

Veterans' Health Care

VFW's Concerns:

With 145 medical centers, 1,235 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC), and a total of nearly 1,700 points of care, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system is tasked with providing timely and high quality health care to more than nine million veterans, their families, and survivors every year. Due to a continuously expanding number of enrolled veterans, under-resourcing, systemwide problems, and a general culture that is resistant to change, VA has faced many challenges in meeting its obligations to deliver timely and high quality care.

After conducting six surveys over the past three years, the VFW knows veterans prefer receiving their health care at VA. Our members report receiving high quality care, maintaining positive long-term relationships with their care teams, and preferring the continuity of care which is unique to VA. For this reason, the VFW is adamantly opposed to privatization of the VA health care system. However, VA can't be everything for everyone. This is why the VFW supports VA's Choice Program, and believes improvements must be made. The program must be made permanent instead of being treated as a temporary band-aid. There must also be no arbitrary guidelines for which veterans qualify for the program. Choice must be a patient-provider decision based on the clinically necessary timeline for treatment.

A recent suicide study of veterans conducted by VA found veterans total 18 percent of adult suicides in the United States, with an average of 20 veterans who die by suicide every day. Of those 20 veterans, only six are actively enrolled in VA and, contrary to popular belief, the majority of veterans who die by suicide are 50 years of age or older.

Veterans using VA health care and the uninsured are the only people in the United States forced to pay for preventive prescriptions. Recent independent studies have found that veterans who turn to VA for their health care needs are more likely to have chronic illnesses and injuries, and to be of low income. While veterans who are at least 50 percent service-connected are exempt for copayments for prescriptions, the majority of veterans using VA care are required to pay for their prescriptions. According to VFW health care surveys, the cost of preventive medicine often leads to veterans choosing to forgo filling possible life-saving prescriptions such as aspirin for cardiovascular disease, vitamin D to improve lower extremity function, preventive breast cancer medication, and many more.

Women veterans are the fastest growing subpopulation within the veteran community, and estimates indicate their population will be the same size as the entire active duty force by 2030. VA must be ready and able to provide the gender-specific care women veterans deserve, to include more reproductive research.

At the center of many issues within VA are the difficulties faced with hiring employees in a timely manner and then retaining them. Congress must provide VA the tools necessary to quickly hire qualified individuals, and maintain competitiveness with the private sector to retain those who are hired.

VFW's Solutions:

- Congress must authorize and properly fund a permanent community care program, while also assuring veterans eligible for the program are deemed so based on a patient-provider decision for clinical necessity.
- Congress and VA must work to reduce the rate of suicide among veterans and ensure veterans receive timely access to high quality mental health care.
- VA must ensure its health care service programs are equal among men and women veterans. Women veterans need gender-specific care for mental health, primary care, specialty care and pharmaceutical care. Congress must also commission toxic exposure research to understand gender-specific health ailments, as well as how it has affected reproduction for veterans who were exposed to toxic substances.
- Congress must pass H.R.1100 or S.1161 to remove copayment requirements for VA preventive care prescriptions.
- VA must be able to expedite hiring of highly qualified employees and be given the tools necessary to retain them.