

Most Private Doctors Not Prepared to Treat Veterans

A RAND study of New York physicians found that while veterans living in the Empire State like to use doctors outside the VA, most physicians in the private sector were unfamiliar with veterans' unique conditions

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More than 800,000 veterans in New York find it difficult to get quality health care outside the VA, according to a study released in March by the RAND Corp.

The nonprofit research organization published a study called “Ready or Not: Assessing the Capacity of New York State Health Care Providers to Meet the Needs of Veterans,” and found that only 5 percent of the 746 health care providers surveyed in New York are members of the VA Community Care network. VA manages and funds a number of non-VA programs through its Office of Community Care that provides veterans with care in the community.

In New York, VA operates 12 medical centers and 48 outpatient clinics, but only about half of the state's vets are enrolled in the VA system. And only 58 percent of those enrolled used the VA in 2015, according to the RAND report.

The authors conclude that these results mean “many” New York veterans are receiving health care in the community sector.

The study was conducted at the behest of the New York State Health Foundation, but it comes at a time when U.S. government officials are deciding whether or not the Veterans Choice Program is beneficial for veterans.

“The failure of the Choice Program is not paying the health care providers in a timely manner,” said VFW Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief William “Doc” Schmitz, of Corning, N.Y. “It has caused many health providers to stop offering health care to vets.”

Implemented in 2014, the Veterans Choice Program offers private-care options for veterans who live more than 40 miles driving distance from a VA medical facility or can't get a VA appointment within 30 days.

The RAND study shows that timely access to care is not the problem in New York — quite the contrary. Some 61 percent of surveyed providers reported that new patients would be seen within two weeks, while 45 percent said most patients could be seen the same day they call for an appointment.

The main problem, according to the report, is quality care. Only about 13 percent of

surveyed medical providers said they had participated in formal training with regard to military and veteran culture. Of those who had not received formal training, less than half expressed an interest in receiving future training.

Only 19 percent said they were aware of the Veterans Choice Program. Furthermore, just 20 percent reported that they routinely screened patients for a military or veteran affiliation.

“These findings reveal significant gaps and variations in the readiness of community-based health care providers to provide high-quality care to veterans,” said study lead author Terri Tanielian, a senior behavioral scientist at RAND. “It appears that more work needs to be done to prepare the civilian health care workforce to care for the unique needs of veterans.”

To determine the “readiness” of private doctors, researchers used seven questions. They asked physicians if they were:

- Currently accepting new patients.
- Prepared to deal with conditions common among veterans.
- Providing high-quality care to their patients.
- Screening for other conditions common among veterans.
- Accommodating patients with disabilities.
- Familiar with military culture.
- Screening patients to determine whether they are current or former members of the armed forces or family members of such a person.

Just 2.3 percent of providers met all of these criteria, the report revealed. To that end, study authors recommended four objectives that private doctors should meet. Those are:

- Improve understanding of VA and available veterans resources.
- Increase familiarity with and preparedness related to military culture and service-connected health conditions.
- Improve provider screening practices.
- Implement quality monitoring and management systems for VA Community Care.

This article is featured in the 2018 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor, VFW magazine.