

VAU.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs**News Release**Office of Public Affairs
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 14, 2016

VA Schedules 2 Million Appointments Using Veterans Choice Program*Improvements being made in increasing access to Community Care, but more work to be done*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Veterans Choice Program (VCP) has reached a key milestone, improving access to health care for Veterans. “VA is pleased to announce over 2 million appointments have been scheduled using the Choice Program,” said VA Secretary Robert McDonald. “Though we are making progress, we will not rest until all Veterans who choose VA to be their healthcare provider are receiving the care they need, when they need it. We will continue to make strides towards an integrated care network, and I urge Congress to enact our [Plan to Consolidate Community Care](#) so we can continue to build upon our progress.”

The Choice Act, which included the VCP, was passed in August 2014 to help Veterans access timely health care both within VA and the community. VA was required to implement a new national program in just 90 days, with new requirements that complicated the way VA provides community care. Recognizing many of the challenges early in the implementation of the program, VA and its stakeholders worked together to make the necessary changes while, at the same time, implementing the new nationwide program.

VA outlined and proposed a community care consolidation plan that would not only improve community care but also be easy to understand, simple to administer, and meets the needs of Veterans, community providers, and VA staff. VA submitted this Plan to Congress in October 2015. Within the plan are several legislative proposals that VA and Congress need to collaborate in order to improve the community care experience for Veterans and providers.

VA’s first proposal would increase Veterans access to community care providers by allowing VA to enter into agreements directly with local community providers. The second would streamline when and how much VA pays for health care services by authorizing VA to be the primary payer. The third would allow VA to more accurately account for healthcare purchased in the community. And the last proposal requests for funding and funding flexibility to improve access to care, reimburse the cost of emergency treatment, and create value-based payment models to best serve Veterans that need community care.

“VA is developing innovative ideas and solutions to enhance the Veterans experience and strengthen partnerships with community providers” said Dr. Baligh Yehia, Assistant

Deputy Undersecretary for Health, Community Care. “The Choice Program of today is a very different program than the one rolled out in November 2014. Many improvements have been made and we continue to work to deliver care to Veterans where and when they need it.”

VCP PROGRESS TO DATE

- Over 2 million appointments scheduled using the VCP, which significantly increased Veterans access to care.
- Though VA saw an overall increase in utilization since the start of VCP, from October 2015 to March 2016 VCP authorizations for care increased 103%.
- The Choice Provider Network grew by 85% in the last 12 months to a network size of over 350,000 providers and facilities.
- Improved timeliness of payments to community providers by removing the requirement for Veterans to submit their entire medical record prior to payment.
- Reduced administrative burden for medical record submission for community providers by decreasing the documentation required.
- Embedded VCP contractor staff with VA staff at select locations to streamline care coordination for Veterans.
- Created dedicated teams across the county to deliver community care improvements.
- VA partnered with Congress to change laws to improve the community care experience by:
 - removing the enrollment date requirement for Choice, allowing more Veterans to receive community care;
 - implementing criteria of 40-mile driving distance based on the medical facility with a primary care physician to increase number of Veterans accessing the program;
 - implementing the “unusual or excessive burden” criteria to increase access for Veterans that do not meet other eligibility criteria; and
 - expanding the “episode of care” – the necessary course of treatment, including follow-up appointments and ancillary and specialty services – authorization from 60 days to a duration of up to one year to reduce the administrative burdens of Veterans, community providers, and VA staff.

“VA needs Congress’s continued support to keep driving progress forward,” said VA Secretary Robert McDonald. “Several legislative barriers remain which inhibit improvements outlined in our Plan to Consolidate Community Care Programs.”

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