program.

Recommendations:

Fortunately, The Veterans Choice Program has begun offering care options to veterans. The problem, however, is that many veterans who are eligible have not been given the opportunity to take advantage of the program. A program of this magnitude is likely to encounter issues during its initial roll-out, which is why the VFW makes the following recommendations to ensure consistent delivery of health care options for veterans:

- VA must provide frontline personnel the training they need to ensure veterans who are eligible for the Veterans Choice Program are afforded the opportunity to participate.
- VA's wait-time standard must be modified to allow veterans to seek care through the Veterans Choice Program if such care cannot be provided at a VA medical facility within the clinically indicated date.
- VA must ensure the proposed Medical Appointment Scheduling System has a compliance aspect to preclude schedulers from using prohibited scheduling practices.
- Congress must amend VACAA by changing the Choice Program's geographic eligibility from geodesic distance to driving distance. In so doing, Congress would truly ensure veterans are not burdened with excessive travel to VA medical facilities.
- Congress must exercise proper oversight to ensure VA is utilizing its non-VA care authorities in cases where it is unable to readily provide veterans the care they need due to lack of available specialists, long wait times, or geographic inaccessibility.
- VA must ensure that Non-VA Care Coordination teams at all VA facilities are adequately staffed with professionals capable of handling the influx of work.

The VFW has been monitoring the Veterans Choice Program from Day 1, and we will continue to monitor its progress to identify shortcomings and work for reasonable solutions. This report is only the second in our series of reports on the state of VA health care and the implementation of the Veterans Choice Program.

In order to continue holding VA accountable, we will need more input from veterans who interact with the VA health care system, and who may be eligible for the Veterans Choice Program. To take part in the process, take a few moments to complete the latest survey at www.vfw.org/VAMatch.



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