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The Rural Connection Newsletter Relaunch

By Kristen Wing, ORH Communications Director

The Rural Connection newsletter has been published by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) for more than a decade. In the early years of ORH, we shared news about the VHA's expansion of Community-Based Outpatient Clinics in rural areas. We shared stories about how ORH was bringing a "*new*" technology to rural health care called "TeleHealth." We let Veterans know about connecting with their providers using Secure Messaging in the *MyHealtheVet* "patient portal" (www.va.gov).

Health care delivery has evolved to improve access to care and so has ORH. Our methods to overcome rural health care challenges and achieve success have changed. We are relaunching ***The Rural Connection*** to better communicate about ORH initiatives. The newsletter puts "Veterans First" and each issue will feature a *Veteran Impact Story.* It will also include an overview of an ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiative or project from an ORH Veterans Rural Health Resource Center (VRHRC). It will also include stories for individuals and organizations who provide care and other support for Veterans.

In Case You Missed It

- **Dr. Peter Kaboli** was officially named ORH executive director in December 2024. He served as acting executive director for two years and led the ORH VRHRC in Iowa City for six years. Dr. Kaboli is a also a practicing physician at the Iowa City VA Medical Center and takes care of rural Veteran patients.
- **Dr. James Watts** joined ORH as deputy director in January 2025. He is a rural Veteran and former associate director of the VA Medical Center in Lexington, Kentucky. Dr. Watts is also a licensed clinical social worker and was the chief of social work at Lexington from 2011-2020.
- ORH currently supports **34 innovative Enterprise-Wide Initiatives (EWIs)**. These field-based solutions have been tested and shown to be effective for care delivery.
- ORH's five VRHRCs around the country conduct quality improvement and research projects to address the VA Secretary's priorities. This year there are **127 VRHRC projects** covering a wide range of medical care and healthcare operations topics.
- We will also be updating the **ORH website** (www.ruralhealth.va.gov).

Peter Kaboli, MD
Executive Director

James Watts, PhD
Deputy Director

Keep reading to learn more about how ORH is working for rural Veterans!

Veteran Impact Story: Undersea Warriors

By Kimber Parry, VRHRC - Salt Lake City; Heather King, Durham VAMC Health Services Research; and VA CDCE

The Rural WAVE (Wellness and Veteran Engagement) Initiative is a program that aims to build strong relationships with community partners and give Veterans a renewed sense of purpose. It encourages Veterans to take part in activities like volunteering and community service to help them connect meaningfully with people in their communities and enhance their overall quality of life.

Undersea Warriors scuba diving in a pool.

One of the Rural WAVE partners at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center in Missouri is an organization called *Undersea Warriors*. They serve all Active Duty, Veterans, National Guard, Reservists and First Responders recovering from PTSD, anxiety or depression. Undersea Warriors pays for recreational and/or adaptive scuba diving lessons with local community scuba shops. Undersea Warriors also participates in marine conservation activities across the United States.

Impact on Rural Veterans

> *"Initially, I was hesitant. The thought of breathing underwater through a tube did not sound like something I wanted to do… [Diving instructor] took us step by step through the process of breathing through the regulator, donning the mask and fins, and going for a little swim in the pool…it was such a good feeling. It's amazing to have an activity that replaces the monsters in your head and your heart with peace and wonder and tranquility. Thank you."* ~ *Comments from a Veteran participant in Undersea Warriors*

Members of the Undersea Warriors team.

> *"I've been a fireman [and Veteran] for 27 years and I've seen some things that I can't unsee. So, I'm writing this letter to let you know about my experience… The diving made my mind at peace, it makes you think about your breathing and taking in the sights. My diving buddy and I liked diving so much that we signed up to do the advanced dive class. I truly believe the Undersea Warriors program will help with my PTSD and I highly recommend it to anyone who may be going through any kind of PTSD."*
>
> ~ *From a Veteran's Letter to Undersea Warriors*

After several years of successful partnership with the VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement (CDCE), we will transition permanent ownership of the initiative to CDCE beginning in October 2025.

***ORH VRHRC-SLC Project**: Rural WAVE Initiative, PROJFY-010200*

Good News Story: SCOUTS Program Comes to Rural Veterans

By Maura Timm, ORH Senior Program Analyst

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) Enterprise-Wide Initiative (EWI) called *Supporting Community, Outpatient, Urgent care, and Telehealth Services* or *SCOUTS*, provides at-home care after an Emergency Department (ED) visit. The program focuses on Veterans at risk for physical, cognitive or functional decline. It is designed to serve older Veterans who may be at risk for hospitalization, falling, and repeat ED visits.

A SCOUTS program Intermediate Care Technician (ICT) visits Veterans after they are discharged from the ED. They come to the Veteran and perform home safety and mobility observations, screen for unmet care needs, and gather information about social needs and caregiver involvement. ICTs are usually a former military corps-men or combat medic. They can also perform minor follow up procedures such as suture removal and provide patient education on durable medical equipment, VA services, and community resources.

SCOUTS ICTs also act as a telepresenter. They connect the Veteran (from their home) to primary and specialty care providers through televideo. This video visit allows the patient's medical issue to be reassessed and any new issues to be addressed so the Veteran's medical team can create a care plan. The SCOUTS program is very beneficial for frail rural Veterans who may have difficulty travelling long distance to VHA facility.

Impact on Rural Veterans

Veteran and ICT Corey Anderson

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene affected Veterans throughout western North Carolina. The SCOUTS program provided a pathway for rural Veterans to receive medical care and supplies when they were unable to leave their home.

> *"I had a patient who had been in the emergency room right before the storm hit and I was heading out to do a follow up with him. About a half mile from his house, yellow caution tape. The road had washed out. It didn't feel like a choice. There was no turning around… That just couldn't happen."* - *SCOUTS ICT*

Read more here:
https://news.va.gov/136690/nothing-stops-asheville-scout-serving-veterans/

***ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiative**: SCOUTS, #PROJFY-010200*

ORH In the News

Tullahoma HBPC Team Celebrates Decorated WWII Veteran's 106th Birthday

On June 2nd, decorated Army Veteran Tommy Gwynn turned 106. Mr. Gwynn is a five-time Purple Heart recipient and a patient at the VA Tennessee Valley Healthcare System (TVHS). Gwynn receives essential health care services through ORH's Home-Based Primary Care (HBPC) Enterprise-wide Initiative. Dr. Ralf Habermann, HBPC program leader at TVHS, has cared for Tommy for over four years. *"He's an incredible man, and without HBPC and the [Tullahoma] community, he couldn't have stayed home,"* said Habermann.

Tennessee Vet Turns 106

Read more here:
https://www.va.gov/tennessee-valley-health-care/stories/wwii-and-korean-war-vet-turns-106/

***ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiative**: Home-Based Primary Care, #PRFY-00612*

Accolades and Awards

Dr. Joseph Chiovaro

ORH Health Professions Training Program Leader Wins Award

Dr. Joseph Chiovaro is the curriculum director for the Rural Interprofessional Faculty Development Initiative (RIFDI), an ORH enterprise-wide initiative. He is a physician at the Portland VA Medical Center and has been a dedicated advocate for interprofessional faculty development for the past 15 years.

Dr. Chiovaro received the David *M. Worthen Award for Excellence in Health Professions Education - Innovation Award* in 2024. This award is given by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and recognizes outstanding achievements in health professions education.

Dr. Chiovaro's work has helped prepare rural VHA clinical educators to teach, mentor, and lead. More than 250 RIFDI participants have enrolled in or completed this training program. Almost all of them (95%) reported significant improvement in their teaching abilities. Graduates of the program have gone on to lead local innovations such as developing new simulation programs.

The RIFDI program brings together nursing, medicine, mental health and 15 other clinical professions. It has become a national model for VA faculty development and was recognized by a White House briefing memo for its role in reducing rural clinician shortages. "*The impact of RIFDI extends to the rural workforce, with graduates having significant reduction in turnover and burnout,"* said Chiovaro. RIFDI-trained educators are more likely to stay with the VHA, which reduces health care workforce shortages in rural VHA facilities.

Read more here: https://www.va.gov/OAA/features/2024_David_M_Worthen_Award_recipients.asp

***ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiative**: RIFDI, PROJFY-010025*

ORH Publications and Presentations For Providers and Researchers

- Lovejoy TI, Wu TY, Maloy P, McPherson SM, Smith CL, Zaccari B. Collaborative Tele-Pain and Substance Use Disorder Care for Patients in a Rural Setting: Results of a Single-Arm Open-Label Pilot Trial. Pain Manag Nurs 2025 doi: 10.1016/j.pmn.2024.12.020 [published Online First: 20250130]. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39890565/
- Kang J, Kreider C, LeBeau K, et al. Occupational Therapists' Insights on Family Involvement in Videoconferencing-Based Home Assessments and Modifications in the Veterans Health Administration: A Descriptive Qualitative Study. Am J Occup Ther 2025;**79**(3) doi: 10.5014/ajot.2025.050879. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40183505/
- Lee PW, Markle PS, West AN, Lee RE. Use and Quality of Care at a VA Outreach Clinic in Northern Maine. J Prim Care Community Health 2012;**3**(3):159-63 doi: 10.1177/2150131911427167 [published Online First: 20120110], https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23803775/
- Turvey C, Howren MB. Developing a Community of Practice Between VA and Rural Community Providers. HRSA Flex Grant Awardees, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy. Virtual, 2023
- Watts BV, Carluzzo K, Webb BF, Arredondo K. Career impact of the national interprofessional fellowship in patient safety: an alumni evaluation. BMJ Open Qual. Jun 4 2025;14(2)doi:10.1136/bmjoq-2024-003090.

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