

2019 Legislative Goals: Implementation of VA Mission Act Top Priority

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As nurses who are often the first face that a veteran sees, members of NOVA (Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs) are committed to enhancing access, coordinating care, and improving health care at the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). NOVA also is the voice of VA nurses on Capitol Hill. Every year, the leadership and legislative committee members provide a list of critical issues identified in their Legislative Priority Goals. For 2019, the goals are divided into 3 areas of concern that either require legislation, funding, or implementation at the regulatory level within the VA.

At the top of the list is implementation of the VA Mission Act and its community care network. The 2018 VA Mission Act (Section 101 of Public Law 115-182) mandated the VA to consolidate existing community care programs and rewrite eligibility rules. Currently, the VA has at least 7 separate community care programs, including the Veterans Choice Program, which gives veterans who live ≥ 40 miles from a VA facility or have a wait time of ≥ 30 days an option to receive care in the local community with VA picking up the bill. Proposed access standards for the new program—Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP)—were made public in January 2019 and would allow veterans with ≥ 30 -minute drive time and/or a wait time of ≥ 20 days for primary care or mental health appointments at a VA facility to use outside care. For specialty care eligibility, the drive time would increase to ≥ 60 minutes and ≥ 28 days for an appointment at a VA facility.

NOVA understands the need for community care partners: They are a crucial part of an integrated network designed to provide care for services that are not readily available within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), but care that veterans receive in the community must be equal to VHA care. Equal care will require training and strict quality

measures and standards verified for the VCCP providers. The VA also must remain the primary provider of care and the coordinator of care for all enrolled veterans.

NOVA identified 6 goals for VA Mission Act implementation. These include the following:

- Require that training, competency, and quality standards for VCCP providers are equal to those of VHA providers;
- Request third-party administrator to verify that providers meet those standards before assigning to VCCP panel;
- Simplify eligibility/access rules for community care without depleting VA funds;
- Ensure that VHA continues to be the first point of access and coordinator of all health care for enrolled veterans;
- Implement a care coordination system allowing veterans to return with ease to the VA when resources are available; and
- Employ mandatory training for VHA personnel and all community providers to improve the coordination of care, understanding of military culture, and health care needs across networks.

Other priorities include staffing/recruitment and retention—a longstanding issue within many VA facilities. Currently, the VHA has $> 40,000$ unfilled positions. It is no secret that the VA has had difficulty hiring essential staff at many levels. Complexities of job site databases and excessive time required to complete on-boarding, shortages in human resources personnel, and less than competitive salaries all add to the growing backlog. The inability for the VA to hire and train providers negatively impacts the access to VHA care and spurs increases in veterans using private sector care.

The VA modernization must include an electronic health record designed to support VHA's model of health care delivery. It is crucial that Congress ensure proper IT funding to

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improve patient safety, software usability, and standardization of patient health care records across VHA.

VA nurses are the largest sector of employees within VHA with > 90,000 currently taking care of veterans. As VA continues its modernization, NOVA asks that nursing leadership be at the forefront of all strategic decision making.

In March, NOVA nurses shared their thoughts and views with members of Congress. They also continued discussions with the administration and VA leadership about

how we can work together toward common goals—whether that be educating the next generation of nurses, providing innovative health care solutions, or engaging veterans in how they envision their health care in the future. Visit www.vanurse.org for more information about NOVA, the Legislative Priority Goals, or to become a member.

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