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Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

**U.S.** veterans represent a special population of men and women who have served their country, many facing extraordinary health risks during their deployments. Because many veterans have served on overseas missions, including combat, veterans with service-connected health issues are a clinically complex and potentially vulnerable population. The mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system is to meet the health care needs of this population.

However, in recent years VA has faced increasing concerns about veterans' access to care and the quality of care delivered. In February 2014, in a widely publicized episode, a retired VA physician alleged that at least 40 veterans died while waiting for care at the Phoenix VA Health Care System. The allegations of deaths were not proven, but they emerged amid wider allegations of long wait times at VA medical centers, poor patient outcomes, and other systemic issues in the VA health care system.

In response to these concerns, the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 ("Veterans Choice Act") was enacted in August 2014. The law attempted to address access issues by expanding the criteria through which veterans can seek care from civilian providers. In addition, the law called for a series of independent assessments of the VA health care system across a broad array of topics related to the delivery of health care services to veterans in VA-owned and -operated facilities, as well as those under contract to VA.

RAND conducted three of these assessments.

This document summarizes the findings of our assessments and makes recommendations for improving the match between veterans' needs and VA's capabilities, including VA's ability to purchase necessary care from the private sector.

### Specifically, RAND teams examined:

The current and projected characteristics and unique health care needs of veterans

VA's current and projected health care capabilities and resources for meeting veterans' needs

The authorities and mechanisms under which VA can purchase care from the private sector

### Veterans with service-connected health issues are a clinically complex and potentially vulnerable population.



Marine Force Recon veteran Jim Alderman lines up a billiards shot in the recreation room at the inpatient posttraumatic stress disorder clinic at the Bay Pines Veterans Administration Healthcare Center in Bay Pines, Fla., Oct. 30, 2015. Mr. Alderman, like thousands of other veterans, relies on VA for his health care and recovery. This report makes recommendations for improving the match between veterans' needs and the VA's capabilities, so as to better serve all veterans. (DoD News photo by E. J. Hersom)



Despite a shrinking population of veterans, the number of veterans who use VA for health care will increase until 2019, then level off or decline.

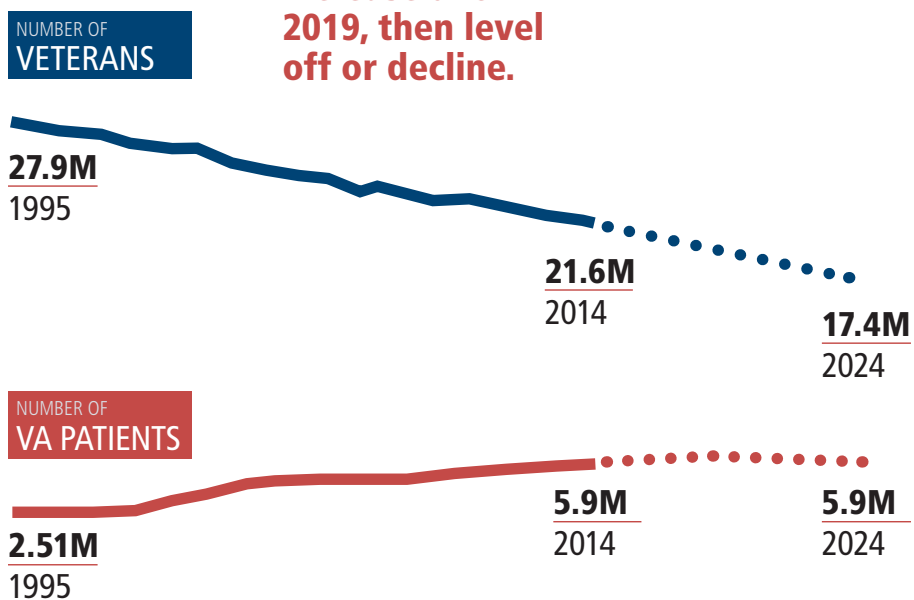


FIGURE 1