

## Advocates Push Local Healthcare for Veterans

By MICHAEL MILLER, Staff Writer / Posted: Monday, March 23, 2015 7:19 pm



Fred Trasatti Jr.'s 2007 van has 226,000 miles on the odometer.

None of them were fun miles, he said.

Trasatti, of Middle Township, coordinates transportation for Cape May County veterans who need a ride to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals in Philadelphia and Delaware. He is a volunteer for Chapter 44 of the Disabled American Veterans in Lower Township, which has two vans to ferry veterans to appointments.

Congress passed the Veterans' Access, Choice and Accountability Act last year, which gives veterans who live 40 miles or more from VA facilities, or who face delays of 30 days or more in getting an appointment, the option of going to their local doctor or hospital. The move was a response to national criticism last year that some veterans were suffering — or, in some cases, dying — while sitting on VA waiting lists for treatment.

So the VA mailed 8.6 million “choice cards” late last year to veterans nationwide. But local veterans said they still can't get medical treatment locally, since they are not eligible. They live within a short drive from VA clinics in Vineland, Cape May or Northfield that provide basic care.

“The VA facilities are not hospitals. They offer no specialists, no MRI, no X-ray. You can't even get a shingles shot there,” said James Lemma, of Wildwood, a U.S. Army veteran who fought in the Vietnam War with the 101st Airborne.



Lemma said the care he received at the VA in Delaware was competent and professional. But when he tried to get VA permission to get a colonoscopy locally in Middle Township, he was denied.

“So I have to go to Wilmington for everything,” he said.

**The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs could not be reached for comment.**

Veterans advocate Joe Griffies, of Middle Township, hosts a weekly radio show on veterans issues on WIBG-1020AM. He said the long drives to VA hospitals have always been an issue for South Jersey's veterans.

"I don't know another group of people who have to travel as far to get treatment — not our politicians, not our leaders," he said.

The Vietnam veteran goes to Philadelphia for treatment. Counting the 180-mile round-trip drive, it takes most of the day.

"It's more than a veterans' issue. It's a community issue," he said. "If local hospitals could see veterans, they'd hire more doctors and staff. It would make for better community hospitals for everyone," he said.

Charles Bennett, a veteran from Commercial Township, said he woke up one night with burning in his chest. He consulted with the doctor at his local VA clinic in Vineland, who advised him to go to the emergency room.

But Bennett said he was reluctant to drive 50 miles to Delaware if he just needed an antacid, or worse, was having a heart attack.

"I opted to buy an over-the-counter product that worked quite well," he said in an email. "I have come to the conclusion that the Department of Veterans Affairs has deliberately decided to operate in the theater of the absurd."

Johnnie Walker, president of Disabled American Veterans Chapter 44, said South Jersey veterans should be able to get treatment at their local hospital.

"Let us go to the local hospital and let them bill the VA. That would be a win-win for us at Cape Regional Medical Center," he said.

Walker said it's cruel to force veterans with serious chronic illnesses to travel all day.

"If anyone has had chemotherapy, you don't want to spend six or eight hours in a van traveling all day," he said. "Some of these guys are in their late 80s. They have to pee every half-hour. It's not working. It's not right."

Trasatti said the drive to hospitals in Delaware or Philadelphia is no picnic for veterans who must wait for everyone else to be seen before they can return home. This often leads to long, uncomfortable days.

"If we have an early appointment, everyone is getting up at zero-dark-thirty hours and getting back late," Trasatti said. "At the end of the day, I come home and I'm beat. I think the trip is more detrimental to their health than the treatment. What are we going to do? We're stuck."

U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, talked to veterans last week in Ocean City and said they could seek hardship waivers from the VA to get medical treatment locally under a pilot program.

LoBiondo said he favored the program because it improved medical care and the efficiency of paying for it.

“We continue to make strides locally,” he said.

*Staff writer Cynthia Nevitt contributed to this report.*

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