



THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

1200 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1200

HEALTH AFFAIRS

The Honorable Carl Levin
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

APR 28 2009

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This report responds to Senate Report 110-335 accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009, that requests the Secretary of Defense report by February 1, 2009, on programs and plans to improve TRICARE information materials, in both print and electronic format, by redesigning them to be more user-friendly, especially for first-time users. This report addresses the TRICARE Web site, print and electronic products, and support phone numbers available to assist Service members and their families who do not have convenient access to a military treatment facility (MTF) benefits counselor to resolve problems. The report also discusses staffing a Reserve Component Beneficiary Counseling and Assistance Coordinator at each TRICARE Regional Office.

TRICARE recently performed a comprehensive review of its customer service, informational materials, and communication venues. A number of new sources of information and enhanced customer service resources have been created for National Guard/Reserve members and their families.

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Center (TSC) listings, which are timely updated. The TRICARE Contacts Web page also links to the Beneficiary Counseling and Assistance Coordinator (BCAC)/Debt Collection Assistance Officer (DCAO) directory.

TRICARE added a Google Custom Search to the Web site in December 2008. A significant improvement from the site's previous search engine, this technology promises to help users quickly locate the information they need.

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Print and Electronic Products: The TRICARE Management Activity responded to concerns about the lack of information in the TRICARE Passport for the Reserve Component by making a much larger print communication effort for this important target audience. The suite of print products developed or improved over the past year includes a comprehensive handbook, the Passport, and easy-to-read flyers that can be easily downloaded and printed from the TRICARE Web site.

The level of benefit information for each product in the suite is tailored for readers depending on its intended purpose. For example, our TRICARE Reserve Select handbook provides detailed information on all available benefits and an entire chapter on getting help with specific issues. Flyers in the suite offer an overview of various program options by specialty, and clarify how benefits change based on activation and deactivation status. In every instance, users are directed to Web and telephone resources for additional information or assistance. All National Guard and Reserve products are updated as information about the benefit changes. The original TRICARE Reserve Select materials were completely revised in the fall of 2007. Four newly revised briefings designed specifically for National Guard and Reserve members and their families are also being developed.

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The print products, which are timely updated, can also be ordered by unit representatives via the TRICARE SMART Web site, and are shipped directly to the unit representative on a quarterly basis, or more often if needed. TRICARE also offers comprehensive briefing slides that provide in-depth information about the benefit. Units may request that managed care support contractors present the briefings at weekend drills and/or family days, while unit representatives can access them at any time via the TRICARE Web site if they would like to present these briefings themselves. TRICARE has also offered “virtual” briefings to units who need only a computer to watch the slides to listen to the presentation by an experienced TRICARE communicator who will also answer questions. TRICARE has also moved into the virtual world via BlogTalkRadio, virtual townhalls, podcasts, and other “social media” designed to take TRICARE information directly to the beneficiary, no matter where they live.

Toll Free Telephone Numbers: To help Service members and their families navigate through the list of toll-free phone numbers, TRICARE provides comprehensive lists in print products for the National Guard and Reserve members and their families and on the TRICARE Web site. For those who might not have access to the print products or Web site, TRICARE has purchased a 1-800-TRICARE telephone number. Beneficiaries may call the number toll-free for general information about the programs that TRICARE offers. The information service continues to be enhanced.

TRICARE will continue to utilize the TRICARE managed care support contractors who are responsible for provider relations and beneficiary customer service for their respective regions. They have established call centers, and their toll-free phone numbers are widely published. These competitively procured TRICARE contracts have financial incentives to improve the information available from their call centers. These contracts are currently under competition for the next generation of contracts, which promise to continue the trend of further improving and enhancing customer service.

Reserve Component BCAC: Each TRICARE Regional Office is staffed with a Reserve Component Beneficiary Counseling and Assistance Coordinator (RC BCAC) who is dedicated to providing customer service support for National Guard and Reserve Service members and their families. RC BCACs are particularly well situated to provide assistance to RC members in areas not close to MTFs.

Additionally, TRICARE has an ongoing training program that offers both online and classroom training to other benefit advisors, family support staff, and unit representatives desiring to participate. In addition to the formal and graded training, TRICARE now offers an online training course that is open to the public and provides access to simplified information at the convenience of the user.

In summary, TRICARE Customer Service will continue to improve its information programs and materials.

Thank you for your continued support of the Military Health System.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Ward Casscells".

S. Ward Casscells, M.D.

cc:
The Honorable John McCain
Ranking Member



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HEALTH AFFAIRS

The Honorable Ben Nelson
Chairman, Subcommittee on Personnel
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate
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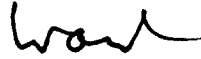
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The Honorable Lindsey O. Graham
Ranking Member



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The Honorable Ike Skelton
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services
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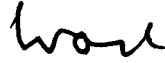
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