

# VA Rural Scholars Fellowship

Rural health care facilities often struggle to recruit the experienced, dedicated clinical workforce that 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 delivery 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 innovation projects at their VHA clinics.

## Structure & Curriculum

The RSF program is a two-year fellowship that enables health professionals to improve care through innovation, quality improvement, and patient safety.

Working alongside the [VA Quality Scholars program](#), the RSF program offers rural-serving clinicians an array of educational, development, and leadership opportunities targeted to their professional interests. Clinicians participating in RSF continue to devote 50 percent of their time to clinical practice and 50 percent to fellowship activities.

The RSF program consists of three principal elements:



A curriculum of weekly virtual courses that focus on rural health care improvement and innovation



An improvement or delivery innovation project in each fellow's rural practice setting



Leadership training with a focus on VHA settings

The program kicks off with a Summer Institute, where fellows enjoy a week-long conference featuring world-renowned guest speakers, innovation, and scholarly activity. This activity creates the space for face-to-face meetings and networking across sites and energizes fellows for the start of the fellowship.

Mentorship is also a critical component of the program. Fellows are guided by mentors both inside and outside of VA who share similar interests and professional goals.

RSF innovation projects have addressed topics such as:

- ▶ Enhancing medication safety through an improved medication reconciliation process
- ▶ Improving Veteran care access through VA Video Connect
- ▶ Eliminating waste and clinic inefficiencies through Lean Six Sigma systems redesign
- ▶ Increasing osteoporosis screenings for female Veterans

## Implementation & Expansion

The RSF program was established by the ORH Veterans Rural Health Resource Center (VRHRC) in Iowa City, IA in 2018 and expanded to the VRHRC in Salt Lake City, UT in 2021. ORH intends to expand the initiative through a hub-and-spoke model to additional VRHRCs in the coming years.

The RSF program recruits talented VA physicians, advanced practice nurses, and physician assistants who practice in VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) with a patient population that is more than 50 percent rural. Four graduates have successfully completed the program. Additionally, there are currently:

- two first-year fellows
- two second-year fellows
- one “pre-fellow” participating through the recruitment pilot
- two candidates accepted to begin as first-year fellows

Additional plans for expansion include opening the program to incoming VHA clinicians who have not yet worked in a rural CBOC, but are committed to working in a VHA rural primary care area during and after the fellowship.

## Benefits & Impact

Benefits for participants in the RSF program include:

- ▶ Participation in a two-year health care improvement and leadership curriculum
- ▶ Opportunities to network with national experts and leaders
- ▶ Access to an expansive alumni network through the VA Quality Scholars and the RSF programs
- ▶ Data analysis training and consultation

Key preliminary findings from fellows who have completed the RSF program include:

- ▶ Fellows successfully engaged in curriculum, initiated projects, and led those projects through sustainable improvement in their rural clinics
- ▶ Fellows indicated satisfaction with the program and an intent both to remain in rural VHA careers and pursue leadership positions
- ▶ VA facility and local leadership support for protected time was key in successfully engaging program fellows

For more information about RSF, visit <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/providers/courses.asp>.

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.