Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

INFO SHEET

ORH
VHA Office of Rural Health

In 2008, The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) chartered the Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) to study and analyze the challenges rural Veterans face when accessing health care and to advise the Secretary accordingly. VRHAC members strive to:

- Identify barriers to providing health care services to Veterans in rural communities, and
- Recommend opportunities to improve access to VA services in rural areas.

To do this, VRHAC members pursue annual updates from and dialogue with subject-matter experts at the national, state and local levels. Every year, the Committee reports directly to the VA Secretary with recommendations or issues that inform VA's national priorities on rural access.

The Committee is a forum where appointed advisors study emerging trends and share new ideas in rural health and Veterans issues, in order to increase rural Veterans' access to health care and services. After meeting directly with Veterans and visiting rural communities to see access challenges firsthand, members collaborate and think critically about how to solve the problems.

Drawing from their expertise, varied experiences, research and Veterans' input, members identify barriers to care and potential solutions in an annual report to the VA Secretary.

VRHAC members are led by a Committee Chair and supported by the VA Office of Rural Health (ORH). They work throughout the year to understand how the rural health landscape is changing for Veterans. Each year, members convene to collect and share information, hear national policy updates and engage with other experts. They also gather in a rural setting to hear from Veterans and rural service providers. Members may also tour local facilities and meet with Veteran leaders to learn about the everyday realities of Veterans' rural life across the country.

Among the 16 appointed VRHAC members are Veterans, leaders of local, state and national Veterans Service Organizations (VSO), researchers, and private sector, non-profit, state and federal rural health professionals. They come from diverse backgrounds in Veteran health care, benefits assistance, community engagement, minority advocacy and military family issues.

Appointments to VRHAC rotate and ORH actively seeks nominations for new members throughout the year. Submit third-party or self-nominations, including a letter of interest, letters of recommendations and a biographical sketch to rural.health.inquiry@va.gov.

Drawing from their expertise, diverse experiences, national research and Veterans' input, Committee members identify barriers to health care access and potential solutions. They compile these suggestions in recommendations to the VA Secretary. In turn, the recommendations inform VA's rural health priorities and the activities of ORH.

A Think Tank for Veterans and Rural Health Access Issues

VRHAC's past recommendations highlighted the importance of understanding the rural Veteran population, the potential of telehealth technology and opportunities for local collaboration. The Committee's work has informed VA policy and health care delivery.

UNDERSTANDING	TECHNOLOGY	LOCAL COLLABORATION
VRHAC encouraged VA to study the rural Veteran population's size, demographics, locations and unmet health needs to ensure its programs addressed the most urgent needs. This informed VA's strategic planning and development of a rural Veterans need assessment.	VRHAC urged VA to implement an enterprise-wide system to coordinate telehealth appointments so rural Veterans can access the care they need. VA promotes rural Veterans' and health care providers' use of telehealth, both of whom benefit from specialists out of town.	VRHAC suggested that VA engage community mental health providers, law enforcement officers, clergy, and community leaders to identify and treat the specific challenges rural Veterans face. VA supports Rural Promising Practices in which local and national mentors build care capacity across the country.

In rural communities, VRHAC members engage with Veterans during town hall meetings, tour facilities and mobile clinics, meet with local VSO leaders, and have the opportunity to see telehealth and other technologies at work. Past Committee visits include:

Augusta, Maine
Chillicothe, Ohio
Helena, Montana
Johnson City, Tennessee
Morgantown, West Virginia
Phoenix, Arizona
Salt Lake City, Utah
Uvalde, Texas
Washington, D.C.

Office of Rural Health

Office of Rural Health (ORH) implements a targeted, solution-driven approach to increase access to care for the 3 million Veterans living in rural communities who rely on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for health care. As VA's lead advocate for rural Veterans, ORH works to see that America's Veterans thrive in rural communities. To accomplish this, ORH leverages its resources to increase rural Veterans' access to care and services. To learn more, visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov.