



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

VISN 12: Expanding Audiology Services into Rural Outpatient Clinics

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Introduction

The Veterans Health Administration provided audiology services to 597,750 Veterans in fiscal year 2009, progressively increasing to 742,604 by fiscal year 2011. This increase in demand for audiology services also brought about an increase in demand for services closer to where Veterans live. Travel can be time consuming, expensive, and inconvenient for Veterans living in rural locations, often leading to a significant barrier to health care. ¹

The purpose of this project was to expand access to audiology services in one rural Outpatient Clinic affiliated with the VA Great Lakes Health Care System (VA GLHCS) – Tomah VA Medical Center, Tomah, WI. The goal was twofold: a) reach Veterans who had not previously utilized audiology services due to distance, and b) bring services closer to Veterans already utilizing the services in an effort to reduce travel burden. None of the four Outpatient Clinics had offered audiology services before this project.

Key Findings

- Unique Veteran users at Wood County clinic increased from 2010 to 2011, while Unique users in Tomah remained relatively constant
- Improved flow of audiology appointments at Tomah facility due to increased audiology booth and space availability, which also contributes to improved employee satisfaction
- Estimated cost savings of \$90,000 in 2011 based on fewer claims for travel pay
- Veterans consistently express improved customer satisfaction due to the convenient location of the clinic, and reduced travel time

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Methods

General audiology services are an important aspect of comprehensive health care for Veterans. This care includes, but is not limited to, routine hearing examinations, evaluation and treatment of hearing loss, tinnitus, vestibular/dizziness, and other problems related to the ear.

Tomah VA Medical audiology services expanded significantly over the past decade, resulting in limited physical space for further expansion at Tomah without significant cost or separation of physical locations. This prompted discussion focused on expanding services at Outpatient Clinic locations.

One key cost element was the transfer of the Wood County outpatient clinic from a contracted capitated rate facility to a VA operated clinic. The concept of adding this service to this location was included in the initial planning phases. From the onset, the focus was on providing all necessary services at this location to include initial exams, hearing aid

fittings, hearing aid repairs and the potential for providing compensation and pension examinations.

With these additional services, access to these clinical areas will be greatly enhanced due to the location in this rural setting. Currently Veterans are driving in excess of 2 hours for such services at the parent site in Tomah, Wisconsin, which is also considered a rural facility.

Using VA data for Tomah VA Medical Center (Table 1), we identified approximately 1/3 of audiology patients were from the Northern Counties of our catchment area. Further verification allowed us to determine the best ideal location for adding services at the Wood County location.

Through the use of these dedicated funds, we were successful in securing a full-time Audiologist and all necessary equipment (booth, Audiometer, repair equipment, etc.).

**Table 1. Audiology Patients at Tomah VA Medical Center
 (Total and from Northern Counties)**

	FY09	FY10	FY11
Number of unique Veterans who have received Audiology care at the Tomah VA Medical Center	2709	3149	3720
Number of unique Veterans who have received Audiology care at the Tomah VA Medical Center including outpatient clinic who reside in the Northern Catchment Area	1,090 (36%)	1094 (35%)	1324 (35%)

*Northern counties include: Price, Oneida, Vilas, Langlade, Lincoln, Marathon, Clark, Wood, Portage, Waushara.

Findings

In April 2010 the Wood County clinic opened, to include audiology services. Throughout the planning phase, appointments were scheduled and the clinic opened with a full schedule.

This initiative brought audiology services to the Northern portions of the Tomah catchment area. While overall demand for audiology services increased from 2009 to 2011, the percentage of Veterans in the Northern catchment areas remained constant at 35% (Table 1), indicating that the majority of new Veterans came from the Northern catchment areas near the Wood County clinic. Demand at the main facility in Tomah showed minimal growth. Services have continued to expand throughout FY 11 in both numbers of unique Veterans and visits (Table 2).

Table 2. Wood County Visits in FY 09-FY11

	Wood County	Wood County	Tomah Visits	Tomah Uniques
FY09	0	0	5107	2709
FY10	595	425	5037	2724
FY11	1800	982	5376	2738

Audiology services at the Wood County clinic have produced the benefit of fewer claims for travel pay, resulting in a significant cost savings of \$90,000 in FY 11. In addition to cost benefit, this equates to 4500 fewer hours of Veterans driving, contributing to improved Veteran satisfaction (Table 3).

In addition to cost savings, the efficiency of workflow has improved in Tomah due to fewer audiologists in the same amount of clinical space. Availability of audiology examination booths allows for less complexity of scheduling processes, leading to improved employee satisfaction.

Table 3. Savings by Year

	<u>FY10</u>	<u>FY11</u>		<u>FY10</u>	<u>FY11</u>
Travel Pay savings =	\$29,750	\$90,000	Time off the road (hours)	1487.5	4500
• Round trip Tomah to Wood County= 100 miles			• Round Trip = ~2.5 hours		
• Mileage rate = \$0.50/mile			• Total Trips = visits		

Conclusion

This ORH-funded initiative improves access by bringing audiology services closer to home, while maintaining the high level of service and productivity at our main audiology clinic in Tomah. The needs of Veterans have been the driving force of the rural health initiative to fund audiology services at the Wood County clinic. This project has proven to be a success for Veterans, as evidenced by numerous compliments and an increased rate of the Veteran population in Tomah VAMC Northern catchment areas.

In addition to the customer service impact, the cost savings benefit cannot be denied, totaling \$90,000 in a single year for travel pay, while contributing to an overall increase in unique Veterans.

Expanding audiology services to Veterans in the Tomah catchment area continues to evolve. The focus of this initiative was to establish this specialty service in an outpatient clinic and determine whether there was a positive impact on care delivery. Based upon the success of this project and lessons learned, VA Tomah is planning to consider adding audiology services in future years.



Cheryl Woltman, Audiology Health Technician, repairing hearing aids.



Melinda Challoner, MS, CCC-A, Wood County Outpatient Clinic Audiologist providing a group hearing aid education.

References

1. Goins RT, Williams KA, Carter MW, Spencer SM, Solovieva T. Perceived Barriers to Health Care Access among Rural Older Adults: A Qualitative Study. *J Rural Health*. 2005;21(3):206-13

