

Rural Veterans Oral Health

The Issue:

Access to oral health services for rural veterans poses several barriers, limiting their ability to receive essential dental care. 4.7 million, about a quarter of all veterans, return from active military careers and [choose to call rural home](#). Notably, veterans with a service disability rating of 70% or higher exhibit a remarkably [high preference for rural living](#). Veterans choose rural communities for a variety of reasons but in this there is a barrier to access in care. These barriers stem from an intersection of factors, including geographical distance, limited availability of dental providers, financial constraints, and systemic challenges. Such obstacles disproportionately affect rural veterans, compounding existing oral health disparities.

Barriers to access:

Veterans in the United States are [experiencing worse health outcomes](#), expectedly poorer oral health outcomes correlate— [reduced visits to practitioners](#), increased prevalence of gum disease, and a heightened demand for restorative dental care are all on the rise. These challenges collectively contribute to a distinct oral health disparity within the veteran population. In comparison to nonveterans, veterans face a greater burden in maintaining optimal dental well-being.

Many veterans rely on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for healthcare services, including dental care. A recent study conducted by the [American Institute for Dental Public Health](#) concluded that “*Rural veterans are less likely to access their dental care in the VA health system due to lack of eligibility, despite being more likely to access other medical care within the VA.*” While rural veterans report similar frequencies of dental visits to their urban counterparts, they are [less likely to report that they feel satisfied with their care and coverage](#). Rural veterans may face constraints that make it difficult to afford dental care and find worse health outcomes overtime.

Less than 15% of rural veterans may be eligible for dental benefits through the VA, and those who are eligible may face limitations on coverage or have [out-of-pocket expenses](#). This puts unnecessary burdens on rural veterans, in contrast to their urban counterparts, who experience elevated out-of-pocket expenses for dental care. Specifically, a larger percentage of rural veterans ([26.5%](#)) faced annual costs ranging from \$500 to \$999, surpassing the corresponding figure for urban veterans ([22.1%](#)). This limited access to comprehensive dental benefits exacerbates the challenges faced by rural veterans, hindering their ability to maintain optimal oral health, and further contributing to disparities in dental care outcomes.

Policy recommendations:

About one quarter of all veterans live in rural areas. Rural veterans are less likely to visit the dentist and more likely to have lost all their natural teeth compared to non-rural veterans. NRHA supports investing in rural veterans' oral health by:

- Supporting, [S. 1954/H.R. 4150](#), the Improving Whole Health for Veterans with Chronic Conditions Act, which would start a pilot program to provide comprehensive dental care for veterans diagnosed with diabetes and heart disease.
- Supporting [H.R. 2410](#), the VET CARE Act of 2023, to create a 4-year pilot program to provide dental care to veterans diagnosed with diabetes.
- Urging passage of [H.R. 2413](#), the Dental Care for Veterans Act, which would make all veterans who are enrolled in the VA health care system eligible for VA-provided dental services.
- Funding a report on the ability of the Department of Veterans Affairs to adequately meet the current and future dental needs of VHA-eligible veterans.

Resources and studies:

- [NRHA's National Rural Oral Health Initiative](#) is the combined effort of the National Rural Health Association and the CareQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement to improve oral health disparities in rural America. Efforts focus on policy, communications, education, and research.
- The National Rural Oral Health Initiatives [State of your State](#), which provides data on rural oral health on all 50 states and lays out priority areas to address deficits.
- The American Institute for Dental Public Health's [Visual Report: Improving the Oral Health of Rural Veterans](#)
- The CareQuest Institute for Oral Health and the American Institute for Dental Public Health's [White Paper on Veteran Oral Health: Expanding Access and Equity](#)
- The American Institute for Dental Public Health's [Oral Health in America: Advances and Challenges— a look at Veteran oral health care](#). During this session, Dr. Rena D'Souza and Dr. Renée Joskow present an overview of the report, highlighting the oral health landscape for veterans and their dental care. An overview of NIDCR's 2021-2026 strategic plan is also presented.
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Report on [Rural Veteran Health Care Challenges](#)
- [Veterans Dental Benefits and Eligibility](#) landing page.

Disclosures:

These position papers were made possible through the funding and assistance of the CareQuest Institute for Oral Health. A special thanks to the National Rural Oral Health Initiative Taskforce and the [American Institute of Dental Public Health](#) for their contributions. Contact [Zil Joyce Dixon Romero](#) and [Piper Martin](#) with questions.