

Veterans Need Affordable Dental Care

Despite the essential role of oral health in overall well-being, access to dental care through the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) remains limited.

Of the more than 9 million veterans who are eligible for medical care through the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), only about 1.8 million are also eligible for dental care.¹ More than 80% are not eligible for dental benefits,² and among those who are, only about one third use them annually, including through the Community Care Network (CCN). Significant barriers to care, such as limited provider availability, burdensome eligibility requirements, and complex administrative processes prevent many from accessing the services to which they're entitled. As a result, even among eligible veterans, unmet dental needs remain widespread, placing these veterans at risk for preventable health complications.

The PACT Act of 2022³ strengthened health care benefits for many veterans and resulted in roughly 330,000 veterans gaining dental coverage.⁴ However, the influx of eligible veterans has strained an already overburdened health care infrastructure within the VHA,⁵ extending beyond what even the CCN can manage. As a result, many veterans who are eligible for dental benefits continue to report challenges in accessing affordable dental care. To address these challenges and ensure continuity of care, policymakers should continue to build up the VA workforce and the CCN and protect and improve veterans' benefits.

Lack of Dental Care Results in More Health Problems and Higher Costs

Veterans face significant oral health challenges that contribute to broader health and financial burdens. A national survey conducted in 2021 reported that nearly half (45%) of veterans had permanent teeth removed because of pain and infection.⁶ Veterans pay 65% more in out-of-pocket dental costs compared to nonveterans⁶ and visit the emergency department for non-traumatic dental conditions at a higher rate (6%) than the general population.⁷

Veterans at Risk: Nearly 8 million veterans report having fair or poor oral health.⁸ Rural veterans are even more affected, with 35.5% rating their dental health as “poor” compared to 28.5% of urban veterans.⁹

Health and Financial Burdens: Veterans without access to dental care face increased risks of chronic disease, emergency dental visits, and financial strain from out-of-pocket expenses. Approximately 1.1 million veterans spend at least \$2,000 out of pocket annually on dental care, totaling more than \$2.2 billion per year.⁷

Gaps in Access: Rural veterans are disproportionately impacted by access barriers, including fewer dental provider options and higher rates of dental anxiety. Nearly 24% of veterans live in rural areas, where access to care is more challenging.⁸ Rural veterans are also more likely to need or have dentures (39.8%) compared to urban veterans (23%) and report higher out-of-pocket dental costs.⁹

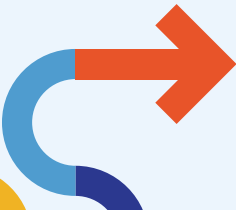
Steps to Strengthen Dental Access for Veterans

Improve VA Dental Eligibility

At a minimum, Congress should broaden VA dental coverage for high-risk veterans, including those with chronic conditions or financial hardship. While recent initiatives have marginally increased dental care eligibility, further growth requires funding for workforce and infrastructure. Policymakers should prioritize preventive care and explore broadening eligibility criteria for dental care, with the goal of improving health outcomes and reducing overall health care costs in the long term.

Improve CCN Access and Functionality

Even eligible veterans often face barriers to receiving care through the VA, including provider shortages, geographic challenges, and administrative delays. Congress and the VA should strengthen the CCN by improving provider availability, streamlining referrals, and enhancing transportation assistance. Optimizing the CCN will ensure timely, comprehensive oral health services for eligible veterans and increase the efficiency of care delivery.



By addressing barriers to affordable dental care, policymakers can improve access to necessary care for veterans while reducing long-term health care costs associated with poor oral health.

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5. Carrie M. Farmer and Rajeev Ramchand, "Infrastructure Investment for Veterans," RAND, May 21, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2021/05/infrastructure-investment-for-veterans.html#:~:text=Aging%20infrastructure%20can%20reduce%20veterans'%20access%20to,having%20outdated%20space%20was%20a%20challenge%20to.>
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