

Highlights of [GAO-04-162](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans residing in Chattanooga, Tennessee, have had difficulty accessing Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care. In response, VA has acted to reduce travel times to medical facilities and waiting times for appointments with primary and specialty care physicians. Recently, VA released a draft national plan for restructuring its health care system as part of a planning initiative known as Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES). GAO was asked to assess Chattanooga-area veterans' access to inpatient hospital and outpatient primary and specialty care against VA's guidelines for travel times and appointment waiting times and to determine how the draft CARES plan would affect Chattanooga-area veterans' access to such care.

What GAO Recommends

When considering the costs and benefits of options for realigning assets to enhance services, GAO recommends that VA explore alternatives to further improve access to health care for Chattanooga-area veterans, such as: (1) purchasing a larger proportion of these veterans' inpatient workload locally, (2) expediting the opening of four community-based clinics proposed by the draft CARES plan, and (3) providing primary care locally for more of those veterans whose access remains outside VA's travel guideline after those clinics open. VA agreed to consider our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-162.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cynthia A. Bascetta at (202) 512-7101.

VA HEALTH CARE

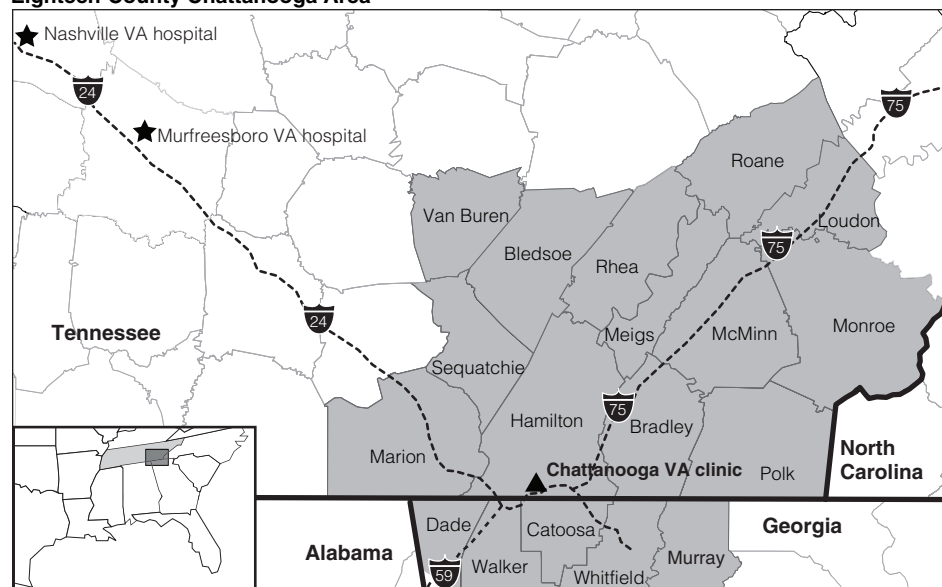
Access for Chattanooga-Area Veterans Needs Improvement

What GAO Found

Almost all (99 percent) of the 16,379 enrolled veterans in the 18-county Chattanooga area, as of September 2001, faced travel times that exceeded VA's guidelines for accessing inpatient hospital care. During fiscal year 2002, only a few Chattanooga-area veterans were admitted to non-VA hospitals in Chattanooga—constituting about 5 percent of inpatient workload. In addition, over half (8,400) of Chattanooga-area enrolled veterans faced travel times that exceeded VA's 30-minute guideline for outpatient primary care. Also, waiting times for scheduling initial outpatient primary and specialty care appointments frequently exceeded VA's 30-day guideline.

VA's draft CARES plan would shorten travel times for some Chattanooga-area veterans but lengthen travel times for others. Under the plan, the amount of inpatient care VA purchases from non-VA hospitals in Chattanooga would increase from 5 percent to 29 percent, thereby reducing those veterans' travel times to within VA's guidelines. The plan also proposes to shift some inpatient workload from VA's Murfreesboro hospital to its Nashville hospital. As a result, an estimated 54 percent of inpatient workload for Chattanooga-area enrolled veterans will be provided in Nashville compared to 40 percent in fiscal year 2002, thereby lengthening some veterans' travel times by about 20 minutes. The plan also proposes opening four new community-based clinics, which would bring about 2,700 more Chattanooga-area enrolled veterans within VA's 30-minute travel guideline for primary care, leaving about 5,700 enrolled veterans with travel times for such care that exceed VA's guideline. These clinics likely would not open before fiscal year 2011, given priorities specified in the plan.

Eighteen-County Chattanooga Area



Source: GAO.