

VFW Releases New Veterans Choice Program Survey Report

May 11, 2015

WASHINGTON — The latest survey report by the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. reveals that veteran participation and awareness of the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Choice Program are improving, but that there are still fundamental areas of concern that must be addressed in order to ensure every veteran who is eligible for the new program is provided the opportunity to use it. The principally areas of concern are the lack of standardized customer service training, unsuitable patient wait time calculations, and a 40-mile rule that still forces disabled veterans to drive long distances instead of allowing them to seek non-VA care closer to home.

This is the second in a series of surveys that the VFW expects to continue throughout the short lifespan of the Veterans Choice Program, which was activated on Nov. 5, 2014, to help the VA overcome a nationwide crisis in care and confidence. To date, the VFW has analyzed input from more than 9,600 veterans regarding their satisfaction and access to the now six-month-old program, which will expire in 2017. The latest report, released today, is the result of 2,155 responses to a VFW survey of membership between Feb. 6 and April 6, plus an apportionment of more than 5,000 direct phone and e-mail contacts with VFW national offices.

“The VFW’s new survey reveals that 35 percent of veterans who believed they were eligible for the program were offered the option to participate, which is a significant improvement that we expected as the new program matured,” said VFW National Commander John W. Stroud, “but there are still a number of hurdles that must be addressed if the Veterans Choice Program is to live up to its name.”

Regarding customer service, veterans are still encountering VA representatives who are unable to explain the nuances of the Veterans Choice Program, which confuses veterans and lowers their confidence in the VA. The VFW insists that VA must create and field a standardized training procedure, to include quality assurance checks, so that all frontline staff can speak with one knowledgeable voice.

How patient wait times are calculated is also a major concern. The current VA wait time standard first requires a veteran to wait at least 30 days beyond the time a provider deems

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clinically necessary before being considered eligible for the Veterans Choice Program. According to Stroud, the wait time standard is not aligned with reality, especially where the severity of illnesses are concerned. “Patient satisfaction is based on how long veterans perceive the wait, not how VA calculates them,” he said. “If a doctor says a veteran needs to receive an MRI within a week to evaluate the veteran’s chest pain, then that veteran must receive an MRI within a week, regardless of whether the care is received through a VA medical facility or through the Veterans Choice Program.” Along with unreasonably long waits, the VFW also believes the current wait time standard remains susceptible to data manipulation.

Regarding the 40-mile rule, the VFW is working with Congress to change the hurdle to allow veterans to seek non-VA care if their nearest VA medical facility is unable to treat their wound, injury or illness. At the VFW’s insistence, the VA dropped its 40-mile “crow fly” rule in early March, and now uses pre-established driving distances.

“Fortunately, the Veterans Choice Program is improving access to care for thousands of veterans, and the hurdles that remain are not insurmountable,” said the VFW national commander, whose organization remains committed to the successful implementation of the program.

The survey report’s findings and 13 recommendations are now available online on the VFW website [here](#).