

Bridging the Gap: Public Transportation for Veterans in Hays County to VA Facilities



SOWK 2375: Social Services in the Community
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January 2025

Executive Summary

Military-connected families in Hays County face barriers accessing critical healthcare services at Veteran Affairs (VA) facilities in San Antonio, Austin, and New Braunfels due to lack of public transportation throughout Hays County. This gap disproportionately affects low-income and disabled veterans, further augmenting health disparities and creating unjustified burdens (Health Services Research & Development Service, 2008). This brief advocates for the establishment of a reliable and accessible public transportation network connecting Hays County to these VA facilities, with special considerations for veterans requiring Community Care services. By implementing a regional transportation program, we can enhance access to care, improve health outcomes, and honor our commitment to those who served.

Description of Problem

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2021b) estimates that 52% (9.8 out of 19 million) of veterans use at least one VA benefit or service. In Texas, there are approximately 1.4 million veterans (Thompson, 2024), and in 2023, nearly 41,300 veterans enrolled in VA healthcare in Texas, a 24% increase from 2022 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2024).

In Hays County, veterans rely on VA facilities for health care, yet lack of transportation creates a barrier to access. Many veterans cannot drive due to disabilities, aging, or financial constraints and must rely on expensive private transportation options such as taxis or rideshare services (Wolfe et al., 2020). Scheduled VA shuttle services, though available, often have limited availability and routes.

Without reliable transportation, veterans may delay or disregard necessary medical treatments, leading to worsened health outcomes and increased reliance on emergency services, which exacerbates health disparities and can result in unnecessary medical debt (Himmelstein et al., 2022).

Overview of Research

Transportation barriers are a leading cause of missed healthcare appointments among veterans (Smith et al., 2022). A 2021 report by the National Academy of Medicine highlights that rural veterans face disproportionately higher transportation challenges, which correlate with poorer health outcomes and increased healthcare costs (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021a).

The City of San Marcos (n.d.) is actively addressing these issues through its 2024 Transit Route Study, aimed at evaluating and improving transportation infrastructure, particularly for vulnerable populations such as veterans. Also, the San Marcos Veterans Advisory Committee has recognized transportation as a critical factor in addressing the needs of unhoused veterans in the area (City of San Marcos, 2024).

The City of Kyle (2021) has implemented the "Uber Kyle 314 Program," which provides discounted rides within city limits and to the Austin VA. This program serves as a promising model for addressing transportation barriers through innovative public-private partnerships.

Additionally, the 2024 Hays County Point-in-Time (PIT) Report underscores the urgent need for effective solutions to improve access to services for the homeless population, which includes veterans (Texas Homeless Network, 2024). By leveraging such research and local initiatives, Hays County can explore actionable solutions to mitigate transportation challenges for its veteran community. (Himmelstein et al., 2022).



Policy Alternatives

Collaborate with regional transit authorities to establish a dedicated public transportation route connecting Hays County to VA facilities in San Antonio, Austin, and New Braunfels. This could include:

- Scheduled buses or shuttles operating on fixed routes.
- Partnerships with local transit providers for discounted veteran fares.
- Integration of ride-share services for veterans in remote areas

- Secure state and federal funding to subsidize public transportation initiatives for veterans.
- Collaborate with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to develop a regional veteran transportation plan.
- Advocate for the inclusion of transportation provisions in upcoming state legislation related to veteran services.

Policy Recommendations

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