

## The Distance between Veterans and Care

**In addition to the long wait times, the facilities are few and far between.**

Meet Paul. He's a post-9/11 veteran who lives in a rural community outside Kankakee, Illinois. Following his return to civilian life, Paul was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and his doctor recommended that he begin an outpatient treatment program. The closest VA facility that provides PTSD treatment is Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital, 12 miles west of downtown Chicago. This means Paul must drive 140 miles round-trip three days a week to get the care he needs. *(Paul is fictional, but his situation is real.)*



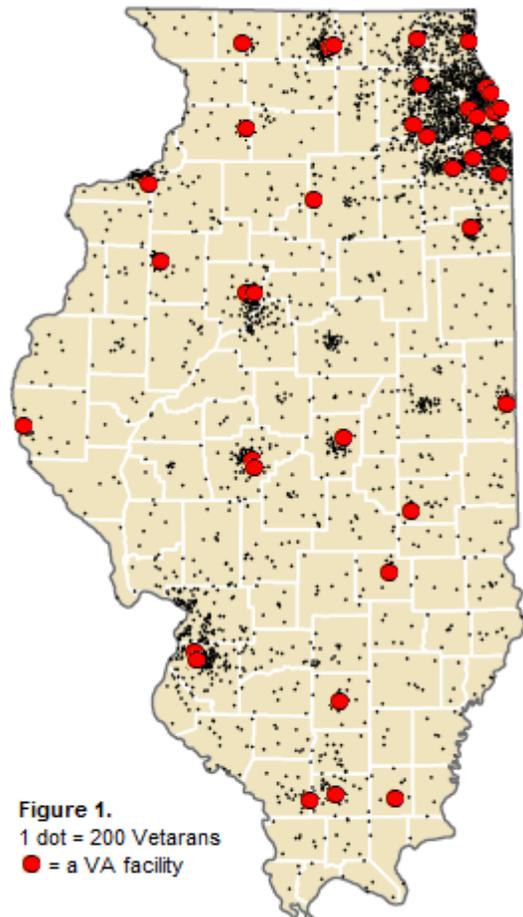
Paul is not alone. Many veterans must spend inordinate amounts of time traveling long distances to use their VA benefits. And this lack of access to convenient care is driving many vets to seek providers outside of the VA system. In fact, although more than 21 million veterans live in the United States,<sup>1</sup> with 200,000 returning to civilian life each year,<sup>2</sup> the VA only serves about 9 million each year.<sup>3</sup>

With more than 170 medical centers and 1,065 outpatient sites around the country, the Veterans Health Administration remains the nation's largest integrated healthcare system.<sup>3</sup> So why are vets finding it difficult to access providers that are closer to where they live?

### The challenge

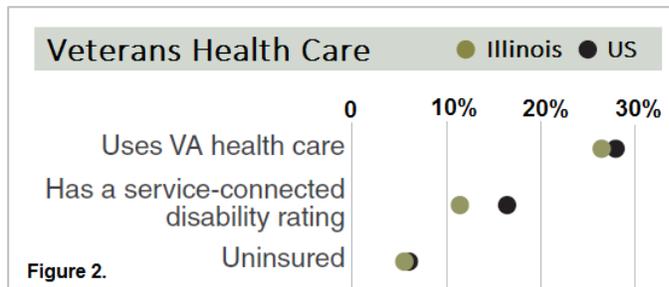
This lack of access to convenient care is caused by two major factors. First, the population of veterans seeking care has increased significantly as aging Vietnam veterans begin to have complex health needs, and Iraq and Afghanistan vets return home. Coupled with a predicted shortage of more than 91,000 physicians nationwide by 2020, the VA is struggling to meet the intense demand for care.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the number of VA hospitals and outpatient clinics is extremely limited, due in part to the lack of providers. Illinois, for example, has only 37 facilities,<sup>5</sup> down from 43 facilities according in 2015 (*Figure 1*).<sup>1</sup> That's roughly one facility for every 20,000 veterans. Only five of these VA facilities in Illinois, and only two of them are outside of the Chicago metropolitan area, are hospitals.



VA community-based outpatient clinics focus on primary care. They may have access to some specialists, a pharmacist, behavioral health, and/or social work services. But a veteran would need to go to an actual VA hospital to access the full range of medical treatments, such as surgical care, medical imaging, and PTSD – or SUD-specific programs. So it's not surprising that only 26% of the veterans in Illinois use VA facilities for their care (Figure 2).<sup>1</sup>

As the population of veterans looking for healthcare continues to grow, the discrepancy between need and availability of care will become even greater. The VA has made strides in dealing with this issue, including implementing some important new initiatives to make finding and getting to VA providers easier.



But more work is needed to lessen the physician shortage and entice more physicians to practice within the VA health system. Learn how you can help by becoming a community care provider in our fact sheet on "[The VA's Community Care Initiatives.](#)"

Sources:

1. <https://www2.census.gov/library/visualizations/2015/comm/vets/il-vets.pdf>
2. <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2016/03/30/usda-helps-military-veterans-answer-question-whats-next>
3. <https://www.va.gov/health/>
4. <https://www.aamc.org/advocacy/secondopinion/381096/06062014.html>
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