

Rural Scholars Fellowship

Background

Rural health care facilities often struggle to recruit the experienced, motivated, and dedicated clinical workforce that rural Veterans need to thrive. Although the reasons for this are as varied as rural communities themselves, a key factor is the geographic isolation that frequently limits opportunities for personal and professional growth.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) created the Rural Scholars Fellowship (RSF) program to develop a cadre of Veterans Health Administration (VHA) clinicians with the skills, knowledge, and professional networks necessary to become leaders and innovators in rural health care systems. The program also promotes recruitment and retention of providers in rural VHA primary care practice areas. By providing opportunities for professional growth and development, the RSF program reduces professional isolation and empowers rural primary care providers to lead quality improvement and innovation projects within their local VHA clinics.

Clinicians who participate in RSF receive mentorship, networking, education, and training opportunities while working with national experts and leaders in the field. Those who completed the program indicated an intent to remain in rural VHA careers and to pursue leadership positions.

This document provides an overview of the RSF's development, implementation, and evaluation processes. It also delineates staffing and organizational

considerations for organizations that are considering implementing a similar recruitment and retention initiative.

Phase One: Program Development

The first step in developing a program like RSF is determining organizational priorities and resources.

RSF was established by ORH's satellite [Veterans Rural Health Resource Center \(VRHRC\)](#) in Iowa City, IA in 2018 with the primary goal of recruiting and retaining providers in rural primary care. RSF achieves this goal through engaging and developing rural primary care VHA clinicians into leaders and innovators in rural health care delivery systems. After guiding successful cohorts through the program, RSF expanded to ORH's VRHRC in Salt Lake City, UT. ORH plans to further expand the initiative through a hub-and-spoke model to additional VRHRCs.



Organizations looking to develop a program like RSF should consider not only program goals, but the intended scope and scale of the program as well as the resources and staff required to execute such an effort.

RSF enlists the support of one full-time program director, one part-time associate director, two part-time staff members who serve as mentors to participating fellows, and one project coordinator. As the program expands, additional team members from around the country will assume support tasks required to keep the program running. This may include additional program leadership, support, mentorship, and/or faculty roles.

Because RSF serves as a sister program to the [VA Quality Scholars program](#), ORH was able to leverage existing resources within VA for tasks such as curriculum development. Organizations with limited resources may consider partnering with more established programs internally or externally to provide momentum for a new initiative.

Phase Two: Implementation

The implementation phase includes application solicitation as well as execution of various program elements. Organizations looking to implement a program like RSF will need to determine the best way to solicit applications and structure the program based on organizational needs and resources.

ORH solicits applications from clinicians working in a primary care setting at a rural-serving Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), defined as a facility where more than 50 percent of patients are considered rural Veterans. Due to growing interest in the program, ORH is transitioning from an acceptance period to a rolling application process.

The RSF program offers rural-serving clinicians an array of educational, development, and leadership opportunities targeted to their professional interests. Participating clinicians continue to devote 50 percent of their time to clinical practice and 50 percent to fellowship activities. Program components include:

- ▶ **Summer Institute:** Week-long conference to kick off the program; consists of guest speakers, innovation, scholarly activity, and networking
- ▶ **Curriculum:** Weekly virtual courses that focus on rural health care improvement and innovation; conducted in collaboration with the VA Quality Scholars program
- ▶ **Innovation Project:** Mentored projects to be completed in each fellow's rural practice setting
- ▶ **Leadership Training:** Rural-focused guidance on leading local team members; leadership training opportunities through the VA Quality Scholars network

Program organizers should remain involved with sites and participants as they complete the curriculum and should regularly solicit feedback to maintain strong engagement throughout the length of the program.

Phase Three: Evaluation

Identifying relevant metrics are key to the success of a program like RSF. Sample program metrics may include:

- ▶ Number of participants who received training
- ▶ Number of participants who indicated an intent to remain working in rural facilities
- ▶ Veterans reached through program curriculum/projects
- ▶ Number of participants who remain in VHA one, three, and five years after program completion

For example, seven VA clinicians participated in RSF through the first three cohorts. A majority of those participants indicated a desire to remain in rural VHA careers and to pursue leadership positions. Additionally, one fellow's innovation project reached more than 1,000 Veterans in a single rural-serving clinic, creating a positive impact on rural Veterans.

Recommendations for Implementation:

- A)** VA facility and local leadership support for protected time for fellows to dedicate to program activities was key in successfully engaging participants
- B)** Holding one or two in-person site visits for both faculty and rural fellows each year increases participant engagement and facility support for the program
- C)** Regular communication and updates provided from the RSF leadership team to the fellow's leadership team facilitates support, project progress, and project completion



For more information about the RSF, visit
www.ruralhealth.va.gov/providers/courses.asp.

Office of Rural Health

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) works to see that America's Veterans thrive in rural communities. To support the health and well-being of rural Veterans, ORH and its Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers establish and disseminate initiatives that increase access to care for the 2.7 million rural Veterans enrolled in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' health care system. Key focus areas include programs that address workforce shortages, transportation, primary care, mental health, telehealth and specialty care. To learn more, visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov.