

Veterans' Access to Substance Abuse Treatment Declines

VISN 1 MIRECC researchers have documented that veterans had both rising need and declining access for substance abuse services during the mid-1990's when over 60% of VA inpatient programs were closed. During 1991-1994, the number of VA substance abuse programs increased by 20% but this expansion was followed by a marked reduction in the part of the VA budget dedicated to substance abuse services. This budget reduction resulted from closing the majority of inpatient substance abuse beds while attempting to increase access to outpatient programs. At the same time, major cutbacks in the Medicaid coverage for substance abuse services led to parallel reductions in non-VA programs. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of these changes on veterans and non-veterans in the general U.S. population. MIRECC researchers used findings from the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse from 1994, 1997, 1998 and 2001 to track trends in substance abuse and access to treatment in veterans and non-veterans. Because rates of substance abuse tend to be highest in young adults, possible decreases in substance problems among the aging veteran population were evaluated. Instead, veterans' rates of self reported substance problems rose between 1994 and 1998 from 4.4% to 5.9% while rates of substance abuse treatment declined from 3.6% to 3.1%. Similar patterns were noted for non-veterans. These trends continued in the 2001 survey. Taken together, these findings suggest that the attempted increase in VA outpatient substance abuse treatment programs has not succeeded in attracting as many substance abusing veterans as the inpatient programs that were closed. The MIRECC researchers conclude that the advantage that veterans have had for many years in access to core substance abuse services has eroded since the early 1990's. The research team included Richard Tessler, Robert Rosenheck and Gail Gamache.