



LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES & POLICY INITIATIVES 118TH ★ CONGRESS



Rural Veterans' Emergency Air Ambulance Access

Almost 200 rural hospitals have closed since 2005.

On October 10, 2023, a 25-bed critical access hospital in Herington, Kansas, abruptly closed its doors. On October 12, 2023, St. Mark's Medical Center in La Grange, Texas, closed. Furthermore, more than 300 additional rural hospitals are at immediate risk of closing. These closures increase EMS transport times. As the distance between emergency care and specialty care grows, patients must increasingly rely on the services of on-air ambulances.

About 550,000 Americans use air ambulances every year. Approximately 75% of them live in rural areas. According to Veteran's Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health, 4.4 million veterans live in rural communities, and 2.7 million are enrolled in VA.

Rural Veterans Broken EMS System

While VA has expanded its Veterans Transportation Services to more than 80 rural communities, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) and others have concerns about VA's proposed new payment plan for air ambulance services.

Planned to go into effect February 16, 2024, the new payment will apply when there is no contract between VA and the air ambulance service vendor. VA will pay the *lesser* of the actual charge, or the amount determined by Medicare Part B, Ambulance Fee Schedule.

The *VA Emergency Transportation Access Act* (S. 2757 and H.R. 5530), introduced September 18, 2023, is bipartisan legislation in the House and Senate supported by multiple VSOs. This bill protects veterans' access to air ambulance services by requiring VA to conduct a thorough review of the impact of their proposed rule change, and to ensure the new rates reflect the actual cost of emergency air transportation.

Access to ambulance services is not just a rural veteran's issue, it affects all Americans. The *Protecting Air Ambulance Services for Americans Act* is another bipartisan bill, updating Medicare's reimbursement rates for air ambulance services. Introduced June 1, 2023, this legislation seeks to improve access to emergency air ambulance services by requiring CMS use data collected under the *No Surprises Act of 2023* to update Medicare's air ambulance reimbursement rates.



How Can You Support These Bills?

Contact your legislator while they are in your district. Tell them your concerns about air ambulance services in your community. Let them know you want to work with them to protect veterans' rights to EMS and specialty care.

Work with your VVA Chapter and local stakeholders to ensure your community (veterans and non-veterans) has access to healthcare. Help VVA, other VSOs, and stakeholders hold Town Hall Meetings.

Attend your legislator's Town Hall Meetings in your district to express your views and concerns about rural access to healthcare.

Write letters, send e-mails, and call your toll-free Legislative Switchboard at (202) 224-3121. A switchboard operator will connect you directly with the Congressional office you request.

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is the only national Vietnam Veterans organization congressionally chartered and exclusively dedicated to Vietnam-era veterans and their families.

www.vva.org