

VA says it will relax 40-mile rule for private medical care

March 24 2015, by Matthew Daly

Responding to pressure from Congress and veterans groups, the Department of Veterans Affairs is relaxing a rule that makes it hard for some veterans in rural areas to prove they live at least 40 miles from a VA health site.

The change comes amid complaints from lawmakers and advocates who say the VA's current policy has prevented thousands of [veterans](#) from taking advantage of a new law intended to allow veterans in remote areas to gain access to federally paid medical care from local doctors.

The VA said it will now measure the 40-mile trip by driving miles as calculated by Google maps or other sites, rather than as the crow flies, as currently interpreted. The rule change is expected to roughly double the number of eligible veterans.

"We've determined that changing the distance calculation will help ensure more veterans have access to care when and where they want it," Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald said in a statement. The change will be unveiled at a hearing Tuesday before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

The committee's chairman, Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and other lawmakers have criticized the VA for what they call an overly strict interpretation of a landmark law adopted last year to overhaul the VA and make it easier for veterans to get private care paid for by the government. The law was passed in response to a scandal over long wait

times for veterans seeking [health care](#) and falsified records covering up the delays.

"Given the clear intent of Congress to reduce barriers to care, it is perplexing that the VA is not using its authority to allow non-VA care for those who face a geographic challenge in accessing care, including long drive times or health conditions that make travel difficult," 42 senators from both parties wrote last month in a letter to McDonald.

McDonald told senators last month that he was open to changes in the way the 40-mile rule is interpreted, but he and other VA officials stressed that relaxing the rule's requirements was likely to result in higher costs for the program.

Under the new interpretation, the distance veterans must travel will be calculated through commercial products such as Google maps or other websites, rather than a straight line.

"We appreciate the constructive feedback shared by veterans and our partners to help us improve service to veterans," McDonald said.

More than 45,000 medical appointments with private providers have been scheduled since the department's "Choice Program" went into effect in early November, McDonald said.

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