

New Pocatello VA clinic site can treat 800 more patients

POCATELLO — The Pocatello Veterans Health Administration clinic will soon relocate and become one of the first patient care facilities of its kind, Veterans Affairs officials said Wednesday at a public forum in the Ballroom at Idaho State University's Pond Student Union Building.

Christopher Scott, a congressional and legislative liaison for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, said that on Aug. 29, the outpatient clinic formerly on Hospital Way in Pocatello will begin treating veterans in the office complex west of the old Portneuf Medical Center hospital building on 900 South 11th Avenue in Pocatello.

Scott said the new facility is three times larger and can treat an additional 800 veterans in Southeast Idaho.

Further, Scott said the newly relocated VA clinic will implement a Patient Aligned Care Team, or PACT, treatment system that will work to obtain a robust total health care picture for veteran patients.

"This means there is a village to treat you," Scott said. "In VA health care, we try to wrap our minds around the total health care of the veteran. This means mental health, physical health or maybe health care in your home."

Melissa Hartman, the coordinator of Bannock County Veteran Services, said that a PACT team will consist of a care provider or physician, a nursing staff, front-desk receptionist, pharmacist and mental health expert.

"There will be four of these teams in the new clinic with a possibility for eight teams in the future," Hartman said.

Todd Johnson, Idaho State University director of Veterans Student Services, said that PACT teams will increase opportunities to meet veterans' health care needs and the new facility will offer patients additional privacy.

Veterans throughout Southeast Idaho voiced their concerns at the public forum that the Department of Veterans Affairs hosted as part of its MyVA initiative. The forum served as a listening session so VA officials can look to provide veterans with a better life experience, particularly regarding health care.

Almost every veteran who shared their experience voiced concerns and frustrations with the Veterans Choice program. It's designed for veterans to get health care locally in their communities, as opposed to waiting more than 30 days and traveling more than 40 miles for health care.

Because many VA health care exchanges are inundated with requests to reimburse providers for treating veterans, many of the physicians or providers are forced to turn patients away because of how long it could take for reimbursement.

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One veteran, David Johnson of Pocatello, said he was told he would be reimbursed to travel to Salt Lake City to receive the care he needed. But after several weeks, he never received any compensation.

“It would be great if it actually worked,” Johnson said about the Veterans Choice program.

Hartman said that going to the VA clinic here in Pocatello should always be a veteran’s first choice.

“It’s frustrating and difficult because the veteran has to contact a third-party exchange service to get authorized for the care they need,” Hartman said. “And the exchange service is struggling to keep up with the demand.”

Another issue, according to Hartman, is that veterans in rural communities like those in Southeast Idaho don’t always know who to call for assistance when trying to navigate the confusing landscape of veterans health care.

Hartman said that in addition to herself, Debbie Harmon, a veterans service officer at the Idaho State Veterans Home in Pocatello, encourage veterans to call and ask for help when figuring out what would work best in terms of securing health care.

“This is frustrating for the VA medical staff, for the veterans and our local medical providers,” Hartman said.

However, with a new and expanded Pocatello veterans clinic soon opening its doors, there’s potential for frustrations to subside in the future.

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