

Assessing the needs and access to health services for US Military Veterans in Illinois

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Abstract

Background: The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is considered the largest healthcare delivery system in the United States. Along with several eligibility requirements for enrollment, VHA provides healthcare for about 45% of all U.S. Veterans, leaving the question if over 10 million Veterans not receiving VA benefits are having their health needs met. The objective of this project is to survey the general health needs, barriers to care, and perceptions of healthcare among veterans residing in Illinois.

Methods: The survey has a total of 16 questions consisting of a five-point Likert scale, nominal data, and multiple choice. Veterans were asked about their demographic information, health coverage, chronic health conditions, and a gauge agreement to statements concerning attitudes to patient care. Social media was the main method of distribution used to reach out to Veterans across the state. Other forms of distribution consisted of requesting Community colleges and public universities in Illinois to share the survey link with Veteran students in their institution, and flyers shared with Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion Halls.

Results: Of the 158 Veterans that participated in the survey, 73% of respondents were not enrolled in VA Healthcare. Of these, 32% indicated they needed more guidance on how to apply, 22% were not aware that VA Healthcare was an option upon separation of the service, 17% did not want to apply, and 10% applied but did not qualify.

A total of 94% of participants enrolled in the VA have a primary care provider compared to 88% of participants with other health insurance providers. Fifty percent of all participants had been diagnosed with a chronic health condition. VA enrollees had a greater percentage of Veterans diagnosed with cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease excluding hypertension.

Veterans enrolled in the VA indicated that “perceived poor quality of care” and “Distance” were two of the most common barriers for receiving care, with 23% and 22% respondents respectively. While 24% of participants with other insurance providers indicated “financial reasons” were their biggest barrier.

Conclusion: The study identified several areas of improvement to expand access to care for all U.S. Veterans. Emphasizing the importance of promoting the trust of medical professionals, providing easily accessible facilities, and expanding VHA eligibility. In addition, the importance of improving or establishing a system that ensures all Veterans are being educated on their VA

benefits and available resources to prevent missed opportunities that can make a difference in someone's well-being.