



VA reform pitch would put medical facilities under a nonprofit

A Washington state lawmaker has proposed placing all Veterans Affairs Department medical facilities under a nonprofit entity and giving all new veterans access to private health care.

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., unveiled a legislative proposal Tuesday to reform the Veterans Health Administration, calling for the creation of three health programs under VA:

- Direct care provided by the department in its own hospitals and clinics overseen by a government nonprofit.
- Private care through a revamped Choice program.
- And a health plan that would serve as secondary payer for Medicare-eligible veterans.

Under the plan, current enrolled veterans would be able to choose where they get care while all new veterans would be automatically enrolled in the new VetsCare Choice, giving them access to private health care.

McMorris Rodgers said the proposal would free veterans from “a system that offers them little or no choice.”

“With the never-ending wait times and the VA Secretary doubling down on his comparison to Disney, the time has long passed for the VA to make the necessary changes to ensure that our veterans are treated effectively, seen efficiently and cared for with respect,” McMorris Rodgers said.

The lawmaker was referring to comments made by VA Secretary Bob McDonald last month that compared wait times for appointments at VA hospitals with lines at Disney theme parks, where he said customer satisfaction is not measured by the length of the wait.

“This proposal should serve as the starting point for putting veterans in charge of their health care,” McMorris Rodgers said.

McMorris Rodgers' plan closely resembles recommendations issued last year by a health care task force formed by Concerned Veterans For America, an advocacy group. The task force called for creating a nonprofit government organization to oversee VA health facilities and shift more veterans to private health care.

Not surprisingly, CVA officials praised McMorris Rodgers' proposal when it was released Tuesday.

“The reality of the VA’s failure is undeniable. The department is not structured to provide timely, sustainable care to veterans and is in desperate need of the systemwide reform. [This legislation] will reverse the tide of inefficiency and failure at the VA while offering veterans the health care choice they deserve,” CVA vice president for political and legislative action Dan Caldwell said.



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The legislative proposal comes as a congressionally appointed panel wraps up its work studying VA health care reform. The Commission on Care met Tuesday in Washington to deliberate a draft of its recommendations, which include creating a board of directors to oversee the Veterans Health Administration, closing underutilized VA facilities and consolidating all outside care programs into one system.

The commission is likely to recommend that veterans be allowed to choose whether they want to go to the VA for most of their health care or be seen by doctors in a private-sector network.

A bill recently proposed by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee seeks to improve the VA by increasing accountability of senior leaders and makes small changes to VA community care programs designed to make them more efficient.

But Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has criticized the bill as a "bad plan" and instead has offered his own VA reform package, which calls for making the Veterans Choice program permanent and expanding eligibility to all veterans.

The VA and major veterans organizations oppose the expansion of the Choice program to all eligible veterans, saying it would weaken VA facilities by drawing resources and patients from hospitals and clinics that are uniquely positioned to care for veterans and their service-related injuries and illnesses.

Paralyzed Veterans of America has spoken against any effort to expand Choice that would negatively affect VA facilities and on Thursday, PVA executive director Sherman Gillums spoke against the McMorris Rodgers' proposal, saying it would burden disabled and low-income veterans by forcing them into a private care system that doesn't provide them specialized care.

"Paralyzed Veterans of America is appalled that a member of our Congress would ignore the choice made by thousands of veterans who prefer VA health care and take the first step toward absolving Congress of its responsibility to resource and oversee a veteran-centric health care system," Gillums said.