

VA Provides MISSION Act Update

by Kevin Hollinger ROA Legislative Director



Today, July 2, 2019, ROA staff attended the monthly Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veteran Service Organization (VSO)/Military Service Organization (MSO) informational breakfast. Attendance was down due to the proximity of the 4th of July holiday, but it gave the few in attendance a great opportunity to dig into what issues the VA was working.

The VA discussion was led by [Richard A. Stone, M.D.](#) who addressed those in attendance. Dr. Richard Stone serves as the Executive in Charge for Veterans Health Administration (VHA), with the authority to perform the functions and duties of the Under Secretary for Health.

The discussion centered on how VA was implementing the new [MISSION Act](#) which is replacing the former community program, the Choice Act.

The MISSION Act was passed by Congress to strengthen the VA's ability to deliver trusted, easy to access, high-quality care at all VA facilities. This will be done virtually through telehealth and in local communities as a way to provide the care and services our veterans deserve, where and when they need it.

Beginning June 6, 2019, under the MISSION Act, veterans will have more ways to access healthcare. This includes within VA's network and through approved non-VA medical providers in your community, called "community care providers."

For example, depending on the veteran's situation if a certain type of health service isn't provided by VA, you may be able to go to a non-VA provider using your VA coverage. In addition to the increased access to VA care, The MISSION Act will also:

- Authorize VA to develop a plan to expand eligibility for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers
- Strengthen VA's ability to recruit and retain the best medical providers
- Strengthen VA's ability to align its footprint with the needs of America's veterans

Eligible veterans can use VA healthcare services nationwide, including through mobile health clinics that serve rural areas and via telehealth (care through a phone or computer.) Note: You need to be enrolled in VA healthcare to use community care benefits. For general MISSION Act healthcare inquiries, contact VA311 (1-844-698-2311) or [visit the website](#).

Dr. Stone did acknowledge there have been challenging issues in development of the program which is in its juvenile phase because of the complexity of the law. VA has found it

difficult to get the right people connected to the patient when they are having problems either at the pharmacy or when trying to get an appointment scheduled.

He assured the MSO/VSO audience he was attempting to combat this issue by constantly updating the website with the most current numbers and information available. The attendees recognized there would be some issues that arise, as it would be impossible to foresee every issue before launch.

The VA also stated that Urgent Care usage was down a considerable amount – more than originally expected. VA had budgeted between 1,000 to 2,000 requests per day, but since the opening they were averaging 300 to 400 request per day.

Because this program is new, we would expect that number to go up as the program gets more publicized. The current budget for this program is approximately \$400 million and at the current rate of usage it is projected VA will only spend about \$100 million giving them a large surplus. They are unsure if they will be able to either move the surplus to another funding stream or roll it over but are prepared for the current usage and encourage as much usage as possible.

As the VA moves toward improvement in the future, they want to ensure they use VA [Open Access Scheduling](#) to reduce the current and rather long waiting list. Open Access is a new computer scheduling system to see your primary care provider at a time convenient for the Veteran, according to VA.



They would also like to ensure veterans are aware of and use the [Vet Centers](#) as needed. VA also provides [VA Telehealth Services](#) by using telehealth technologies to improve access to care.

The MISSION Act, Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC), expands eligibility to eligible veterans and their caregivers from all eras. Under the law, expansion will begin when VA certifies to Congress that VA has fully implemented a required information technology system. This system is supposed to be in place no later than October 1st, 2019.

The expansion will occur in two phases beginning with eligible veterans who incurred or aggravated a serious injury in the line of duty on or before May 7, 1975. The next expansion for veterans after May 7, 1975 will begin two years later. Dr. Stone assured everyone the implementation of the MISSION Act was the VA's top priority. Furthermore, all deadlines will be worked so that they are implemented as soon as they possibly can be.