The VA's Community Care Initiatives

Recent programs aim to improve access; but they depend on provider participation.

Many veterans struggle to find care near where they live. As noted in our earlier fact sheet "Distance to Care," the number of VA hospitals and outpatient clinics is limited and veterans must often travel long distances to use their benefits or seek care outside of the VA system.

The large population of aging vets coupled with the numbers of newly returned service members has placed a mounting burden on the Department of Veterans Affairs. The agency responded with initiatives that aim to improve access via transportation and telehealth resources, and by expanding the provider network that vets can access.

Increasing access to VA providers

In 2014, the "Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act," commonly called the "Choice Act," enabled the creation of tools and resources to improve veterans' access to care, including making better information available about VA providers and appointments.

- **Access and Quality in VA** – Launched in April 2017, the Access and Quality in VA tool allows patients to look up how many days it takes on average to get an appointment, to compare average wait times and quality ratings for providers.

- **VA Video Connect** – Also unveiled in 2017, VA Video Connect lets a veteran use the camera on their phone or computer to interact with their providers remotely via live video. Within its first five months, more than 8,000 vets had used it for over 24,000 appointments.

- **Veterans Transportation Service** – This service provides free transportation to participating VA medical centers for qualified veterans who are visually impaired, elderly, or immobilized due to disease or disability, particularly those living in remote and rural areas. Unfortunately, for some veterans the Veterans Transportation Service would actually increase travel times, due to the limited shuttle schedule. Each authorized VTS has its own guidelines on eligibility and availability of services.

Expanding the community provider network

The VA has also created two initiatives that expand the network of providers that a veteran can see.

- **Veterans Choice Program** – Created in 2014, the Veterans Choice Program allows VA beneficiaries to obtain care in their own community. The VCP covers community-based primary care, inpatient and outpatient specialty care, and behavioral health care. A VCP-eligible veteran must receive prior authorization to get care from a community provider, as the program is meant for cases where the closest VA facility cannot provide the services due to lack of specialists, extended wait times, or extraordinary distance from theveteran's home.

- **Patient-Centered Community Care** – This network is similar to the VCP, but Patient-Centered Community Care consists of community providers who are pre-approved by the VA that a veteran may be referred to if needed. The PC3 network helps expand access to resources such as primary care, specialty care, mental health care, emergency care, and newborn care. All PC3 providers are listed in a Preferred Provider Network

database, and they become the first option for referrals outside the VA. The vet does not need to be eligible for the VCP in order to receive care from a PC3 provider.

More than 446,000 federal, private, and academic partners have already joined the VA's community care provider network, which has extended care to over 1.5 million veterans across the country.

But while these new programs are making a real difference, these efforts alone cannot overcome the barriers of eligibility and distance, and the fact that the number of providers available to veterans is a small fraction of what their civilian counterparts have access to.

How can community healthcare providers help?
A key way that you, as a community healthcare provider, can help veterans access care is by becoming a VCP provider. Each new member expands the VA's community care network, helping more veterans gain access to care that's convenient. VCP membership also makes it possible for you to bill the VA for care that you may already be providing to an eligible veteran. The program is overseen by three third party administrators (TPA), and a VCP provider must contract directly with the TPA in their region. Providers must also accept Medicare rates, have similar credentials to VA staff, and meet several other eligibility requirements to be enrolled in the program. To learn more, visit the VCP provider page.

More information: smartpolicyworks.com/veterans/