

VA Choice program's distance rule to be revised

By Patricia Kime, Staff writer 7:43 a.m. EDT March 24, 2015



(Photo: Department of Veterans Affairs)

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After much debate over how the Veterans Affairs Department chose to define the 40-mile distance rule for veterans to access the new Veterans Choice health program, VA will announce today that it's changing the definition.

Rather than use an "as the crow flies" measure of 40 miles, VA will rely on driving distance from a VA medical facility as the qualifier to use Veterans Choice, a program that lets veterans see a civilian health care provider if they live in a remote area or can't get an appointment at a VA facility.

Under the VA Access, Choice and Accountability Act passed by Congress last year, veterans who live more than 40 miles from a VA facility were supposed to have access to the Choice Card program.

But VA's strict, straight-line interpretation left some veterans with lengthy drives because of geographic obstacles or convoluted roadway routes.

The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee has a hearing scheduled today on the 40-mile rule; earlier this month, 41 senators petitioned VA to relax its interpretation.

House lawmakers also have pressed VA Secretary Robert McDonald for a change, sending him a letter on March 3 signed by 53 representatives.

"When Congress passed the Veterans Choice program, we intended the program to be widely available to ensure that all veterans receive timely access to medical appointments," said Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif.

McDonald says VA decided to make the change after receiving "constructive feedback."

"We've determined that changing the distance calculation will help ensure more veterans have access to care when and where they want it," McDonald said.

According to the VA, the policy change will be made through "regulatory action in the coming weeks."

But officials also stipulated that the change will affect only veterans who live 40 miles from any VA medical facility.

Veterans who live within 40 miles of a community-based clinic or other VA health facility but need advanced care not offered at those facilities still will not qualify for the program.

VA officials said the law will have to be changed for those veterans to participate.

According to the VA, about 45,000 medical appointments have been scheduled through VA Choice since the program launched last November.

A Veterans of Foreign Wars surveyed issued earlier this month found 80 percent of individuals who thought they qualified for the outside care options were rejected by the VA, a figure the VFW called "unsettlingly high."