

## **Understanding fee-based claims for non-VA medical care and treatment**

As a veteran, you may be eligible for health care through the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). If this is the case, the goal is to provide you with the care you need at a nearby VA medical facility. However, this may not always be an option, especially in an emergency situation. Any veteran and their family who receives emergency care outside of their primary VA medical network should be familiar with Community Care programs and have an understanding of fee-based claims. Understanding these resources can help expedite the medical claims process, ensuring your bills get paid appropriately and on time.

Veterans and their loved ones who regularly receive medical care outside a VA medical facility are familiar with Community Care program and fee-based claims. Community Care programs are available to all veterans when VA medical facilities are not feasibly available. This includes veterans who live long distances from a VA medical facility and / or require procedures from out of network care providers.

In most cases, having the VA pay for Community Care requires pre-authorization, and, any care needed or recommended must be approved by the VA medical facility that authorizes the care. The use of non-VA medical facilities is governed by federal law and details when and how it can be used. For many veterans, this will not be an issue, as they receive regular medical care at their assigned VA medical facility, however, this may not always be the case, especially in an emergency situation.

First of all – and this point cannot be stressed enough – do not delay treatment by attempting to request VA payment authorization. Get the emergency medical care you require right away. Emergency events may be reimbursed on behalf of the VA in certain cases. A medical emergency is generally defined as a condition or situation that requires immediate medical attention and may be life threatening if left untreated.

In some instances, 9-1-1 may be called and the ambulance provider has protocol that requires them to take you to the nearest trauma or medical emergency center. This may be a VA medical facility, but many times it is not. It is important to inform the non-VA medical facility treating you that you are a veteran, and, if impatient care is required, you may request to be transferred to a VA medical facility once your condition stabilizes. Contact the nearest VA medical facility as soon as possible to find out more about VA payments of your emergency care.

During an emergency situation you may become unconscious or unable to communicate effectively to the person or persons providing you with care. If this happens, it is important to have a family member contact the VA within 72-hours of the emergency event to make them aware of your situation, explain any fee-based claims that may be applied and how to properly manage them for payment.

Locally, in Solano County and in the surrounding communities, our VA medical facilities are aware of the 72-hour requirement and are working on an identification card explaining how the fee-based system works, providing explicit instructions for you, your family members and the private health care providers or ambulance service on how to notify the VA so that payment can be made.

Remember, one of the biggest barriers veterans face when seeking benefits is knowing what benefits are available to them. In this instance, the last thing we want is for a hospital or ambulance service to bill you or take you to collections for something that could have been taken care of in advance with the right Community Care program and fee-based claims benefits offered by the VA.

If you or your loved ones have a question about Community Care programs, fee-based claims or other benefit programs available to veterans and their families, please come by our office and let us assist you. We are here to help and look forward to working with you. Thank you for your service to this country.

*Ted Puntillo is Director of Veteran's Services for Solano County. Reach him at (707) 784-6590 or TEPuntillo@SolanoCounty.com. The Solano County Veteran's Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.*

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