

Wall Street Journal OpEd: Unfinished Repairs at Veterans Affairs

By John W. Stroud

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The crisis in confidence at the Department of Veterans Affairs—started last year after allegations by a whistleblower about veterans dying on secret waiting lists—was caused by systematic failures at every level: oversight that was too trusting; a decentralized management system; a culture of indifference toward politically appointed leadership; and a lack of proper resources, both human and fiscal.

But in the wake of public outcry, much progress has been made. One of the biggest leaps was passage in August last year of the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act. The legislation allows veterans to see non-VA health-care providers if they live more than 40 miles from the nearest VA medical facility, or if they cannot be seen at a VA facility within 30 days.

The Veterans Choice Program isn't a solution for every challenge the VA faces, and positive changes haven't come as fast or been as thorough as some might like. But one large step forward came in late March when the VA announced that it was changing how the 40-mile rule is calculated.

Previously, the distance was drawn in a straight line, or "as the crow flies." But geography often made this measurement unhelpful and misleading. For example: The north rim of the Grand Canyon is roughly 10 miles away from the south rim—well within the 40-mile rule bubble—but it is 200 miles away "as the crow drives." Many veterans who thought they were eligible for the choice program were understandably confused when they were told that they technically fell within the 40-mile radius. The VA deserves credit for listening to their frustrations and switching its calculation to actual driving distances.

No exemption, however, has been announced for veterans who have a local VA that cannot serve their medical needs. For instance, a Vietnam veteran from Jackson, Tenn., currently

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seeks treatment for a neurological condition in Memphis, which requires him to travel, round-trip, 170 miles. He would prefer to visit a non-VA doctor closer to home through the Veterans Choice Program, but he is ineligible because he resides within 40 miles of a VA outpatient clinic—a clinic that does not have a neurologist on staff.

It is absolutely unthinkable to expect any veteran to travel such distances for treatment, especially knowing that non-VA care is readily available much closer to home—if only the VA would deem him eligible. The House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees are reviewing this problem, but Congress knows that the more the 40-mile bubble is expanded, the more the program will cost. We believe that veterans should be given the choice, as the name of the law passed last year implies.

At this point, the successful implementation of the Veterans Choice Program hinges largely on the VA getting out of its own way—and that includes training its staff to properly explain the program's nuances to inquiring patients. My organization, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, released in March a [survey](#) of more than 2,500 veterans. Of those who believed they were eligible for the choice program, only one in five were offered the option to participate. That figure is getting better, however.

Preliminary results from our latest survey, which we expect to complete and release later this month, show that more than a third of respondents are now being offered options for non-VA care. That's an improvement we hoped to see as the program continues to mature. But more work is still required to ensure every veteran who is eligible is afforded the option to participate.

The VFW may sometimes be called the VA's harshest critic, but we are always in fact its strongest supporter. We believe we must improve upon the programs and benefits that veterans are offered, not dismantle what has taken so long to build. We remain confident that the VA—together with lawmakers and partners such as the VFW—can fix what's broken, hold its employees accountable for their actions, and in the end regain the trust of our nation's veterans and their families.

Mr. Stroud is the national commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its auxiliaries.

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