



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Fact Sheet

Office of Public Affairs
Media Relations

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VA Makes Enhancements to the Veterans Choice Program

Background:





On August 7, 2014, President Obama signed into law the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA). In July 2015, Congress passed the Surface Transportation and Veterans Health Care Choice Act (also known as the VA Budget and Choice Improvement Act) which directed VA to make a number of changes to the Veterans Choice Program. On December 1, 2015, VA published an Interim Final Rule detailing the implementation of each change.

Updated Veterans Choice Program Eligibility Requirements:

Under the updated eligibility requirements, a Veteran is eligible for the Veterans Choice Program if he/she is enrolled in the VA health care system and meets at least one of the following criteria:

- A Veteran is told by his/her local VA medical facility that they will not be able to schedule an appointment for care:
 - Within 30 days of the date the Veteran's physician determines he/she needs to be seen; or
 - Within 30 days of the date the Veteran wishes to be seen if there is no specific date from his/her physician.
- The Veteran lives more than 40 miles driving distance from a VA medical facility *with a full-time primary care physician*.
- The Veteran needs to travel by air, boat, or ferry to the VA medical facility closest to his/her home.
- The Veteran faces an unusual or excessive burden in traveling to a VA medical facility based on geographic challenges, environmental factors, a medical condition, the nature or frequency of the care needed, and whether an attendant is needed. Staff at the Veteran's local VA medical facility will work with him/her to determine if he/she is eligible for any of these reasons.
- The Veteran lives in a State or Territory without a full-service VA medical facility which includes: Alaska, Hawaii, New Hampshire (Note that Veterans are not eligible under this criterion if they live in New Hampshire and live within 20 miles of the White River Junction VAMC), and the United States Territories (excluding Puerto Rico which has a full service VA medical facility).

Side-by-Side Review of Changes

<u><i>Old Policy</i></u>		<u><i>New Policy</i></u>
Veteran must have been enrolled in VA health care by 8/1/14 or able to enroll as a combat Veteran to be eligible for the Veterans Choice Program.		Any Veteran enrolled in VA health care will meet basic eligibility for the program.
Unusual or Excessive Burden eligibility determined by geographical challenges, environmental factors, or a medical condition impacting the Veteran's ability to travel.		The nature of the hospital care or medical services, how frequently the care is needed, and the need for an attendant are now also considerations for eligibility under the unusual or excessive burden eligibility criterion for Veterans who reside less than 40 miles from the closest VA medical facility.
Veterans must call Third Party Administrators (TPAs) themselves to follow-up on authorization updates.		Contractors now have the ability to make outbound calls to Veterans directly once authorizations are received. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance-eligible should call Choice Program Call Center (866-606-8198) to make an appt. • Wait List-eligible Veterans will receive a phone call from the contractor to set up an appt.
If a Veteran's current residence is more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest VA medical facility, they are eligible for the program.		If a Veteran is more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest VA medical facility with a full-time primary care physician, they are eligible for the program.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: Why is VA making these changes?

A: VA recognizes that there are opportunities to improve access to, and experience with, the Veterans Choice Program. Through collaboration with our partners in Congress, we were able to make a number of changes to the legislation. These changes align with our goal to expand Veteran access to timely, high-quality health care.

Q: How do Veterans make appointments for care through the Veterans Choice Program?

A: The way appointments are made have been improved based on Veteran feedback. To make an appointment:

- Distance- Eligible Veterans call 866-606-8198 to make sure they qualify for the program and to schedule an appointment. When they call, they will be asked for:
 - First and last name
 - Full address
 - The name of their preferred community physician

Wait List- Eligible Veterans will receive a phone call from one of VA's community health care partners (a non-VA phone number). When they receive this call, they will be asked for their:

- First and last name
- Full address
- Date of birth
- Last 4 digits of your social security number

Veterans should continue to call 866-606-8198 or visit www.va.gov/opa/choiceact with general questions about the Choice Program.

Q: How is it determined if a VA medical facility has a full-time primary care physician?

A: A "full time primary care physician" means at least one individual physician whose workload, or multiple physicians whose combined workload, equates to a 0.9 full time equivalent employee that works at least 36 clinical work hours per week.

Q: What related to the specific nature and frequency of health care needs might qualify a Veteran for the Choice Program?

A: Examples of some health care needs that could qualify a Veteran for the Choice program include:

- The nature or simplicity of the hospital care or medical services the veteran requires, or
- how frequently the Veteran needs hospital care or medical services, or
- the need for an attendant who provides aid and/or physical assistance to the Veteran.

This will allow VA to determine, for example, if routine and simple procedures that do not necessarily require the expertise or best practices of VA physicians can be sought through the Veterans Choice Program. Similarly, if a Veteran needs repeated appointments for a course of treatment, the frequency of travel could become an excessive burden on the Veteran that could be alleviated or lessened by receiving care closer to home. If a Veteran requires an attendant to travel to a VA medical facility, coordination could become burdensome and may be alleviated by use of the Veterans Choice Program. These examples are demonstrative and not exhaustive. VA will make a determination on a case-by-case basis.

Q: Where can I get more information about the program?

A: Please review the VA Choice Program website at <http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/>