



Statement of Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
March 24, 2015

Statement of Bill Rausch
Political Director
at
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
for the
**Hearing Examining "The Veterans Choice Act:
Exploring the Distance Criteria"**

March 24, 2015

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our nearly 400,000 members and supporters, thank you for the opportunity to share our views with you at today's hearing examining the distance criteria in the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act (VACAA) of 2014, Public Law 113-146.

IAVA was an early supporter of and partner with you on crafting the Choice Act last year as it became apparent that the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) could not fulfill its obligation to provide timely access and quality care to the veterans under its charge. While we fully support the VA and want to see it properly resourced, we also believe that no veteran should have to wait to receive the care they need and deserve.

For this reason, IAVA worked diligently with the staff of this Committee and with many of your offices to craft solutions that would open up options for veterans to receive quicker care in more convenient locations. The resulting bill established two criteria for determining which veterans are eligible to use the Choice Program; those who must wait longer than 30 days for an appointment and those who live more than 40 miles from a VA medical facility, which is the topic of today's hearing.

Although there were many factors that went into determining the distance criteria, including cost concerns, initial implementation has exposed two areas for improvement based on the feedback we have received from our membership. IAVA urges this committee to consider amending the legislation to measure the 40 mile distance criteria based on driving distance rather than point-to-point or geodesic measurement.

Further, we urge a change in the law to measure the distance from the nearest VA medical facility that offers the specific treatment or care the veteran requires rather than the current 40 mile restriction measured from any VA medical facility. Currently, the nearest VA medical facility or CBOC may not be the facility that offers the care the veteran needs.

Based on a recent poll of our members who are eligible for the program, only 9% have used the program while 25% stated they have tried to utilize the program but were denied access. From those who were denied access, over half (58%) were denied because of distance issues.

One example includes a member who travels 1.5 hours to a VA medical facility for urology appointments. This veteran tried to use the Choice Program to see a urologist in their hometown, but was denied because they lived within 40 miles of a VA Clinic that

doesn't have a urology department.

Another member told us, "because there is a CBOC in my area I was denied. The clinic doesn't provide any service or treatment I need for my primary service connected disability. [The] nearest medical center in my network is 153 miles away."

On a related topic, a recent poll of our members show that there is confusion on who is eligible for the Choice Program and that the information being provided by VA schedulers is inconsistent. In recognition of this, we urge the VA to aggressively educate their staff to ensure veterans are consistently being informed of the Choice Program. Additionally, efforts need to continue in educating the veteran population of the program and its eligibility requirements. Given the infancy of the Choice Program, we believe this is a shared responsibility among all stakeholders.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that everyone represented here today should be focused on the same goal; doing what's best for our nations veterans.

Reforming the distance requirements of the Choice Program takes positive steps in meeting this obligation and we look forward to working with the Secretary, our VSO partners and this Committee to provide the best access and quality of care for all veterans.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for allowing IAVA to be a part of this hearing and for considering our views and recommendations regarding how to best improve upon the distance criteria within the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014.