

# THE UNION

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## Local clinic joins federal program to improve health care access for veterans

Western Sierra Medical Clinic has been approved as a registered health care provider for the Veterans Choice Program.

Clinic officials began offering the closer-to-home health services last week to veterans in the region.

Under the new program, the federal Veterans Affairs allows Western Sierra to handle many health care services for veterans who live more than 40 miles away or must wait more than 30 days for an appointment at the closest VA medical facilities in Sacramento or Reno.

Western Sierra, the largest outpatient health care provider in Nevada County, is offering numerous health services, including medical and behavioral health, to the 10,500-plus veterans in the region.

The Veterans Choice Program, established in November 2014, greatly improves access to health care and reduces often lengthy waits for medical appointments at VA facilities.

“Veterans in the North State should not be held at a disadvantage when it comes to receiving the benefits they deserve because of their proximity to VA facilities,” said U.S. Rep. Doug LaMalfa, whose district includes Sierra County and part of Nevada County. LaMalfa was a major supporter of legislation that established the Veterans Choice Program. “The men and women who served our country honorably should have access to the best possible care, regardless of whether it is at the VA or through private providers. The Veterans Choice Program is a step in the right direction to achieving that goal and I look forward to working with facilities, such as Western Sierra, to ensure our veterans receive the care they need.”

Western Sierra’s staff is excited to provide health services to local veterans, said Western Sierra CEO Scott McFarland. Currently, the health center has about 465 patients who are veterans.

“Our staff is extremely proud and ready to serve more of the region’s veterans,” McFarland said. “Veterans who seek health care at Western Sierra will be pleasantly surprised with our extensive services and be able to get care from our highly skilled medical staff.”

The Veterans Choice Program will hopefully encourage more veterans to seek much-needed health care services closer to home rather than delay medical treatment because of long drives or possible long waiting times for appointments at VA facilities, said Dr. Glenn Thiel, Chief Medical Officer of Western Sierra.

“The faster we see patients, the quicker we can determine what is wrong and give them the medical treatment they need,” Thiel said. “We’ll take excellent care of our veterans, who deserve our gratitude, respect — and the best possible health care.”

The Veterans Choice Program is a new, temporary benefit that allows eligible veterans to receive health care in their communities rather than wait for a VA appointment or travel to a VA facility. The Veterans Choice Program ends Dec. 31, 2017, or when the \$10 billion in funding is depleted.

Veterans seeking to use the Veterans Choice Program should call 866-606-8198 to confirm eligibility.

“It’s an excellent program that is really making a significant difference for veterans in our region and nationwide who need or want easier access to health care,” said Julie Carrara, Interim Executive Director and Board Chair for Welcome Home Vets, the Grass Valley-based nonprofit that provides support and transitional services for veterans and families in the region. “Western Sierra Medical Clinic can provide many of the health services veterans may need, while eliminating a long drive to the closest VA facilities, and saving them a lot of time and money.”