

Veterans Choice Improvement Act of 2016

Senators Burr, Hoeven, Tillis and Ayotte

In 2014, Congress took the first step to address the VA health care crisis with the passage of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, which created the new Choice card that allows veterans who face long waits or distances to see a doctor of their choice. Since then, we have learned that systemic problems still exist and that the VA has resisted letting veterans see doctors outside the VA. This means veterans are still facing unacceptable hassles and delays.

The Veterans Choice Improvement Act seeks to improve the Veterans Choice Program and to eliminate the redundant, bureaucratic layering that is causing our veterans to experience confusion and delay. Our veterans fought to defend our country, and we promised them the best health care in the world. This legislation seeks to make good on that sacred promise by:

- ★ Providing veterans with one easy-to-understand program that allows them to get health care outside the VA by consolidating the myriad of existing programs, contracts and authorities that currently allow veterans to receive care from a non-VA provider.
- ★ Ensuring that veterans can continue to count on health care that is both timely and close to home by making the Veterans Choice Program, which is scheduled to sunset in 2017, a permanent program that is also funded in advance.
- ★ Enhancing current eligibility criteria for the Veterans Choice Program so that no veteran loses their eligibility for non-VA care and the ability to choose their own doctor.
- ★ Prohibiting the VA from imposing a so-called “tiered network” that would restrict a veteran’s ability to choose among providers.
- ★ Enabling the VA to manage resources in an efficient and transparent manner by creating one funding account dedicated to care outside of the VA.
- ★ Streamlining funding for care and allowing the VA to manage that funding in a more efficient manner.
- ★ Ensuring that veterans can get the care they need without having to drive long distances to VA medical centers by enabling the VA to enter into agreements with local medical providers when the VA is unable to meet the demands of veterans in a local area.
- ★ Setting strict time standards for claims reimbursement and standardizing reimbursement rates so that outside medical providers will no longer be hesitant to work with the VA to see veterans because of the agency’s notoriously antiquated and inefficient claims process.
- ★ Calling on the VA create an electronic claims submission process that is modern, secure, and efficient.

Veterans Choice Improvement Act of 2016

The Veterans Choice Improvement Act of 2016 seeks to solve the problems that are contributing to the VA's continued inability to provide consistent, quality health care to veterans across the United States. There are currently three common complaints from veterans and health care providers about Choice and the other non-VA care programs that currently exist:

Problem #1 – Systemic confusion with accessing health care outside the VA

The VA has the legal authority to send veterans outside of the VA to receive care, but there are multiple programs, contracts and laws that confuse everyone involved. The eligibility requirements, reimbursement rates, funding sources and regulations that govern the programs are all different, and this creates confusion that ultimately harms veterans.

✓ Solution #1 – Simplify the system

The Veterans Choice Improvement Act simplifies the process by consolidating redundant and overlapping programs into the Veterans Choice Program and creating one funding source for all non-VA care programs. This will streamline and simplify the process for veterans who need to go outside of the VA to receive care.

Problem #2 – Medical providers fear working with the VA

VA has an antiquated, slow, and inefficient claims processing system that often makes it very difficult for private medical providers to work with the VA. Reimbursement from VA for medical claims is chronically slow or not forthcoming at all, which is currently causing significant financial hardship for many small medical practices and hospitals. This is creating a major disincentive for doctors to do business with the VA, which is jeopardizing veterans' ability to get the health care they need.

✓ Solution #2 – Create a standardized claims processing system using industry best practices

The Veterans Choice Improvement Act requires that the VA will create a modern, secure and efficient claims submission process. It gives strict timelines for reimbursement to providers and includes measures to make sure that the VA meets those timelines. It standardizes reimbursement rates and defines what information the VA needs to promptly reimburse a claim. The intent is to create a system that is user friendly for medical providers so that they are eager to work with the VA to provide quality care to our veterans.

Problem #3 – VA does not use local medical providers to help veterans

In rural states, it is common to hear of a veteran who has to drive four or more hours each way just to receive care for something as simple as getting a new pair of eyeglasses. This defies common sense when the veteran could go to any number of local providers near their home to be cared for but is instead made to drive hundreds of miles. Why doesn't VA just have an agreement with local providers to help veterans?

✓ Solution # 3 – Provide VA with the ability to enter into provider agreements

This legislation allows the VA to enter into provider agreements with local providers when VA is unable to provide that service or when it places an excessive burden on the veteran to get to that care. This will help thousands of veterans who live in rural or other areas with health care shortages to receive the care they need much more easily and conveniently.