

VA reopens Priority 8 health care enrollment

The veterans health care system, closed since 2003 to new enrollments for veterans whose medical conditions are not service-connected, reopened effective Monday with new income caps that will allow more people to get in.

A calculator to help determine eligibility and other enrollment details are posted at a Veterans Affairs Department Web site. www.va.gov

In general, veterans with no dependents are eligible if their income is less than \$32,342, while a veteran with four dependents is eligible if their income is less than \$45,478. In some high-cost areas, income caps are even higher.

Enrollments are for veterans in the lowest health care priority group, Priority 8, which is for veterans with at least moderate incomes whose health issues are not service-connected. VA stopped accepting new enrollments for that group in January 2003 in what was supposed to be a temporary move to stretch tight health care funds. Once the enrollment freeze began, VA found it difficult to reverse because it couldn't find the extra money to cover the costs of expanding the number of beneficiaries. President Barack Obama, who had promised during his campaign to reopen the VA health plan, worked with Congress to find money to cover the added costs, VA officials said.

Philip Matkovsky, VA's deputy chief business officer, estimates that 266,000 veterans will sign up for health insurance as a result of reopening enrollments.

But, the numbers could be larger. Since Jan. 16, 2003, when new enrollments were cancelled, more than 420,000 veterans have applied for Priority 8 coverage and were rejected, including 3,900 who applied since the start of this year.

Those who have applied since Jan. 1 will have their applications automatically reviewed to determine if they are eligible, Matkovsky said. Those who applied earlier are receiving personal letters informing them that enrollments have reopened and telling them about the income thresholds that apply at their location, he said.

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