

# Washington Wire

## VA Officially Drops Net Worth as Eligibility Factor

A VA proposal to exclude a veteran's net worth as a factor in determining his or her eligibility for health care is now the rule. Proposed early in 2015, it became official Dec. 21.

VA will no longer consider net worth when determining if a veteran is eligible for certain benefits or reduced co-payment responsibilities.

Instead of combining the sum of a veteran's income with his or her assets to determine eligibility for medical care and co-payment obligations, VA will now only consider the veteran's gross house-



hold income and deductible expenses from the previous year. VA says the new ruling "means that certain lower-income, non-service-connected veterans will have less out-of-pocket costs."

Co-payments for vets in VA's lowest priority care groups—7 and 8—are higher than other groups. For example, a veteran in Group 7 is responsible for a \$252 co-payment for the first 90 days of inpatient care, while a vet in Group 8 pays \$1,260. The daily charge for inpatient services in Group 7 is \$2 and \$10 for Group 8. Medications cost \$9 for a 30-day supply for Groups 7 and 8, while it is \$8 for Groups 2-6.

VA estimates that over a five-year period nearly 190,000 veterans will

become eligible for reduced costs of their health care services. According to the official notice placed in the *Federal Register*, 53,000 veterans would be moved from a lower priority category to Category 5 in the first year of this policy, allowing them to make lower co-payments.

Over five years, VA expects that another 135,000 veterans who previously were ineligible would be able to enroll in VA's health care system because of the change. During that same period, VA says it could lose \$55.5 million to \$80 million in patient co-payments.

Income thresholds are based on several factors such as geographical area and number of dependents. To determine your specific threshold, access <http://nationalincomelimits.vaftl.us/>.

VA announced it would notify veterans who had been placed in Groups 7 and 8 because their net worth/income calculations exceeded the previous threshold that they may now be eligible for higher priority groups.

## VA Endorses Choice Card Program

VA's No. 2 man said in November that his department will fully implement a program to get more veterans into health care appointments quicker. Sloan Gibson, VA's deputy secretary, told lawmakers Nov. 18 that the *VA Choice and Accountability Act (Choice Program)* and its option of private care will be an important method of delivering health care to veterans.

"These efforts won't just improve the way we do community care, they will make community care part of the fabric of VA care, making VA a truly integrated health care system," Gibson told the House VA Committee.

The *Choice Program*, enacted into

law in August 2014 in the wake of VA's wait-time crisis, offers veterans who live farther than 40 miles from a VA facility or can't get a VA appointment within 30 days the option of private medical care.

To get the program operating correctly, Gibson said VA would need \$421 million for fiscal year 2016 and it would cost between \$400 million to \$600 million annually. That figure could go up, Gibson said, if the program attracts more VA health care enrollees. When



the program was created in 2014, it was expected to cost \$10 billion to be fully implemented.

VA also

announced changes to the program on Dec. 1 that "streamlines eligibility requirements." VA now extends the private care option to veterans who:

- Must travel by "air, boat or ferry" to their closest VA facility.
- Face "unusual or excessive" burdens due to geographic, environmental, medical, frequency-of-care or attendant issues in traveling to their closest VA facility.
- Live in a state or territory without a full-service VA facility.

Veterans can call 1-866-606-8198 to confirm their eligibility and to schedule an appointment. For more details about the *Veterans Choice Program* and VA's progress, visit: [www.va.gov/opa/choiceact](http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact).

## Vets Feel 'Stalled' in Corporate World

Veterans feel less than challenged and sometimes even alienated in corporate America, according to results of a study released in November. Research shows

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