

How Will the VA Mission Act of 2018 Affect Veterans' Health Care?

By Mark Foreman, Vietnam Veteran

In 2018, the US Congress and President Trump signed the **VA Mission Act of 2018** into law. One year later, the **Veterans Community Healthcare Program** was initiated. Few veterans understand how these two programs will affect their quality of health care. The impact of these two programs is what my article will address.

Today, I am one of nine million veterans who depend on VA healthcare. I was severely wounded in Vietnam in 1968 and discharged from the Navy with a 100% disability rating.

It's my belief that if veterans are being encouraged by the **Veterans Community Healthcare Program** to seek treatment from outside of VA hospitals that we will lose our high quality of health care.

Speaking as a 100 percent disabled veteran who has required a great deal of medical care, I believe **The Mission Act** and the **Veterans Community Healthcare Program** will lower the quality of care that we are presently receiving at VA hospitals.

Because of the **Veterans Community Healthcare Program**, we're being told by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) that veterans will have greater "choice" and that we will be "empowered" to utilize private sector health care. They are telling us that we will finally be able to experience the same level of healthcare that average Americans enjoy. To that I would say, "Veterans are not average Americans".

The injuries I received in Vietnam have taken me on a 52 year journey through the Veterans Health Administration. It was a hellhole back in the 1970s and 80s, and if someone had asked me which hospital I'd rather go to for my medical care, it would not have been a VA hospital.

Initially, when I came home from Vietnam, I didn't trust VA hospitals. But it was the only choice I had. That is, until the early 1970s, when the VA initiated a new medical insurance plan for 100% disabled veterans like myself. It allowed me to receive health care through private sector doctors. The VA called it CHAMPUS — Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services". However, when I started using my new CHAMPUS insurance card to pay for private sector care, I discovered that CHAMPUS would only pay a small portion of the bill, and sometimes nothing at all. So, private sector doctors quickly learned that CHAMPUS wasn't reliable.

Moreover, during the 70s and 80s, I was appalled to see how many veterans had to wait in long lines to be seen by a doctor at a VA hospital, veterans who had served during World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Gulf War. Many would end up waiting all day, just to be told to go home and try again tomorrow. It was common to see veterans have angry melt downs while waiting to see a doctor. The situation was made even worse because no one knew anything about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Agent Orange.

Not knowing how to recognize and treat these kind of injuries only added to the frustration and anger inside of VA hospitals. During that time, VA hospitals were drastically underfunded and the medical staff were understandably overwhelmed.

It wasn't until the mid-90s that Congress realized that it had to drastically increase the VA's budget in order to train and hire enough medical personnel to handle the medical and psychological needs of veterans.

Today, the VHA has become a first class health care system. During the past twenty years, I have received holistic, coordinated care plans that I have yet to find in the private sector. VHA staff – from the clerks who book my appointments, to my primary care doctor, to medical specialists as well as psychologists and physical therapists, all respect the fact that I'm not an ordinary citizen. I'm a combat veteran. They understand that we veterans have experienced trauma in ways that are alien to most civilian doctors and nurses. They have helped me deal with the PTSD that has never left me, as well as with the accompanying physical pain that still haunts me.

Two years ago I strained the sciatic nerves in both of my legs. It was extremely painful and I could only get around in a wheelchair for a couple of months. My VA doctor encouraged me to participate in a newly created eight week program in which I was introduced to a wide variety of neurologists, psychologists, orthopedists, yoga instructors, meditation specialists and a physical therapist. When the program was over, they explained that I could come back and work with any of the specialists that I felt would help me manage my pain and strengthen my leg muscles. Now I'm able to get around with a walker and I'm managing my pain without the use of drugs.

Thanks to Congress increasing the VHA's budget, our Veterans Health Administration has now become the most effective healthcare system in the United States, perhaps in the world.

In 2016, to prove that the funding increase was effective, VA initiated a quarterly VA-Wide Trust Survey to measure veterans experience of being

treated at VA hospitals. Trust in the VA increased by 17% from 2016 to 2019. When asked specifically about VA health care, 88% of veterans responded that they now trusted the quality of care that they received at VA hospitals. Additionally, in a recent Veterans of Foreign Wars survey, 90% said that they would recommend VA healthcare.

Here are five reasons why I believe VA hospitals provide better care for veterans than private sector hospitals:

1. VA medical staff are specifically trained to treat severe war injuries. These injuries include physical, emotional, psychological and moral trauma.
2. VA hospitals provide holistic treatment under one roof. The treatment is provided by general practitioners, psychologists, sociologists, neurologists, orthopedists, cardiologists, ear nose and throat specialists, physical therapists, oncologists, radiologists, dentists, podiatrists, prosthetics, yoga instruction, meditation training and more.
3. Since all veterans share the unique experience of having served in the military, they naturally share a strong bond with one another. You can see it in the way that they dress and in how they interact with each other while waiting to see a doctor. Their caps and jackets are covered with insignia identifying the branch of service they were in, as well as the wars that they fought in. Veterans know that they're not alone when they enter a VA hospital.
4. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is credited with establishing the first integrated digital medical records system in the nation, which allows VA doctors immediate access to veterans' medical records at any VA hospital in the United States. So veterans can go to any VA hospital and know that their records can be accessed by medical personnel.

5. Most VA staff believe it is their sacred duty to care for veterans and they are generally paid less than private sector staff, but money isn't their main reason for working in a VA hospital.

So why did Congress and President Trump sign two bills into law? **The Mission Act of 2018** and the **The Veterans Community Healthcare Program of 2019**. Both of these bills were supposedly designed to provide faster and better care for veterans by encouraging them to use private sector doctors. To that I say, "Why fix it when it ain't broke?"

Here's what a 2018 study by the Rand Corporation found:

"Consistent with previous studies, our analysis found that the VA health care system generally **provides care that is higher in quality than what is offered elsewhere in communities across the nation.**" [Emphasis mine].

Thus, it is proven that VA health care has now become more effective and less expensive than private sector health care.

When private doctors and hospitals become involved with treating veterans, they're not just thinking about the veteran's health needs, they're also thinking about the profit they will make. On the other hand, unlike private hospitals, VA hospitals have no profit incentive. The VHA's only purpose is to provide the best care they can for all veterans. The 2019 **Veterans Community Healthcare Program** is encouraging veterans to go to health care providers outside of the VHA. If this new program is allowed to continue, the expense will become much greater and the quality of care will be demonstrably less.

Those who initiated the **The Mission Act of 2018** and the **Veterans Community Healthcare Program of 2019** claim that VA hospitals aren't equipped to handle the number of veterans who need care. If that is true, why hasn't the Secretary of Veterans Affairs lobbied Congress to fill the 50,000 open staff positions in our VA hospitals? We need to ask ourselves why veterans are being encouraged to use private hospitals, when VA hospitals are proven to be better?

A further important issue to consider is that injuries from combat are generally much more severe than the injuries that private doctors normally see. A private doctors' lack of experience with the complexity and severity of combat injuries can lead to ineffective, if not harmful, treatment.

Moreover, another key concern that hasn't received enough attention is that of methodology. How will the VA be able to effectively monitor the quality of care that veterans receive when they visit private doctors?

Providing the best health care for veterans won't be accomplished by sending us out to private doctors who haven't had the experience and training that VA doctors have had. Instead, we need to pressure the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to lobby Congress, so that our VA hospitals will be fully funded and fully staffed.