

RURAL VETERANS HEALTH CARE IMPROVEMENT ACT
SUMMARY
Senator Al Franken

Despite being over-represented in the military, rural Americans have a hard time getting access to quality health care when they return home as veterans.

Over 40 percent of all veterans enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system live in rural areas, yet these areas have a shortage of medical providers and facilities. Often, rural veterans live hundreds of miles from the nearest VA Medical Center. VA has created smaller community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs), but they are still often too far away or too small to fully meet veterans' needs. And a growing number of female veterans with distinctive health care needs face particular barriers in rural settings.

The VA has established an Office of Rural Health (ORH), but a strong and comprehensive strategic plan is needed to best use available resources and adequately serve our veterans.

Congress has appropriated about \$750 million to ORH since it was established in 2007 to address barriers to quality care. These funds allowed the office to undertake hundreds of initiatives throughout the country between FY 2009 and 2011. Unfortunately, ORH's lack of strategic vision and planning has meant that progress has been piecemeal and uneven. Most strikingly, the VA Inspector General found that ORH lacked reasonable assurance that a majority of its funds in FY 2009 and 2010 actually improved access to and quality of care for rural veterans. The IG found specifically that ORH did not adequately manage the use of fee funds, which go to outside providers. While VA has now published a strategic plan, it lacks the vision and specificity required to adequately serve veterans.

Making sure that rural veterans have access to quality care from VA is a national priority, and requires careful strategic planning and stewardship of resources.

The Rural Veterans Health Care Improvement Act will help the VA better manage resources and ensure that the Office of Rural Health achieves its important mission.

Sen. Franken's legislation requires VA to develop a five-year strategic plan for the Office of Rural Health within six months of enactment. The plan must include goals and objectives for:

- recruiting and retaining Veterans Health Administration (VHA) healthcare personnel in rural areas.
- ensuring timeliness and quality of care by VHA in rural areas through contract and fee-basis providers.
- the implementation, expansion, and enhanced use of telemedicine in rural areas.
- the full and effective use of VA's mobile outpatient clinics.
- the modification of ORH funding allocation mechanisms so that the funds actually go to initiatives and projects that improve access to and quality of care for rural veterans.

In addition, the strategic plan must include procedures for soliciting from VA rural providers a statement of their clinical capacity, how they handle emergencies that exceed that capacity, including mental health emergencies, and how they provide and coordinate health care for women veterans.