

# OUR CARE 2017

*A Report Evaluating Veterans Health Care*



**VFW**   
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS  
NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS.  
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**Executive Summary**  
**March 2017**

# BACKGROUND:

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For the past three years the VFW has worked tirelessly to identify the issues veterans face when accessing their earned VA health care. Our continued objective is to use what we learn to recommend reasonable solutions to ensure the veterans' health care system is able to provide timely access to high quality health care. To do so, the VFW has relied on the direct feedback from veterans as the basis for its recommendations and views.

During the height of the VA health care access crisis in 2014, the VFW turned to its members to gauge their experiences receiving health care from VA. We used feedback collected from more than 6,000 veterans to publish a comprehensive report on the state of VA health care entitled [“Hurry Up and Wait,”](#) which outlined 11 specific recommendations to improve the delivery of care to the veterans' community through improvements to customer service, consistency in care-delivery and access, as well as employment and accountability processes for VA employees.

Following the implementation of the Veterans Choice Program, the VFW once again turned to our members to evaluate how the program was performing and identify deficiencies that needed to be corrected. [Through this feedback,](#) the VFW published 15 specific recommendations on how to improve VA's community care programs. The VFW has since worked with VA leaders and the third-party contractors responsible for administering the Veterans Choice Program to make consistent improvements to community care delivery for our veterans.

Following the VA access crisis, the veterans' community engaged in a philosophical discussion regarding the future of VA. To ensure those discussions were centered on the needs and expectations of the men and women VA was designed to serve, the VFW launched the [“Our Care”](#) survey in 2015 to evaluate veterans' options, expectations, and preferences when seeking health care. The VFW used the information collected through this survey to inform the Commission on Care, VA and Congress. With this information, the VA was able to deter policy makers from considering radical ideas that would dismantle the VA health care system and erode the care VA provides veterans.

To gauge whether changes VA and Congress have made to the VA health care system since 2014 are having a tangible impact on the views and experiences of veterans, VFW commissioned a follow-up survey to “Our Care.” The following report is the VFW's analysis of changes in the veterans' health care landscape based on responses from a diverse cross-section of military veterans.

To read any of the VFW's prior reports or to read about the VFW's efforts to reform the VA health system to better serve veterans, visit [www.vfw.org/VAwatch](http://www.vfw.org/VAwatch).

# Executive Summary:

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Over the past two years, VA has undergone a comprehensive transformation called MyVA, which seeks to modernize VA by building the agency into a high performing organization focused on veterans' experience, employee experience, and streamlining VA policies and programs. To gauge the impact of VA's transformation, the VFW asked veterans to share their views and experiences when receiving health care in VA and in the community. The VFW's most recent "Our Care" survey collected 10,801 responses from September 20, 2016, to October 20, 2016.

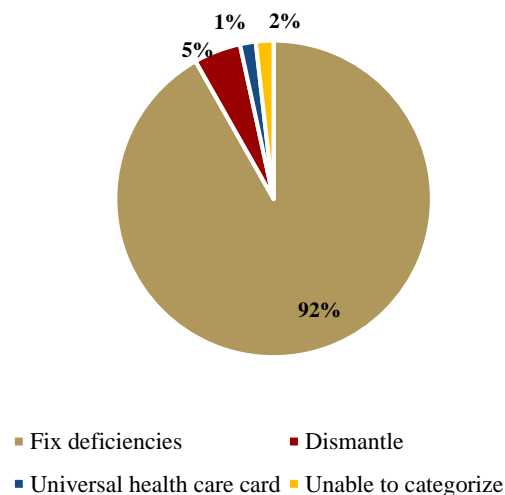
The VFW's comprehensive "Our Care 2017" report provides an in-depth analysis of veterans' options, perceptions, and expectations of health care. The VFW's most recent survey is the largest and most comprehensive sampling of veterans' health care preferences since 2014. Our goal is for "Our Care 2017" to once again serve as a road map for policy-makers on how to best address the health care needs of an ever-changing veterans' population. The following executive summary includes a brief overview of the VFW's six most significant findings on the current state of veterans' health care.

## Veterans Want to Fix, Not Dismantle the VA Health Care System

When asked how they would improve their health care system, veterans overwhelmingly reported that they believe VA must fix current deficiencies; that VA is already improving; or that there is nothing to improve in VA when compared to private sector health care.

Very few respondents believe veterans should be given a universal health care card or believe the VA health care system should be dismantled by creating a subsidy-based private health insurance for veterans, shutdown completely and outsourced to the private sector, or limited to only serving service-connected conditions.

**How would you improve the VA health care system to better serve veterans?**  
n=5,763



Deficiencies that veterans identified were regarding a shortage of health care providers, inadequate customer service, waiting too long or having to travel too far for their care, and bureaucratic processes and systems which don't make much sense to them.

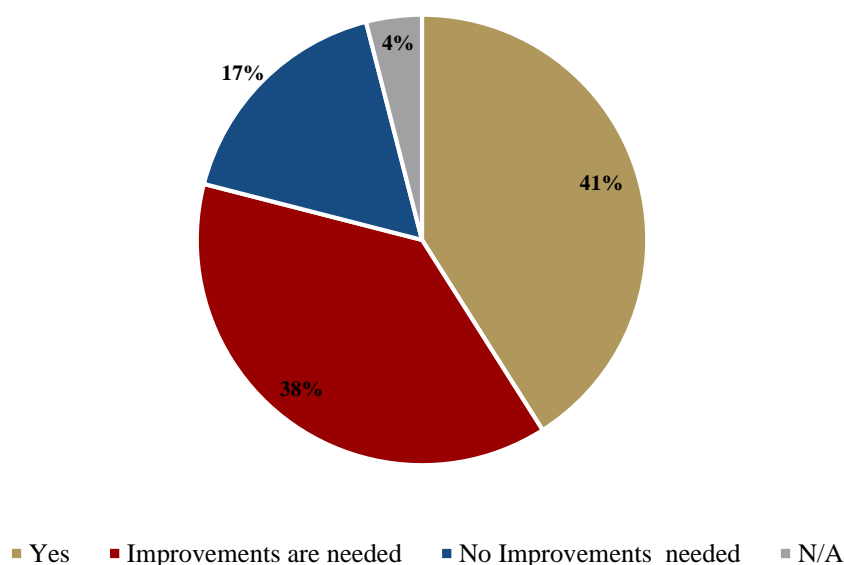
## Veterans Are Starting to Notice Improvements

When asked whether they have noticed an improvement at their local VA health care facility, 41 percent of veterans reported noticing an improvement. Thirty-eight percent did not see any improvements but believe improvements were needed, while 17 percent indicated no improvements were needed at their local VA health care facilities. Meaning that nearly 60 percent of veterans who have used VA in the past year believe their VA medical facility has improved or is already a high performing facility and does not need to improve.

When asked what has improved, veterans said VA has improved its customer service by being more caring and friendly. Veterans also reported shorter wait times for their appointments, some commending VA for offering same day appointments. VA has also made capital infrastructure changes that improved veteran experiences such as expanded parking structures, new clinics or cosmetic improvements. Many veterans also experienced other access improvements such as being able to schedule follow-up appointments before leaving the clinic, as well as care available closer to home through expanded services or community care programs.

However, respondents indicated that VA still has a lot of work ahead in order to fully restore the trust of those it was created to serve. Nearly 40 percent of veterans reported that they did not notice an improvement and that their local VA medical facilities need improvements. When asked what needs to improve, access was the principal concern with veterans indicating VA needs to hire more doctors, decrease wait times and travel for appointments, and streamline procedures and system. Veterans also indicated that VA needs to improve its phone systems to make them more user-friendly.

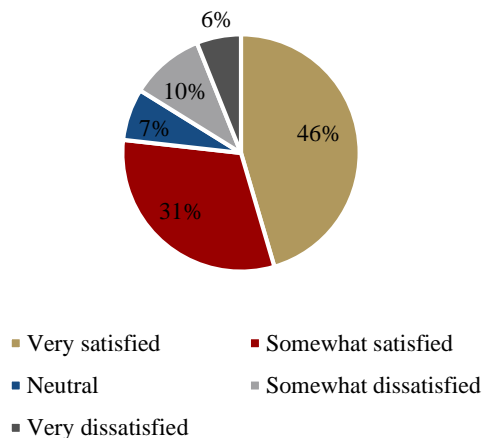
**Have you noticed an improvement  
at your local VA health care facility?**  
n= 6,684



## Patient Satisfaction Has Improved

**How would you rate your overall satisfaction with your VA health care experience?**

**n=6,673**



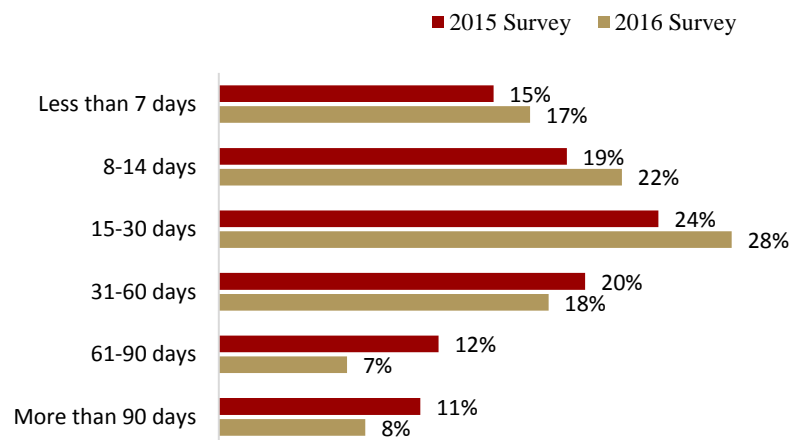
Seventy-seven percent of survey participants who have used VA health care within the past year report being at least somewhat satisfied with their experience. This is an increase from previous surveys where 68 percent of recent VA health care users reported being at least somewhat satisfied with their VA health care experience.<sup>1</sup>

To the VFW, the increase in patient satisfaction is an indicator that the VA health care system is on the right track. However, a 16 percent dissatisfaction rate means too many veterans are still experiencing inadequate wait times and poor customer service when seeking VA health care. Seven percent of survey participants rated their experience as neutral.

## Veterans are Waiting Less for Their Health Care Appointments

The survey also asked veterans to report how long they have waited for their most recent VA health care appointment. When compared to the VFW's "Choice and Access Survey," the number of veterans who report receiving an appointment between 7 days, 8-14 days and 15-30 days increased, while those reporting appointment wait times more than 30 days decreased.

### Self-Reported Wait Times



<sup>1</sup> Fall 2015 Choice and Access Survey, conducted between August and October 2015 and received 3,931 responses. Sixty-eight percent of the 1,412 participants who reported having scheduled an appointment since November 2014 reported being at least somewhat satisfied with their VA health care experience.

## Quality of Care is Paramount When Choosing a Health Care Provider

In an effort to determine what influences veterans' health care decisions, the VFW asked veterans to identify which factors are most important to them when choosing a health care provider. Seventy-nine percent of the 9,473 veterans who answered this question reported that quality of care is the most important factor; availability of appointments was second with 44 percent; 33 percent answered distance to health care facilities; 29 percent said provider reputation or expertise; and 27 percent believe cost is most important.

**What factors are most important to you when choosing a health care provider?**  
**n= 9,473**

Quality of Care	Availability of appointments	Distance to health care facility	Provider reputation or expertise	Cost to receive care	Convenience	Customer Service
79%	44%	33%	29%	27%	17%	17 %

## Veterans' Preferences Depend on Options

When asked where they prefer to receive most of their health care, 45 percent of veterans prefer to receive their care from VA; 44 percent prefer to receive care from private sector providers; and 7 percent prefer military health care providers. However, 60 percent of veterans who have used VA health care prefer it over any other form of care. Furthermore, 64 percent of veterans who only have VA and Medicare or Medicaid as an option prefer VA. Only 32 percent of such veterans prefer to receive their care from private sector providers.

Veterans who are eligible for VA and private sector insurance prefer to use private sector doctors. Fifty-three percent of the 1,010 veterans who report being eligible for VA and private sector insurance prefer to use private sector providers, and 44 percent of such veterans prefer to use VA. However, nearly 60 percent of veterans who have VA and private sector insurance and have used VA health care in the past year prefer VA. These percentages, when compared to open-ended comments from veterans about their perceptions of VA care indicate to the VFW that veterans who use VA health care like their care and prefer to use it, while those who do not use VA health care may not be willing to try it due to negative media attention or past negative experiences.

Moreover, when veterans were asked whether or not they would recommend VA health care to their fellow veterans 87 percent of respondents who have used VA within the past year reported that they would recommend VA care. When asked why, veterans commonly reported that VA provides high quality care, it is an earned benefit and that the VA system is uniquely poised to address the specific health care concerns of the veterans' community.



# CONCLUSION:

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**T**he results of the “Our Care” survey indicate that VA has come a long way since 2014. Veterans indicate to the VFW that VA is addressing the appropriate issues. This is evident by the decrease in the amount of time veterans report waiting for their care and the increase in patient satisfaction. With nearly 60 percent of veterans reporting that VA has improved or that their facilities do not need to improve, the VFW believes that VA is on the right track.

However, much work remains. The VFW will continue to use information gathered from our veterans to make certain VA addresses its outstanding issues. VA must continue to work on access to ensure all veterans have the opportunity to receive high quality care that is tailored to their needs, which they have earned. The VFW’s survey made it clear that the preferred method to achieve this is to hire more VA doctors, hold wrongdoers accountable, improve customer service, and make VA’s programs and systems more user-friendly.

Veterans told the VFW that they want to fix, not dismantle the VA health care system. For that reason, the VFW will continue to debunk and reject radical policy proposals, which would reverse the progress VA has made by privatizing the VA health care system or erode the veteran-centric care VA is obligated to provide.

## **For more information on “Our Care”:**

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Read all of the VFW’s health care reports at [www.vfw.org/VAWatch](http://www.vfw.org/VAWatch).



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