

Stephen Jarrard, MD FACS

General Surgery / General Medicine

Lakemont, Georgia

Statement to GA Joint Field Hearing, Senate VA Committee on 21 Aug 2015

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Mr. Chairman, Congressman, Mr. Secretary, Mr. Deputy Under Secretary,  
Committee Staff, and Fellow Panelists,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you here today on behalf of Georgia Veterans – one of this Great State’s most valuable natural resources. I feel qualified to provide some input, within my scope, as I am both a Healthcare Provider and a Veteran. I served in the Army on Active Duty as both an Infantry Officer and then a Surgeon. During my Medical Schooling and Training, I was always honored to work in VA Medical Facilities, to include Mountain Home, TN and Augusta, GA. It is an honor to be a Veteran, but more of a personal honor to earn their trust, establish a bond with them as a Physician, and take care of them. I consider them my brothers and sisters, and therefore they are family. It is never a bother to attend to their needs – and I only hope our Nation never loses that perspective about her Sons and Daughters who have sacrificed and served both now and in the past.

On that note, I would commend the Veteran’s Administration for recognizing a problem in the care of our Veterans and coming up with a good program to help solve that problem. Especially in rural areas, like Rabun County, GA where I practice medicine – Veteran’s Choice gives our Veterans good options to get safe and quality care in a timely manner. Health Net seems to have good oversight and management, and does a good job coordinating this care and seeing it through to completion – no small task. Also, tying reimbursement to Medicare rates is not unfair, and I believe most providers would want to be a part of this system and help the VA to care for these Veterans. I did personally find that it was easy to register and become part of the database and therefore to become an option in the Veteran’s Choice program. I have not yet personally carried an encounter through to completion, so I cannot speak as much about ease of use, but I look forward to that and trust it will be organized and smooth. I would also commend Health Net, Ms. Hoffmeier, as your Provider information materials have been very useful and informative.

However, we would all like it to be better, and I again appreciate the chance to provide two specific recommendations to that end.

I believe that the program could benefit from wider publicity and efforts to register more providers. This information also needs to be kept current. When I put my own zip code into the provider search area – I saw a list of many of my colleagues who don't really know about the program, or their contact information was out of date or not correct. More efforts should be made to publicize through provider channels such as State Medical Associations, Specialty Organizations, and even County Medical Societies (and I will do so through our local Stephens-Rabun County Medical Society). I consider it a patriotic duty to help with this program, and I know many of my Georgia medical colleagues would regard it the same way if they knew more about it.

Another thing that I think would help is to recognize those providers who have accepted the Veteran's Choice responsibility and are actively participating and caring for Veterans under this program. Perhaps some kind of recognition symbol or "logo" they could publicize in their own marketing materials or social media outlets. This should be something that Veterans could identify with and look for to know that this provider is "approved by the VA" and could be an option in their spectrum of care should they need it or if they just feel more comfortable staying closer to home and having a local provider.

Again, Sir, it is an honor to have the opportunity to participate in this valuable discussion regarding the care of our Veterans. As they and their past and current service represent the strength of our National fiber – none of us deny the priority they deserve and it is a privilege to still serve by assisting in their health care. Thank you very much.