NEW PAINKILLER RULE AFFECTS VETS

New federal rules that make it harder to get narcotic painkillers are taking an unexpected toll on thousands of veterans who depend on these prescription drugs to treat everything from missing limbs to post-traumatic stress. The restrictions, adopted last summer by the Drug Enforcement Administration to curb a national epidemic of opioid abuse, are for the first time, in effect, forcing veterans to return to the doctor every month to renew their medication, although many were already struggling to get appointments at overburdened VA health facilities. And even if patients can get appointments, the new rules pose an additional hardship for many who live a good distance from the health centers.

While the tighter regulation applies to everyone on opioid painkillers, it’s hitting veterans especially hard, because so many are being treated for horrific injuries sustained during the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have become dependent on the VA’s beleaguered health-care system for medical care. The rules come at a time of turmoil for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The agency’s widespread problem with patient backlogs burst into view last year with revelations that employees had covered up how long veterans had to wait for care, even for such pressing matters as cancer and suicide prevention. In dramatically curtailing access to the highly addictive painkillers, the government is trying to roll back what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has termed “the worst drug addiction epidemic in the country’s history, killing more people than heroin and crack cocaine.” The rules apply to “hydrocodone combination products,” such as Vicodin. More than half a million veterans are now on prescription opioids, according to the VA. Pain experts at the VA say that in hindsight they have been overmedicating veterans, and doctors at the Pentagon and VA now say that the use of the painkillers contributes to family strife, homelessness and even suicide among veterans. A study by the American Public Health Association in 2011 also showed that the overdose rate among VA patients is nearly double the national average. But some veterans say they have come to depend on these painkillers to function and now, unable to get a timely renewal of the prescription, are suffering withdrawal symptoms that feel like a panic attack and the flu at the same time. Officials at the Disabled American Veterans, a veterans service organization, said the VA needs to be more compassionate and help veterans through the changes. “We’re hearing from veterans with life-long disabilities, who never had a problem with addiction issues. They have been on these drugs for decades and then all of sudden it was boom, a total change in attitudes,” said the deputy national legislative director.
VA Wants To Shift Funds From Vet Choice Program

Veterans Affairs officials don't know how many veterans are using the new "choice card" program, but it's a small enough total that they want to start taking money out of the program. The move is likely to ignite a lengthy fight on Capitol Hill with lawmakers who created the program last summer following the department's patient-wait-time scandal and who doubt VA's ability to serve veterans in a timely and effective manner.

As part of the agency's nearly $169 billion fiscal 2016 budget plan, White House officials said they will submit legislation to "reallocating a portion of Veterans Choice Program funding to support essential investments in VA system priorities in a fiscally-responsible, budget-neutral manner."

Congress approved $15 billion in funding for two years of the program, with $5 billion for physician hiring and the rest to establish a temporary program making it easier for veterans to seek private, non-VA health care. The goal was to provide quicker appointments, after tens of thousands of veterans nationwide were found to be waiting more than a month for medical visits and physician consults. But on February 2, VA assistant secretary for management Helen Tierney said officials have "a strong indication that this is not their preferred choice" and "would prefer to remain in the VA" for medical care.

About 8.5 million choice cards have been issued to veterans, who are eligible for the program if they live in rural areas or face more than a month wait for medical appointments. Tierney could not say how many veterans are using the program, how many are eligible but preferred to stay in VA care, or how much money might be moved around. But she said the funding could be used to supplement more "essential" services at the department.

House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-FL) blasted the department's announcement as short-sighted and potentially harmful to veterans.

"If there's one thing we've learned over the last year, it's that VA's numbers cannot be trusted," he said in a statement. "The president's idea to reallocate a portion of Veterans Choice Program funding to other areas of VA is a complete non-starter, which I will not support. "When a near-unanimous Congress worked with President Obama last year to create the choice program, we made a promise to veterans to give them more freedom in their health care decisions. I will not stand idly by while the president attempts to renege on that promise."

Tierney promised to lay out a stronger case for using the money elsewhere in months to come. But in recent weeks, several Republicans on Capitol Hill have questioned whether VA should be shifting more health care appointments outside their facilities, not bringing veterans back in. The issue is likely to become the most controversial aspect of the VA budget discussions, even before any specific figures are outlined.

The VA budget grew almost $100 million from fiscal 2004 to fiscal 2014, and lawmakers have promised to more closely scrutinize that spending in wake of last year's scandal. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Feb 02, 2015 ++]

DO YOU AGREE WITH THIS ARTICLE?

As a veteran your voice should be heard! You need to communicate with your Congressman and Senators to let them know how you feel about this issue.

Senator Tammy Baldwin
717 Hart Senate Office Bldg SH717
Washington DC, 20510
(202)224-5653 (Washington DC)
608-264-5338 (Madison, WI)
www.baldwin.senate.gov

Senator Ron Johnson
386 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510
202-224-5323 (Washington DC)
920-230-7250 (Oshkosh, WI)
www.ronjohnson.senate.gov

Congressman Glen Grothman
501 Cannon House Office Building
Washington DC 20515
202-225-2476 (Washington DC)
920-907-0624 (Fond du lac, WI)
https://grothman.house.gov/contact

Veteran Choice Card
Picture by the Dallas Chronicle photographer
RaeLynn Recarte
When Secretary Bob McDonald took office he immediately set off on a series of engagements to regain trust with Veterans. He has visited dozens VA hospitals across the country and mandated all VA facilities conduct quarterly town halls to promote accountability and an open dialogue with Veterans. When he gave out his personal cell phone number and e-mail address at a press conference, many dismissed it as a PR move. But, when he said he wanted to open up the VA culture, he meant it.

“I did that on purpose,” McDonald said with a smile at the Student Veterans of America National Conference. “I did because I want to demonstrate to the employees at VA how we need to think about our customers. We don’t hide from you. We want you to call us. We want to deal with your problems ... and now we’re building that capability internally, so you might not always get an answer from me but somebody will try to help you out.”

Since then, hundreds of Veterans have called and e-mailed him. Sometimes he answers, sometimes his staff answers, but more importantly the Veteran gets an answer.

On 7 JAN, Reddit user CyberVictimizer posted to r/Veterans

http://www.reddit.com/r/Veterans

that her husband was having problems receiving care for his back pain. The VA doctor prescribed weight loss, but her husband claimed that he wouldn’t be able to lose weight until his pain subsided. A common plight for many people and Veterans. He wanted an MRI. CyberVictimizer asked the Reddit Veteran community what could her husband do? She received great advice ranging from using the Choice Act to consulting a Veteran Service Organization. Then user EatTheBankers responded:

“See McDonald’s personal cell# (513)509-8454. You can leave a message.

His email is: robert.a.mcdonald@va.gov

Two weeks later, CyberVictimizer posted UPDATE:

VA hospital won’t perform necessary tests. Where do we go from here? She reported that she sent Secretary McDonald an e-mail and the VA clinic manager called her husband soon after to schedule him for the tests he requested.

Problem solved. This isn’t an exception. Many Veterans have expressed their surprise and excitement in the Veteran subreddit about similar experiences. While all Veterans are invited to call or e-mail Bob, there are several avenues that can be tried first.

1. Speak to a patient advocate http://www.va.gov/health/patient_advocate These are VA employees

2. Request a different primary care physician. If your current physician doesn’t work for you, you

3. Consult with a Veteran service organization http://www.va.gov/vso These organizations are vital.

Tweet your question using the hashtag #VetQ

http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/vetq
VA and Veteran Service organizations monitor this hashtag to answer your questions.

Use:

http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention_Inquiry_Routing_Information_System

• Reach out to your local member of Congress.

• Search the Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents and Survivors online handbook accessible at


Veterans use r/Veterans to vent, share information and seek help using their Veteran benefits. It’s a great resource that exemplifies the best of our community. [Source: VAntage Point | Tim Hudak | Feb. 3, 2015 ++]

On a more local note, talking to your County Veterans Service Office can help you navigate these systems before you lose your cool. We have established relationships with many VA offices in both the Claim, State and Medical areas. We will try to help facilitate a solution to your problem.

Waushara County Veteran Services office can be reached at:
(920)787-0446

Or by email:
http://www.co.waushara.wi.us/forms.aspx?fid=638
Women Veterans Listening Sessions

Save the Dates!
March 3, 2015 at 1 p.m.
Radisson Conference Center
Green Bay, WI

March 24, 2015 at 6 p.m.
Madison Area Technical College
Madison, WI

To learn more about veterans events visit:
www.WisVets.com/Events
Or call:
1-(800)947-8387

Libby Muller, WI Women Veterans Contact
Recently this office received a letter from Libby Muller the newest member with the Department of Veteran Affairs Outreach Team where her emphasis will focus on Wisconsin Women Veterans. In the upcoming year, she will be holding several listening sessions around the state including Green Bay, Madison, Milwaukee and Eau Claire. These sessions will provide her with an opportunity to meet and discuss specific women veteran issues and concerns so she may present and help develop meaningful solutions with WDVA resources. Her plans include a department sponsored Women Veterans Retreat in May at Trinity Equestrian Center in Eau Claire and a Lake Geneva Female Veteran Rally in the fall. The flyer above is introducing her first event two events held on March 3, 2015 at 1 p.m. at the Radisson Conference Center in Green Bay, and on March 24, 2015 at 6 p.m. at Madison Area Technical College. (From the WDVA website)

Women Vet Week
Camp American Legion is holding their 5th Annual Women Veterans’ Week at the camp at no cost for food or lodging for all women’s week. Participants accepted on first come, first served basis until all accommodations are filled. Some VA Primary care clinics will have applications or you may call:
Kevin Moshea, Director
(715) 277-2510
WOMEN VETERANS WEEK
JUNE 15-19 2015
VA Prescription Tracker

Veterans can now track the status of most of their prescriptions online, thanks to an innovative idea by a Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) employee. The new 24/7 service allows online tracking for most prescriptions mailed from the VA Mail Order Pharmacy (https://www.myhealth.va.gov/index.html). The Prescription Tracker was recommended by VA employee Kenneth Siehr, a winner of the President’s 2013 Securing Americans Value and Efficiency (SAVE) Award. Siehr’s idea focused on the use of technology as a way to save money and improve the services VA provides to its patients. More than 57,000 Veterans are currently using the service through My HealtheVet, an online feature that allows Veterans to partner with their health care team. The number is expected to grow as VA starts to educate Veterans about the new feature. Later this month, the tracking feature will include images of the medication that is dispensed. Over the next year, a secure messaging alert will be added so that Veterans know when a medication was placed in the mail. “VA prescription refill online is an excellent example of how one employee looked at the process of VA prescription tracking through the eyes of our Veterans and came up with an idea that better serves Veterans,” said Interim Under Secretary for Health, Carolyn M. Clancy. “This idea is both innovative and transformative, and it is certainly one, when put into action, improves customer service for America’s Veterans.”

[Source: VA News Release | Feb. 04, 2015 ++] Article was altered to fit page. A quote was removed by Kenneth Siehr.

GWOT Medal

The Department of Defense announced 9 FEB that effective immediately, service members are authorized to wear Service Stars on their Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medals (GWOT-EM) to represent deployments in support of approved GWOT operations. Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Jessica Wright signed a memorandum authorizing the new policy change retroactive to Sept. 11, 2001. Only one GWOT-EM is awarded for each approved operation. For example, a service member who was awarded the medal for an Operation Enduring Freedom deployment, and is subsequently authorized a second award for an Operation Inherent Resolve deployment, would wear a single Service Star on the GWOT-EM to denote both awards. The five GWOT-EM approved operations are:

**Operation Inclusive Dates**

ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF)  Sep 11, 2001 – TBD

IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF)  Mar 19, 2003 – Aug 31, 2010

NOMAD SHADOW (ONS)  Nov 5, 2007 – TBD

NEW DAWN (OND)  Sep 1, 2010 – Dec 31, 2011

INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR)  June 15, 2014 – TBD

The list of associated areas of eligibility for each approved GWOT-EM operation is available at:

http://prhome.defense.gov/RFM/MPP/OEPM/Functions


Toxic Exposure

To visit Fort McClellan, Alabama is to visit a ghost town. After 81 years training millions of soldiers, the Army base was mothballed in 1999. From World War II until it closed, Fort McClellan was home to the Army chemical warfare school. It spent decades steeped in the toxic agents of battle. Today, it is off limits and a federal Superfund site. Rep. Reid Ribble, (R) Appleton, knows about Fort McClellan through the stories of veterans fighting to survive. They turned to him for help after struggling to get treatment at the VA. "The first thing the VA wants to know is: Is it connected to your military service? If it's not connected to your military service, the type of benefits and care might look different," Ribble said. Those stories motivated Rep. Ribble to support a bill last year that will help Fort McClellan veterans get treatment. It's called the Fort McClellan Health Registry Act and would force the defense department to inform veterans of possible toxic exposure and begin screening them for problems. Supporters say the bill failed because the defense department opposes it. One DOD staffer e-mailed the bill's key sponsor it "would generate a significant financial and resource burden upon the Army." Congressman Ribble and his colleagues will try again this month because, he said, the government needs to be responsible. "They still were there and they were there in the service of their country, as a result of that we ought to take care of them," Ribble said. Refer to http://www.jrn.com/tmj4/news/i-team/Sick-Veterans 291256011.html to view a video. [Source: TMJ4 I-Team | Steve Chamraz | Feb 09, 2015 ++]

Agent Orange/ C123 Aircraft

The US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) should immediately provide full benefits to veterans exposed to the chemical Agent Orange in contaminated C-123 aircraft during and after the Vietnam War, a bi-partisan group of senators led by senators Richard Burr and Jeff Merkley said in a letter to the VA head Robert McDonald. “It is our desire to see that C-123 veterans, who suffer today because of service-related exposure to Agent Orange receive the help they need,” the letter, issued on 4 FEB, said. The senators said the VA’s failure to provide benefits to all but one veteran has been disappointing. “Despite multiple Air Force reports going back to 1979, showing that the C-123s were contaminated, numerous expert opinions from inside and outside the government suggesting these veterans were exposed to Agent Orange and other toxins, and a judge’s order stopping the resale of these C-123s because the planes were a ‘danger to public health,’ the VA to-date has doggedly insisted there is no possibility that post-Vietnam era C-123 veterans might have been exposed to dangerous levels of Agent Orange,” the letter, issued on Wednesday, said. The Institute of Medicine released a report in January that found 1500 to 2100 veterans were exposed and sickened by traces of Agent Orange in C-123 aircraft that were not properly decontaminated. The report indicated that service members flew in the C-123 airplanes until 1982. The United States sprayed 12 million gallons of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, according to a study in the journal Nature. The United States used Agent Orange to destroy crops used to feed its adversaries, clear perimeters of military installations of foliage, and eliminate the cover that the jungle provided to its enemy. The US banned Agent Orange in the 1970s and destroyed existing stocks. [Source: Sputnik International | Feb. 05, 2015 ++]

http://www.c123kcancer.blogspot.com/

Photo Courtesy of the c123 cancer blog spot supporting the efforts of veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange post Vietnam through the use of the Agent Orange spraying aircraft still in use after the war had ended. To read more of the effort to get benefits for veterans possibly exposed, go to the website above. Regular updates tell the uphill climb for recognition of this type of exposure.
If you're a veteran and rely on benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, where you live may have an effect on whether you receive the benefits you've earned.

The VA has a hard time explaining why there are such huge disparities on Vet benefits spending across the nation. And when the agency's data are published, a VA official says, they can count on angry calls from the congressional offices of whichever state ranks last in terms of dollars per veteran.

Below is a breakdown by state of what was spent in 2013. Refer to [http://www.va.gov/vetdata/](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/) for previous years back to 1999 along with how it was spent each year, VA says the data don't show the full picture because there are too many unknowns — only 9 million vets use the VA out of 22 million total veterans. They move around, sometimes disappearing off the VA's radar for decades, and then they walk back in the door. The numbers are also driven by where vets choose to retire, and by each state's efforts to educate veterans about the benefits and services available. State Spending Per Vet Vets as a Share of the Population

- Florida $6,677 9%
- South Carolina $6,676 10%
- Alaska $6,620 12%
- Rhode Island $6,531 8%
- North Carolina $6,440 9%
- Kentucky $6,438 9%
- Mississippi $6,340 8%
- Hawaii $6,302 10%
- Montana $6,287 10%
- Louisiana $6,257 8%
- Tennessee $6,237 9%
- Minnesota $6,207 8%
- New York $6,191 5%
- Colorado $6,190 10%
- Massachusetts $6,186 6%
- U.S. average $6,088 8%
- Wyoming $5,925 11%
- Georgia $5,885 9%
- Arizona $5,860 10%
- North Dakota $5,793 9%
- Missouri $5,715 9%
- Wisconsin $5,715 8%
- Vermont $5,508 8%
- Utah $5,493 7%
- New Hampshire $5,474 10%
- Maryland $5,465 9%
- Virginia $5,437 11%
- Washington $5,414 10%
- Kansas $5,409 9%
- Idaho $5,261 10%
- Connecticut $5,085 7%
- Illinois $5,082 7%
- Ohio $5,019 9%
- Iowa $5,056 9%
- Michigan $5,001 8%
- Indiana $4,935 8%
- Pennsylvania $4,797 8%
- Delaware $4,587 10%
- New Jersey $4,480 6%

As of September 2014 in the State of Wisconsin there were:
- Total: 413,723 Veterans
- Wartime 300,421
- Gulf War 111,209
- Vietnam 140,064
- Korean 35,496
- WWII 21-747
- Peacetime 113,298
- Female 33,629
- Male 380,094

In Waushara County, 10% of the population are Veterans!

Notes U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs spending figures include only categories that go directly to veterans (such as medical, compensation or education benefits) and exclude capital expenses (such as facilities and new construction).


SOME MORE FUN FACTS!

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released [Veterans Employed in the Federal Executive Branch: Fiscal Year 2012](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/). This report summarizes Veteran employment in the federal government using data from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) report, Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch Fiscal Year (FY)2012. According to OPM, 29.7% of Federal Executive Branch employees were Veterans in FY2012 which is a 4.2% increase from FY2008. From FY2008 to FY2012, as the number of new hires decreased 32%, the percent of new hires who were Veterans increased 6 percentage points.
**Mental Help**

Jennifer Grubba 608-264-5342 of the Madison Vet Center will be filling in the counseling position that comes to Waushara County Courthouse by previously arranged appointments, 2nd Wednesday of the month. Call for appointment. Free Counseling to combat veterans and sexual trauma veterans.

5 sessions to non-combat veterans. Marriage counseling, also.

**Financial Help**

Jamie Kolpian from Supportive Service for Veterans Families (SSVF) will meet with veterans facing eviction from rentals or post foreclosures, every 4th Wednesday at the North Annex 230 W. Park St. Wautoma, WI between 10 am to 3 pm. For an appointment call 866-823-8387.

There is a financial limit to this help. You may call her to find out more details.

**PTSD Group**

Interested in forming a PTSD support group? Jennifer Grubba of the Madison Vet Center (608)264-5342 would like to help form a group for Veterans with PTSD in Waushara County. The group would most likely meet in Waushara County. Please call her if you are interested in being part of a support group. And willing to join with other veterans in support of each other. No cost!!!