

[TRACK 8: SURVIVOR STORIES: THE VA]

Many people who have served in any of the U.S. Armed Services are eligible for, and entitled to some kinds of support provided through the U.S. Veterans Administration - the VA. The rules have changed, and veterans now need to enroll every year for services. There has been some definite tightening of coverage, and the VA encourages veterans to keep any health insurance they have. But, for those who qualify, the VA system can provide much needed help in finding and getting care. Glenn's story is fairly common. .

Glenn, in his late 60s: Part I

[Glenn]

When I got out of the Service, I went back to work on my dad's farm and have been there ever since - except now it is my farm. Like a lot of farmers, I don't have a health insurance plan, and I am a couple years shy of qualifying for Medicare. So, my cancer threatens my way of life on the farm with my wife and son and his family. I don't know if I will be able to keep farming or, if I can, for how long. I had no idea how to pay for my treatment. My neighbor's daughter, who was an Army nurse, asked me if I'd thought about checking to see if I could get care at the VA hospital. To tell the truth, I had not even thought about the VA. So, I set out to try to find information about the VA health-care system and to see if I could qualify for care there. I found out that the VA offers benefits to anyone who has served in the United States' Armed Forces. These health-care services include medical care, prescription drugs, and long term care at VA facilities. The nearest big VA Medical Center is quite a ways from my farm. But, I also found out that the VA has a contract arrangement with the treatment center that is closer to home, so that I can get care there. I have learned not to assume anything, so I negotiated my treatment plans with the VA benefits counselor before I made my final decisions. To qualify for VA services, you need to first apply for enrollment in the Uniform Benefits Package. You can apply at the nearest VA medical center or at a veterans' benefit office. The VA assigns you to one of seven priority groups. The priority groups help allot VA resources to veterans who are most in need of help. The assignment to priority groups takes into account if conditions are "service-connected" - if the illness or disability is directly related to active military service - and how severe the illness or disability actually is. As I understand it, access to VA services might also be determined on the basis of the veteran's financial need. Since funding for VA services is decided each year by Congress, it can change from year to year. This was news to me too - I have always ignored politics - but I have learned to pay attention to how my Congressional representative and Senators vote on veterans issues now! The VA social worker and benefits counselor helped me figure out my eligibility and I enrolled. I found out that the VA and the National Cancer Institute have worked out an agreement so that the VA will cover the costs of care if I decided to take part in a clinical trial sponsored by the National Cancer Institute. I did get my cancer treatment covered through the VA and I continue to get follow-up care through my Veteran's Administration benefits.

[Narrator]

You can consult with a VA benefits counselor at any VA Medical Center or call the Department of Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents at their toll-free number - 1-800-827-1000. There are other places to look for low-cost or free cancer care services. Each community is likely to have many such services. Some organizations, like the American Cancer Society and the Leukemia Society, cover the entire United States. Others, such as those run by community agencies and churches, have a more local focus. A place to start looking for services is a local hospital. Many American hospitals get funding for building costs from the Federal Government through a program called "Hill-Burton" - named for the senators who helped create it. Health-care facilities that get Hill-Burton funding are required by law to offer at least some services to people who cannot pay for their own care. Funding cycles generally start at the beginning of the year, and funds get used up quickly. So, it is a good idea to put in your request as soon as you can. Your hospital social worker can help you find out about Hill-Burton facilities in your area, or you

can get a list of hospitals that receive Hill-Burton funding by calling the toll-free number - 1-800-638-0742. Public hospitals in many cities have created programs to provide care for people who do not have insurance. Many of these hospitals and services are linked to university or medical-center cancer programs, and offer services for people with cancer. Again, your social worker can help locate a cancer care program that offers the services that are needed.