

ISSUE BRIEF: TIMELY ACCESS TO VA HEALTH CARE SERVICES

Situation

- For more than a decade, the VA health care system has been under-resourced and unable to provide timely access to all enrolled veterans seeking medical services.
- During the spring and summer of 2014, a crisis erupted in VA health care when it became broadly known that tens of thousands and perhaps many more veterans were waiting for VA health care without appointments. Some veterans died while waiting.
- While the primary cause of access and waiting list problems was lack of available provider slots and insufficient space, there were also problems in VA's scheduling and accountability systems that resulted in secret waiting lists, falsification of appointment records and the destruction of official documents.

Challenge

- VA pledged to meet the needs of all veterans waiting for care, either by immediately scheduling them for appointments within the health care system, or by contracting for their care with private health care resources. VA also requested an additional \$17.6 billion to increase its capacity to deliver care.
- Congress rapidly enacted Public Law 113-146, the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, which provided temporary 3-year authority and \$10 billion for purchasing new non-VA care for veterans who cannot get VA care within certain access standards; those who reside 40 or more miles from a VA facility and those who must wait more than 30 days for an appointment.
- The new law also provided VA with an infusion of \$5 billion to be used for hiring new clinical staff and expanding treatment space to increase VA's ability to deliver timely health care to enrolled veterans.

Solution

- Congress must work closely with VA to sensibly implement the new law, particularly the temporary provisions to provide veterans with "Choice" cards, in order to avoid confusion among the 9 million enrolled veterans, the vast majority of whom will not qualify for this new non-VA care program.
- Congress and VA must refocus on the underlying causes of VA's access problems and on long term solutions, rather than short-term fixes, such as temporarily purchasing non-VA care. VA must remain first and foremost a provider of the full continuum of health care services required to ensure the best health outcomes for veterans', especially disabled veterans who rely heavily on VA.
- VA must request, and Congress must appropriate, the full amount of medical care funding required to sustain the VA health care system, including its specialized medical and research programs, without reliance on budget gimmicks or unrealistic projections of collections and savings.
- VA must also request, and Congress must appropriate, sufficient funding to repair, renovate and replace VA's aging infrastructure, including its IT and research infrastructure.