

Chris Reiter

Mentor: Chris Lynch

Title: *2019 Southern Illinois Veterans Healthcare Needs Assessment Survey*

Abstract

Background: A healthcare needs assessment survey is a systematic approach to ensure a health service uses its resources to improve the health of its population in the most efficient way. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) conducts a regular needs assessment survey of VA enrollees. However, these VA surveys do not capture the needs of over 9 million veterans ineligible to receive VA benefits, representing nearly half of all US veterans. This project was designed to capture the needs and attitudes towards pain, mental health and general healthcare services for all US military Veterans and their children residing in Southern Illinois.

Methods: The survey utilized a seven-point Likert scale to assess respondent agreement to statements concerning access and attitudes to patient care. Respondents were asked about their health insurer and if any children were dependent upon them for medical care. To reach veterans outside of the VA system, flyers with links to the survey were sent to barbers, bars, churches, ministries, tattoo parlors, VFW halls and American Legion halls. Up to four of each requisite business type in the largest city or town within the 52 southernmost Illinois counties included in the survey's scope received survey recruitment tools for display. Unique survey URLs were created for each business type to allow for identifying of the best avenue of response. Unique URLs were also created for distribution at the 2019 Southern Illinois Veterans Summit and for social media distribution via the authors' Facebook accounts.

Results: Of the 24 responses received, 79% of respondents received their healthcare outside of the VA system. 67% of respondents had at least one child dependent upon them for their medical care. 64% of respondents indicated they had experienced a general medical issue within the last 90 days that likely required medical attention and 23.7% had a child who likely required medical attention over the same time period. 25% of respondents indicated they found it difficult to receive an appointment for their medical issues when they attempted to make one.

62.5% of respondents had experienced pain limiting daily activity within the last 90 days. 41.67% of respondents found it difficult to receive an appointment when attempting to make one. 58.33% of respondents were unlikely to make an appointment regarding their pain because they preferred to manage their pain treatment on their own

25% of respondents indicated they had concerns regarding their mental health within the past 90 days. 41.67% of respondents indicated they do not trust medical professionals assigned to care to handle their mental health issues. 25% of respondents find it difficult to get an appointment for mental health services when trying to make one.

Conclusion: The high rate of respondents not receiving their healthcare through the VA system indicates this survey reached its intended audience. The rate of respondents with dependent children also demonstrates that veteran's programs must consider pediatric healthcare care a priority. Access to care was identified as a key area, with nearly half of respondents indicating appointment difficulties for pain services. While appointments for mental health services demonstrated greater availability, provider mistrust could potentially limit their use. Improvements to veteran healthcare in Southern Illinois should

focus on broadening appointment availability while stressing the importance of seeking out healthcare and cultivating provider trust.