

First DAV CAN message (posted and sent 7/10/2015):

DAV Position on VA Health Care Reform

Over the coming weeks leading to DAV's 2015 National Convention in Denver, Colorado, we will be alerting you, other DAV supporters, and convention delegates to the critical issues and emerging threats facing VA health care in the aftermath of the 2014-2015 access-to-care crisis and how DAV believes the system can be reformed to better serve the health care needs of the men and women for whom this system was designed. This alert is the first of those messages. Please send any feedback via email to legislation@dav.org.

Millions of veterans need and rely on the VA for health care and DAV intends to ensure that those veterans continue to have access to high quality, timely health care when and where they need it. We are convinced that VA is the best health care system to treat the unique needs of wounded, injured and ill veterans for a number of reasons. First, VA is structured to treat the whole veteran – that means both their basic primary care, as well as their specialized and service connected conditions. Quality health care must focus on the entire patient, not just certain injuries or illnesses. VA specializes in holistic and preventative care which is more likely to lead to better health outcomes for veterans. VA offers a veteran-centric culture and has developed expertise treating veterans of all generations, particularly for war-related injuries, such as those resulting from exposure to military toxic and environmental hazards. VA has a national, integrated network of health care and benefits that also provides comprehensive and interrelated transition and readjustment services to help veterans throughout their post military lives.

While there are still areas where it can and must improve, VA health care has been consistently judged to be among the best health care systems in the world when measured by objective standards for quality and safety. VA offers numerous specialized programs to treat the physical and mental health challenges of veterans that simply don't exist in general health care, or are very rare and scarce. All DAV members served during wartime, and most are enrolled in VA care because of VA's expertise in treating their wounds, illnesses and injuries.

VA has a track record of providing direct health care to veterans (as well as world class biomedical research programs and graduate medical education for future doctors), but VA has too often been hampered due chronic underfunding of its health care program. DAV and our Independent Budget partners have documented these funding shortfalls annually for more than a decade, a fact that was independently identified as far back as 2003 in an authoritative report of The Presidential Task Force on Improving the Delivery of Health Care to Our Nation's Veterans. And as both the Report and DAV predicted, chronic underfunding leads to a lack of access and waiting lists for veterans, which is exactly what occurred last year.

In response to the problems uncovered last year, Congress and the Administration have made changes to a wide variety of VA policies, programs and activities, including the creation of a temporary, 3-year "choice" program to increase non-VA care options. While these changes are designed to help VA address the access crisis in the short term, it is imperative that we start to focus on about how best to reform VA for the long term. Our goal must be to ensure that

wounded, injured and ill veterans have timely access to high-quality health care, which we believe requires a strong and robust VA at its core.

Some groups and even some Members of Congress are calling for the “choice” program to be made permanent and expanded to all veterans. Others have called for VA to greatly shrink or restrict its direct health care mission to combat-related injuries. There is even a proposal to convert VA to an insurance program forcing veterans to receive their care in the private sector.

As Congress and others start to consider these proposals, it is essential that we begin by focusing on what is best for the veterans. “Choice” may be a great sound bite, but it is not a solution that will adequately meet the needs of our nation’s wounded, ill and injured veterans. Rather than simply giving veterans a card to find care in the private sector on their own, our goal must be to reform VA so that it can remain the best, most accessible choice for veterans, delivering high-quality, high-value health care.

VA is already the world leader treating PTSD, spinal cord injury, blindness, amputation and other wartime injuries. VA is a proven leader in preventative care for veterans. VA clinicians spend more time with their patients, ensuring they treat the whole veteran. Independent studies show that VA screens for service-related conditions that are often overlooked by or irrelevant to private sector providers.

This is not to say that we are satisfied with state of VA health care today. Too much of what has been uncovered in the VA health care system is inexcusable and needs reform today. No veteran should have to wait too long or travel too far to get health care. But rather than privatize, downsize or eliminate VA altogether, we believe that veterans need a stronger, healthier VA to ensure they get the care they have earned.

Next week DAV will share its plan to reform the VA health care system to ensure all enrolled veterans, especially those wounded, injured or made ill as a result of military service receive timely, high-quality health care services that meet their unique needs. We welcome your ideas, suggestions and comments which can be sent to: legislation@dav.org.

Second DAV CAN message (posted and sent 7/16/2015):

DAV Framework for Building a Better VA

As mentioned in our message last week, we propose a new framework to meet the needs of America's veterans based on **rebuilding, restructuring, realigning** and **reforming** the VA health care system. We have received numerous comments from our first alert, some with very positive comments and experiences with VA that illustrate that the VA health care system is capable of improving the lives of ill and injured veterans. However, we also received some comments that clearly showed areas that are in dire need of improvement. DAV believes all veterans who seek care in the VA should have a positive health care experience, which can only happen with a robust VA health care system that is capable of providing timely, high quality health care when needed by eligible veterans, both inside VA and in the community. Our proposed reforms are intended to ensure VA can provide that kind of care.

VA needs to **rebuild** and sustain its internal capacity to provide timely, high-quality health care. This begins with a long-term strategy to recruit, hire and retain sufficient clinical staff at all facilities to meet the needs of all enrolled veterans. In addition, VA must secure the funding to implement a long-term strategy to repair, maintain, relocate and expand, as necessary, usable treatment space to maximize access points where veterans can receive care. VA must build on temporary initiatives implemented last year by permanently extending hours of operation outside traditional working hours. It also should strengthen its research programs to prepare for veterans' future health care needs. In addition, academic affiliations support the teaching and research programs for future staffing and recruitment, and improve the quality of VA care.

VA needs to **restructure** and consolidate all non-VA care programs, into a single integrated Extended Care Network. A single program means VA remains accountable for the health care, whether delivered by VA or by a community provider. It would guarantee non-VA health care is coordinated. Consolidation would provide comprehensive access instead of simply giving veterans a payment card. Restructuring will require VA to complete the research and analysis related to the "choice" program. Based on research and data, VA must develop an integrated Extended Care Network which incorporates the best features of fee-basis, contract care, ARCH, PC3, "choice," and other purchased care programs. However, this will only work if Congress provides a single, separate and guaranteed funding mechanism. To be veteran-centric, VA must establish a new clinically based access policy. In addition, VA must develop an appropriate and effective decision mechanism that ensures that veterans who need medical care are able to access the extended care network, and make rapid decisions to ensure they gain access quickly.

VA must **realign** and expand its health care services to meet the diverse needs of all generations of veterans, beginning with new urgent care and extended operating hours. Like any large health care system, VA should provide walk-in capability. Urgent care services could be delivered in existing facilities, or smaller urgent care clinics situated in new locations. It should give veterans the ability to self-schedule appointments through web and app-based programs and expand web-based and tele-medicine options to reach rural veterans. It should also eliminate barriers and expand services to ensure that women veterans gain equal access to high quality, gender-specific, holistic, and preventative care. VA must also rebalance long-term care services

to provide greater access to home- and community-based services, including expanding support for caregivers of veterans from all generations.

VA must **reform** its management culture through increased transparency and accountability. It should implement a new, transparent multi-year budgeting process that tracks funding and ties it to health outcomes. This approach is already working for the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security and legislation is pending in Congress to bring the same program to VA. Another improvement would be to establish new performance standards for VA leaders and employees that focus on veteran-centric outcomes. VA should modernize and streamline hiring and human resources policies to more effectively compete with the private sector and other federal agencies. VA must reform and strengthen its Patient Advocate program to achieve greater independence from VA facility leadership and greater authority to cut through barriers and perform their duties to ensure that veterans receive timely, high-quality medical care services. Finally, VA must hold all of its employees – from the Secretary to receptionists – to the highest standards, while balancing the need to make the VA an employer of choice among federal agencies and the private sector.

The framework outlined here offers a new pathway that could lead toward a more responsive and better managed system. DAV is convinced that the VA health care system must be the centerpiece of how our nation delivers health care to America's wounded, injured and ill veterans.

Next week, DAV will explain why some current proposals to reform VA health care might appear beneficial, but in reality could be devastating for meeting veterans' health care needs.

Third DAV CAN message (posted and sent 7/23/2015):

Moving Forward to Reform and Build a Robust VA Health Care System

While we fully support the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and believe the VA health care system is the best model of care to treat service disabled veterans, DAV *is not* satisfied with the state of VA today. VA absolutely must reform from top to bottom and must refocus its work squarely on veterans.

As we reported last week, there are some key reforms that are essential for building a healthy and robust VA health care system for the 21st Century. Congress must commit to provide the VA the resources it needs to modernize, **rebuild** and sustain its internal capacity to provide timely, high-quality health care. To better serve veterans, VA needs to **restructure** and consolidate all non-VA care programs into a single integrated Extended Care Network. VA must also **realign** and expand its health care services to meet the diverse needs of all generations of veterans, beginning with establishing new urgent care centers out in the community, and continue its extended operating hours. Finally, VA must **reform** its management culture through increased transparency and accountability.

As we previously noted, some elected officials are proposing additional reforms in VA health care that we believe would ultimately weaken the system and move VA in the wrong direction. We have warned that these types of proposals risk eliminating VA as a direct care provider—and will fracture the care that veterans would be able to find for themselves. Overly simplistic “choice” proposals sound good, unless you are a wounded, injured or ill veteran with complex and specialized medical needs who is left on his or her own to find care in the private sector, equipped only with a card.

DAV needs grassroots support, and your direct experience with VA, to remind Congress—and even your own VA facility, why the VA system is essential and important to you as a disabled veteran. Most importantly, please tell them we want to ensure veterans have the **choice** to get all or most of their care from VA, and for VA to have the resources and flexibility to provide coordinated care in the community when necessary.

In Washington, DAV continues to work with our service organization partners, and with the Administration and Congress, to address the problems that have been identified. We must work together to ensure a viable health care system for ourselves now, and for future generations of disabled veterans.

We hope in these messages that we have been able to convey the seriousness of the situation, what is at stake for you, and for all veterans nationwide. We are approaching a Presidential election year and it is more important than ever to collectively make our voices heard. Between now and the November 2016 election, it is likely the future course of veterans health will be decided. Please let your elected officials know what is important to you as disabled veterans, and what we need, deserve, and expect from our VA.

DAV hopes this information has helped you understand and appreciate why we are steadfast in our belief that VA is a vital national asset to disabled veterans. We recognize that some veterans have had a negative experience at VA and we appreciate you providing us that feedback.

DAV's goal is to ensure VA is reformed and services improved so that all veterans who chose VA are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve and most importantly get the care they need in a timely manner.

Please join us in this battle.