

# U.S. Sen. Baldwin: Pushes for reforms to fix VA Choice Program

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin today announced her 3-point plan to fix the VA Choice Program and help Wisconsin's veterans access care more quickly in their communities.

“Wisconsin veterans have made it clear to me that the VA Choice Program is not working as well as it needs to for them to get the care they've earned and deserve,” **said Senator Baldwin.** “That is why I am fighting to make immediate changes to the Choice Program in Wisconsin, pass bipartisan reforms to cut red tape and expedite care, and increase transparency and accountability in the VA's care.”

## 1. **Cut Red Tape to Expedite Care**

Senator Baldwin is fighting for bipartisan reforms to cut red tape in the VA Choice Program to allow veterans access to more timely care in their own communities. The bipartisan *Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act*, authored by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT), Ranking Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, would make the VA the primary payer under the Choice Program, reducing veterans' out-of-pocket expenses and aligning the Choice Program with the VA's other community care programs.

The bipartisan *Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act* would accomplish this by:

- Improving the sharing of medical records between the VA and community

providers in Choice to better coordinate care for veterans and connect them to care in a timelier manner.

- Reducing confusion and out-of-pocket costs for veterans.
- Allowing community providers to be reimbursed in a more rapidly – which would reduce providers' frustrations and ultimately bring them back into Choice, further increasing access to care for more veterans.

The *Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act* has strong bipartisan support with Senators Tester and Baldwin being joined by Senators Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Michael Bennet (D-CO), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), John Boozman (R-AR), Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), Joe Manchin (D-WV), John McCain (R-AZ), Jerry Moran (R-KS), Mike Rounds (R-SD) and Brian Schatz (D-HI) in support of the legislation.

## **2. Hold VA Contractors Accountable**

Senator Baldwin has cosponsored the *VA Performance Accountability and Contractor Transparency (PACT) Act*, which increases oversight and accountability of VA contractors. The *PACT Act* would make the details of VA contracts over \$100 million public and require the companies being contracted to report their progress to Congress. This will apply to the VA-HealthNet contract, as well as other major VA contracts.

The *PACT Act* would:

- Require VA contracts to include a plan of action and milestones, along with measurable metrics tracking cost, schedule & services rendered.
- Necessitate contractors to document their progress and provide performance updates to the VA, Congress, and certain oversight committees.
- Allow the Secretary of the VA to have the authority to penalize contractors if their performance does not meet stated standards.

The *PACT Act* is authored by Senator Tester and in addition to Baldwin is cosponsored by Senators Michael Bennet (D-CO), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Patty Murray (D-WA).

## **3. Streamline the Appointment Process**

Senator Baldwin, in response to concerns expressed by Wisconsin veterans, has

called on the VA to make it an immediate priority to shift scheduling duties away from HealthNet to local Wisconsin VAMCs.

In a letter to VA Secretary David Shulkin today, **Senator Baldwin wrote**, “Delays in HealthNet’s appointment scheduling and their inability to process timely payments are at the top of complaints I hear from veterans and providers. For the last two years, I have worked with veterans and VA staff to address concerns with access to timely care through the Choice Program... While the VA works to modify its contract with HealthNet, I urge you to allow Wisconsin VAMC staff to begin scheduling appointments for veterans participating in the Choice Program as soon as possible.”

This failure of the Choice Program appointments process was highlighted when the largest health care provider in rural northern Wisconsin, Aspirus Health Care, opted to no longer accept Veterans Choice referrals. Additionally, Senator Baldwin has spoken with local VAMC staff in Wisconsin who’ve expressed a strong desire to take on Choice scheduling to ensure the veteran patients they personally know and care for are served well.

A summary of Senator Baldwin’s plan to fix the VA Choice Program is available [here](#).