

Mental Health Services (Veterans)

For people with disabilities

Agency Involved: *Veterans Health Administration*

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers all US government programs supporting veterans of the US military. Within the VA, the **Veterans Health Administration** (VHA) administers the medical assistance program, including numerous outpatient clinics, hospitals, medical centers and long-term healthcare facilities (such as nursing homes). The VHA division has more employees than all other elements of the VA combined.

Administratively, the VHA divides the US into 21 regions called VISNs (Veterans Integrated Service Networks). Each VISN has at least two large medical centers and a network of community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) and Veterans Centers.

More details available at:

[Veterans Health Administration Website](#)

Summary

The nature of contemporary warfare is creating more veterans with significant mental health issues, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse. The VHA has dramatically increased its mental health services in the past decades. It has also established several research and treatment programs focused specifically on PTSD, TBI, and mental health. There are also some programs for homeless vets.

Although most veterans are eligible for mental health services (for service-related issues), the need for these services sometimes outstrips the available resources. Still, most veterans in need of services are able to meet with a mental health professional within a few weeks. There are also several 24-hour crisis hotlines and online resources.

A large percentage of vets live in rural areas, which, in the past, made it hard for VHA to provide them with convenient health care. However, that situation is much better now thanks to the large network of Community-Based Outpatient Clinics and a dedicated VA Rural Health Service.

More details available at:

[Fact Sheets About VA Health Benefits](#)

[VA State-by-state Facilities Locator](#)

Specific Benefits

The VA employs about 21,000 mental health professionals, providing care for vets experiencing post-traumatic stress (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), substance abuse, and general re-entry issues, among other things. Vets can get these services through many facilities of the VA health system:

- **Medical Centers** – These are large hospital facilities and associated outpatient clinics, usually located in major cities or centrally-located smaller cities. There are more than 150 around the US.
 - There are 5 in Missouri: 2 in St. Louis, one each in KC, Columbia, & Poplar Bluff.
- **Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs)** – Although smaller than the Medical Centers, these are significant medical facilities located throughout each region, to serve a wide variety of medical needs. Some are quite large, serving more than 10,000 vets per year, others are much smaller. There are more than 800 CBOCs around the country and nearly half are in rural areas.
 - There are more than 20 in Missouri.
- **Vet Centers** – These are general counseling and referral centers, staffed mostly by veterans. They allow vets to have confidential, non-clinical settings in which vets can talk with other vets about readjustment issues and other mental health problems. The services are open to any vet who served in combat zones, as well as family members of those vets. They do not provide formal therapy/treatment programs, but staff members do some initial screening and referral around TBI, depression, sexual trauma and substance abuse, as well as referral on employment and vocational rehabilitation. There are approximately 300 centers around the country.
 - There are 5 in Missouri.
- **Rural Health Service** – This is mostly a coordinating and management system focused on vets in rural communities and collaborating with CBOCs. However, it also provides some telemedicine services and, in some places, mobile health clinics (basically a "clinic-in-a truck" model) which travel around providing basic medical services to vets in remote areas.
- **Domociliaries** – These are large scale residential treatment facilities for Veterans with multiple medical and mental health conditions. There are specific programs for homelessness, PTSD, substance abuse, and psychosocial issues. There are approximately 50 around the US.
 - There is one in Missouri, at the Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, focused on homelessness.
- **National Center for PTSD and Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center** – These are both research and technical assistance projects, mostly serving medical professionals within the VA system. But each provides basic screening and referral for mental health issues through 24-hour phone numbers and live online chat. They can help vets locate mental health resources in the vets' local area.

More details available at:

[VA State-by-state Facilities Locator](#)

[VA Medical Center Locator](#)

[PTSD Service Locator](#)
[Defense Centers of Excellence \(for Psychological Health\) Website](#)

Populations Served (eligibility)

To be eligible for VHA benefits, a veteran must have served 24 continuous months (or their full term of active duty, if it was less). However, vets who received a disability discharge before meeting this requirement are still covered. (There are also other exceptions to this requirement, so everyone is encouraged to at least apply for services). Vets of the Reserves and National Guard who were called to active duty may also be eligible if they served their full term.

Most veterans are eligible for some level of health care through the VHA (unless they received a dishonorable discharge). However, the realities of congressional funding limit the number of vets the VHA can serve each year. To address this, the VHA has an 8-level priority rating system for eligible vets. Those in the top two or three tiers will get priority in services and coverage, compared to the lower tiers.

- **Priority Group 1** – Vets with a 50% disability rating (or higher) for service-connected disabilities. (See entry on VA Voc Rehab for more on disability rating)
- **Priority Group 2** – Vets with a 30% or 40% disability rating for service-connected disabilities
- **Priority Group 3** – Vets with a 10% or 20% disability rating for service-connected disabilities, or former POWs, Purple Heart recipients, and a few others.
- **Priority Group 4** – Vets with significant disabilities which are NOT service-connected
- **Priority Group 5** – Vets with low income, vets getting a VA pension for personal attendant care, vets getting Medicaid
- **Priority Group 6** – WW I vets, vets with certain types of milder disabilities or exposure to specific situations (Gulf War Syndrome, Agent Orange exposure, etc.)
- **Priority Group 7** - Vets with modest incomes and no significant disabilities
- **Priority Group 8** - Vets with higher incomes and no significant disabilities

Copayments

Vets in most of the priority groups will have to make some co-payments for treatment for non-service-related health issues. Vets in Priority Group one will not have any co-pays. The VHA asks vets in most of the lower priority groups (4-8) to submit an annual financial assessment to see if they qualify for no-cost services. Veterans who served in combat may also be exempt from copays for five years after discharge.

More details available at:
[VHA Priority Groups Description](#)
[VHA Benefits Page](#)

Definition of Disability

As discussed in the entry on VA Vocational Rehabilitation, there are actually two different disability ratings systems involved with VA benefits determination – one from the Department of Defense

(DOD) and one from the VA. Both use the same rating scale – the Veterans Affairs Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD) – but apply it in slightly different ways. The VASRD rates the significance of a person's disability on a percentage scale from 0 – 100, in 10% increments.

In addition, for priority group determination for health benefits, VHA considers what it calls "noncompensable 0% service-connected" disabilities. This involves a vet who has a moderate disability, which military physicians decide was caused (or made worse) by military service, but which is not significant enough for the vet to get monthly disability payments. It is, thus, "noncompensable", 0% disability rating, and service-connected, and the vet might need medical services from VHA for the condition.

More details available at:

[VHA Priority Groups Description](#)

[VHA Benefits Page](#)

Criminal History

Having a criminal history does not affect a vet's eligibility for VHA services, including mental health services.

VHA has two specialized outreach programs to help vets who are currently in prison: Veterans Justice Outreach and Health Care Reentry for Veterans. Both have a strong mental health focus and service representatives in each state.

More details available at:

[Veterans Justice Outreach state-by-state contacts](#)

[Health Care for Reentry Veterans state-by-state contacts](#)

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse does not affect a vet's eligibility for VHA services, including mental health services. Treatment and therapy for substance abuse is a major part of many VHA programs and is integrated through most of the screening and referral services.

More details available at:

[VHA Substance Abuse Treatment Page](#)

Application Process

Although most vets are eligible for VHA benefits, they are not automatically enrolled for health benefits. They must apply using the 1010ez form. Fortunately, this is available online at the web link below. Alternative, vets can get a copy and apply at their local vet center.

If a vet is already enrolled in VHA benefits, they should have a primary care provider (doctor) who can refer them to mental health services. If not, they can contact their local Vet Center for a referral.

More details available at:

[Online application for Health Benefits \(Form 1010ez\)](#)

Insider Tips/Comments

- As of 2013, the VA was experiencing a crisis-level backlog in processing disability benefits claims. The average wait was over a year, and getting longer, in spite of several years of effort by the VA to solve the situation. This backlog appears to focus on claims for financial compensation for service-related disabilities. Filing for these financial claims is independent of applying for VA health benefits. In theory, vets should have either a service-issued (DOD) disability rating or a temporary "Memorandum" disability rating (pending an official rating) which should allow them to apply for VA health benefits.
- Get help from the Disabled American Veterans (DAV). This non-profit organization has a network of National Service Officers available to advise vets at no cost on how to navigate the VA benefits system. These officers are well trained and very helpful. Vets do not have to be members of the DAV to use their services.
- A vet should appeal any VA disability rating determinations they feel were not correct. The VA officially says its staff members make errors in fewer than 15% of all cases, but a 2009 review by the Inspector General's Office suggested the error rate is nearly 25%.
- Vets should bring any documentation of disability status and medical records they have to the first meeting with a VHA staff member.

More details available at:

[Disabled American Veterans website](#)

[DAV National Service Office Locator](#)

[National Personnel Records Center](#)

Typical Timeline

- The VHA has a policy that all vets with a need for mental health services will see a counselor or doctor within 14 days of referral or request. Unfortunately, the Disabled American Veterans reports that it often takes four to six weeks to actually see a mental health professional. Sometimes the initial meeting is within the 14 day window, but is only with intake staff. A 2011 survey of VA mental health providers found that 40% could not meet the 14 day deadline.

Contact Information

Regional or National:

- [Veterans Health Administration Website](#)
- [Online application for Health Benefits \(Form 1010ez\)](#)

State:

- [VA Listing of State-specific VA Health Service Facilities](#)
- [VA Listing of Missouri VA Health Service Facilities](#)
- [Missouri Department of Mental Health, Veterans Page](#)

- [Missouri Veterans Commission](#) (help vets access services & benefits)
 - 1-866-VET-INFO
 - (573) 751-3779

Local

- [County Service Locator, Missouri Veteran's Commission](#)
- [VA Medical Center Locator](#)

Web links for Independent research:

- [The VA's main website](#)
 - [Veterans Health Administration Website](#)
 - [VA's Fact Sheets on Various Benefits Programs](#)
 - [Online application for Health Benefits \(Form 1010ez\)](#)
 - [Overviews of VA Health Benefits](#)
 - [VA Medical Center Locator](#)
 - [PTSD Service Locator](#)
 - [My Health e Vet](#) – an online health records and service management tool for vets from the VA
 - [VHA Office of Rural Health](#)
 - [Defense Centers of Excellence Website](#)
- [Disabled American Veterans website](#)
- [MilitaryMentalHealth.org](#) – a website from the non-profit organization *Screening for Mental Health*. This site provides online, anonymous, self-administered assessments to help vets decide if they need help with mental health issues, and locate nearby resources. There are screening tests for a variety of different issues, which can help give a composite picture of a vet's status.

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