

# Leading private-sector health system woos veterans in ads

25 March 2016, by Carla K. Johnson

A leading hospital system in the U.S. is courting military veterans with a multimillion-dollar ad campaign, raising concerns from some veterans groups that private sector marketing could weaken the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system.

The campaign tag lines—"Veterans have a choice in healthcare" and "You honored your oath, and so do we"—emphasize consumer preference and the shared values of medical professionals and the military.

Starting Monday, TV, radio, print and online ads by St. Louis-based Ascension Health's will urge veterans to call a toll-free number for information about Veterans Choice, the cornerstone of the VA overhaul approved in 2014, which makes it easier for veterans to receive federally paid medical care from local doctors.

Veterans groups say it's the first large-scale marketing to Choice-eligible veterans.

Vets are wary of proposals to privatize the VA health system and fear that draining off patients and dollars could hurt the VA in the long term, said Louis Celli of the American Legion, the nation's largest veterans group. While they supported the Choice legislation following a scandal over long wait times and falsified records, most want the program to remain temporary, he said.

More than 4.6 million veterans used VA health care last year, and the VA says it has reduced its waiting list while authorizing millions of veterans to receive care in the [private sector](#).

Congress approved \$10 billion over three years for the Choice program, money that will go to private sector providers at Medicare rates, a potentially valuable revenue stream. To be eligible, veterans must live more than 40 miles away from a VA medical facility or face a long wait for VA care.

"No community is more vulnerable than veterans," said Ascension spokesman Nick Ragone. "Our mission is to serve those who are underserved, no matter what the revenue stream or reimbursement levels."

Ascension, the nation's largest nonprofit [health care](#) system with facilities in 24 states, estimates its efforts could lead to 24,000 veterans a year getting care from its providers, helping the VA reduce its backlog of cases.

Ascension supports extending the Choice program beyond its 2017 expiration and will air ads in Washington, D.C., Ragone said. "We're looking to continue to be part of the solution," he said.

Ascension plans to train providers in veterans' issues and has hired veterans in each of its markets to help new patients navigate the requirements of the Choice program, Ragone said.

Some veterans groups are skeptical, however, about whether Ascension can live up to its marketing.

"How many mechanical arms have they fitted recently?" said Celli after seeing an Ascension ad depicting a veteran with a prosthetic arm. "This campaign suggests that veterans are interchangeable with anyone else in society (paste head here), which clearly shows that they just don't get it."

Terri Tanielian, a Rand senior research analyst, said many private sector providers lack training in military culture and combat-related health conditions. Her research—a 2014 survey of mental health professionals—found only 13 percent met standards for culturally competent, evidence-based care for veterans.

Ascension's ad campaign could lead to unexpected medical bills if veterans seek private sector care

without making sure they're eligible, said Carlos Fuentes of Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"If we hear from [veterans](#) that Ascension facilities are improperly billing them, we would object," Fuentes said. "The most important part is that (Ascension) keep their information and materials up to date. I commend them if they're up to that task."

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