



# Federal Health Matters

## Presidential Candidates Describe Proposals for Improving VA Services

Voters who are concerned about the future of veterans' services—including health care—will have the chance to consider multiple proposals on these issues from both of the major presidential candidates before voting this November.

Many of these proposals involve the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) claims process, which both Republican nominee Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) and Democratic nominee Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) have pledged to speed. Both candidates say they will do so, in part, by having the VA convert to an entirely electronic claims system. Obama has emphasized that instituting such a system for both the DoD and the VA could enable an immediate transfer of records between the departments upon a veteran's military discharge. In addition, both candidates say that they will improve education and accountability among VBA claims workers, with Obama adding that the VA needs to hire more of these workers. McCain has said that he will improve the process further by enlisting the help of veterans' service organizations and simplifying the DoD disability retirement system. And Obama told *Stars and Stripes* on August 6 that "maybe the most important" step toward improving the claims process—as well as other aspects of the VA—is to encourage "a shift in attitude" in the department. At present, he said, "there is a sense that somehow the job of the VA is to protect the treasury as opposed to mak[ing] sure that those who served are getting treated with the honor and respect that they deserve."

In the realm of health care, perhaps the most dramatic proposal offered by either candidate is McCain's idea for a "veterans care access card" that allows some veterans to access care at non-VA facilities. McCain said in July and early August that such a card would help veterans receive routine care outside the VA and, in so doing, would enable the VA to focus more on war-related health problems. The card is "the best thing we could possibly do" to improve the VA's ability to provide care, he told *Stars and Stripes* on August 2. McCain began to describe the proposal somewhat differently in mid-August, however, saying that it would be issued to "veterans with illness or injury incurred during their military service and by those with lower incomes" and that it would enable "those without timely access to VA facilities the option of using high-quality health-care providers near their homes." He added

of the VA network—including those facilities designed to serve veterans living in rural and remote areas."

Obama and McCain each have pledged to ensure that the VA is fully funded every year. Obama has said that he will "meet early in the budgeting process each year with congressional leaders and the nation's leading veteran service organizations" to "ensure the VA budget is always given 'must-pass' status." McCain has complained that many VA bills contain earmarks amounting to "wasteful and often worthless political pork"; by vetoing such bills, he has said, he will "save many billions of dollars that can be applied to essential priorities and, above all, the care of our veterans." Obama also has promised that, if elected, one of his first acts as President would be to lift the ban on VA enrollment by veterans classified as "Priority 8," which has been in place since 2003.

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that the VA is "lagging behind" with respect to women's health care and that the proposed card would enhance women veterans' options while the department catches up in this area. McCain emphasized in an August 18 speech that the card would not "force anyone to go to a non-VA facility," "signal privatization of the VA," or "replace any scheduled expansion

McCain's other proposals regarding veterans' services include providing veterans with "easy-to-understand, comprehensive information" on benefits and expanding VA and DoD educational programs for family caregivers. Obama's other proposals include strengthening VA specialty care by establishing additional centers of excellence for a variety of

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conditions common among veterans (such as traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), visual impairment, and spinal cord injury) and expanding Vet Centers. Both candidates have emphasized that the VA needs to do a better job of screening for and treating PTSD. Additional information about the candidates' positions on veterans issues can be found by visiting their web sites (<http://www.barackobama.com> and <http://www.johnmccain.com>) and clicking on the "Issues" link on the home page of each site.

### VA Lifts Voter Registration Ban

The VA announced on September 8 that it is reversing a May 5 directive to prohibit voter registration drives at VA facilities. State and local election officials and nonpartisan groups, it said, will be allowed to help VA staff register voters at hospitals and outpatient clinics. The department added

that patients who cannot leave a VA facility "must be assisted to register and to vote by absentee ballot."

Every VA hospital will be required to post information about patients' rights, including their right to vote, and to provide patients with copies of these rights upon admission. Facilities will be responsible for coordinating voter registration assistance and publishing their individual policies on voter registration activities.

The VA's policy reversal followed criticisms of its May 5 prohibition by Committee on House Administration Chair Robert A. Brady (D-PA), House VA Committee Chair Bob Filner (D-CA), and 21 secretaries of state. In addition, bills were introduced in both the House and the Senate in July that would require the VA to provide voter registration services. While no major actions have been taken on the Senate bill (S. 3308) since its introduction, the nearly identical House bill (H.R. 6625) passed in the House on September 17 and was referred to the Senate.

Brady has said that H.R. 6625 "expands on recently announced VA policy changes that fall short of ensuring election officials and nonpartisan organizations access to VA facilities for the purpose of providing voter registration and voting assistance." In addition to requiring the VA to accommodate nonpartisan voter registration groups, the bill also permits top state election officials to designate VA facilities as voter registration agencies. It is unclear, however, whether this legislation will become law in time to help veterans vote in the presidential election this November. ●