November 2025 www.ruralhealth.va.gov

Flying High with Rural Veterans: My Eastern Iowa Honor Flight Experience

Peter Kaboli, MD, Executive Director, VHA Office of Rural Health

On October 14th, I had one of the greatest honors and privileges of my 28-year career as a physician with the Veterans Health Administration. In the dark hours of the morning, I joined 95 Veterans, their family members and friends, as a volunteer escort with the **Eastern Iowa Honor Flight.** We left the Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids at 6:00 a.m. and arrived in Washington, DC two hours later.

For many Veterans, the journey to Washington, DC is more than just a trip—it is a pilgrimage. *Honor Flights*, a program established to honor America's Veterans for their sacrifices, transports our heroes to the Nation's capital to visit and reflect at their memorials. This initiative has evolved into a profound and often overwhelmingly emotional experience for participants, many of whom have never set foot on the very land etched with the memories and accolades of their service. You can read more about *Honor Flights* here, https://www.honorflight.org/.

We visited memorials honoring World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, as well as Arlington National Cemetery, the 911 Memorial, and Air Force and Marine Memorials. For some, the day was a newfound connection to a brotherhood bound by sacrifice and a Nation's gratitude. For others, it was a chance to honor their family legacies and serve those who have served. These trips are more than just flights; they are about closure, honor, and the celebration of the valiant lives that shaped history.

On the flight home, gifts and letters were given to the Veterans and appreciation was given to the Honor Flight staff. Well over a thousand friends, family, active-duty military, police, fireman, and other Veterans there to greet the Veterans as they returned. A band played and flags waved for the Welcome Home Celebration. It was the largest crowd I've ever seen in this airport. It was yet another emotion-filled moment on this very special day.

I was touched to see the appreciation given to the men and women who served their country and can truly say, the *Honor Flight* experience leaves a lasting impact on both Veterans and its volunteers.

Peter

Peter J. Kaboli, MD, MS
Executive Director, VHA Office of Rural Health

NCA's *Plan Today, Honor Forever* Campaign Promoting VA Burial and Memorial Benefits to Rural Veterans

James W. Theres, Public Affairs/Special Projects, Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovations, National Cemetery Administration

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is responsible for the operational and maintenance of Arlington National Cemetery, the largest in the United States, as well 150+ national cemeteries and soldiers' lots and monument sites. More than 4 million Veterans, from every war and conflict, are buried in VA's national cemeteries.

This past year, NCA launched its first nationwide campaign, *Plan Today, Honor Forever* (www.cem.va.gov/veterans-and-families/). In 2025, promotional materials for the campaign were disseminated to rural Veterans in Arizona, Idaho, South Dakota, Maine and Mississippi. After sharing information about VA burial and memorial benefits and Pre-Need eligibility for burial at a national cemetery, all five states showed an increase in Pre-Need applications.

Veterans approved for pre-need eligibility for burial in a VA national cemetery NCA can post self-authored content to *VA's Veterans Legacy Memorial (VLM), www.vlm.cem.va.gov/*. VLM is the nation's largest digital platform dedicated to the memory of more than 10 million Veterans interred in VA National Cemeteries. Individual Veteran profile pages are populated with military service and cemetery information and interactive features allow family, friends, and the public to contribute to the Veterans memorial profile page.

National Cemetery Administration Veterans Legacy Program

In January 2025, NCA launched the *Living Veterans Legacy Project—the VLM for Living Veterans, www.vlm.cem.va.gov/livingveteranhome*. This site provides a web page where Pre-Need eligible Veterans can add their own images, autobiographies, military and life timelines, and historical documents. After their passing, if the Veteran is interred in a Veterans cemetery or receives a VA headstone or other memorial benefit, the content they've submitted will appear on their publicly-visible VLM Memorial page.

Whether a Veteran is buried in a VA national cemetery, a VA grant-funded cemetery, or private family cemetery , NCA benefits play an essential role in end-of-life planning. Information for Veterans, their family members, and caregivers is available from www.cem.va.gov/veterans-and-families/.

ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiative Spotlight: Technology-Based Eye Care Services (TECS)

TECS is a telehealth-based eye screening initiative that places ophthalmology technicians in rural VA clinics to collect information about a patient's eyes and transmit it to VA ophthalmologists for diagnosis and follow-up.

Read more about how the TECS EWI is improving rural Veterans access to eye care.

Good News Story: Clinical Pharmacists Connect Rural Veterans to Soonest and Best Care

Todd Longfellow, Health Systems Specialist, Clinical Pharmacy Practice Office

Dr. Abigail Brooks with a Veteran receiving care in the Specialty Pain Clinic.

Over 80 percent of Veterans require medications as critical component of their care. The Clinical Pharmacist Practitioner (CPP) is the healthcare team's medication expert who works with Veterans to ensure their medication regimen is safe and effective. CPPs are advanced practice providers that increase access to comprehensive medication management services and improve health outcomes via a whole health, Veteran-centric approach. CPPs use telehealth to deliver care to Veterans in their homes or local clinics, reducing the need for long-distance travel.

In partnership with the VHA Office of Rural Health (ORH), the Pharmacy Benefits Management Clinical Pharmacy Practice Office launched multiple ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiatives (EWIs). Through this partnership, 341 CPPs haven been integrated into rural interprofessional teams in primary care, mental health, pain management, substance use disorder, and specialty care areas such as cardiology, neurology, and nephrology. Approximately 366,500 Veterans have received critical access to care through over 1 million CPP led appointments, with more than half conducted via telehealth.

> *"You [CPP] changed my life. I am telling everyone about you."*
>
> *~ Alexandria Veteran*
>
> *"When I met with the CPP, I felt like she listened and truly cared."*
>
> *~ Syracuse Veteran*

Utilizing their medication expertise, the CPPs are part of the solution to increase access to care for the nearly 3 million Veterans who live in rural communities. Veterans have shared their powerful stories of how CPPs help them get their lives back. View Veteran video testimonials on the Pharmacy Benefits Management Services, Clinical Pharmacy Practice Office website, www.pbm.va.gov/PBM/CPPO/Clinical_Pharmacy_Practice_Office_Practice_Impact.asp. Learn more about the CPP EWIs and on the ORH website, www.ruralhealth.va.gov/providers/Enterprise_Wide_Initiatives.asp.

ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiative Spotlight: Mobile Prosthetic and Orthotic Care (MoPOC)

Rural Veterans who need orthotic and prosthetic (O&P) care typically must travel to urban VA medical centers. MoPOC removes this barrier to receiving O&P care by providing care in rural VHA clinics or in Veterans' homes.

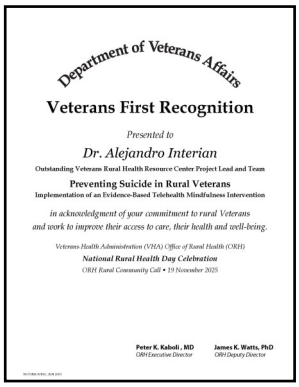
Read more about how the MoPOC EWI removes travel and transportation barriers by bringing specialty care services to rural Veterans.

National Rural Health Day 2025

www.powerofrural.org

National Rural Health Day has taken place on the third Thursday of November since 2011. Initiated by the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH), this day is about celebrating the "Power of Rural" and honoring the dedication of rural health care providers across the country. National Rural Health Day (NRHD) showcases the efforts of rural healthcare providers, State Offices of Rural Health, and other rural stakeholders to address the unique healthcare challenges that rural citizens face today and into the future.

ORH Celebrates National Rural Health Day with Inaugural Veterans First Recognitions


Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans First Recognition

Presented to

Dr. Alejandro Interian

Outstanding Veterans Rural Health Resource Center Project Lead and Team

Preventing Suicide in Rural Veterans

Implementation of an Evidence-Based Telehealth Mindfulness Intervention

in acknowledgment of your commitment to rural Veterans and work to improve their access to care, their health and well-being.

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Rural Health (ORH)

National Rural Health Day Celebration

ORH Rural Community Call • 19 November 2025

Peter K. Kaboli , MD, *ORH Executive Director*

James K. Watts, PhD, *ORH Deputy Director*

The **ORH Veterans First Recognition** is an acknowledgement of achievement for exceptional contributions to VA Secretary Collins' *Veterans First* priorities and to the ORH mission to improve rural Veterans access to care and health outcomes. This acknowledgement of achievement aims to encourage excellence and innovation in rural health delivery and operations to significantly impact the health and well-being of rural veterans. Finalists were selected based on nominated work alignment with VA Secretary, VHA, and ORH priorities; and its reach and positive impact on both rural Veterans and the VHA organization. Recipients were presented with an ORH *Veterans First Recognition* certificate during the National Rural Health Day celebration on the monthly ORH Rural Community Call (11/19/25).

Outstanding Enterprise-Wide Initiative Project Lead and Team

- **Daniel Abrahamson and Eli Kaufman; Mobile Prosthetic & Orthotic Care (MoPOC)**

Outstanding Veterans Rural Health Resource Center (VRHRC) Project Lead and Team

- **Dr. Alejandro Interian; Preventing Suicide in Rural Veterans Implementation of an Evidence-Based Telehealth Mindfulness Intervention** (VRHRC-White River Junction)

Outstanding Rural Mentored Implementation Project Lead and Team

- **Dr. Sheila Rauch; Prolonged Exposure for Primary Care Training and Implementation Initiative** (VRHRC-White River Junction)

Outstanding Research Lead and Team (VRHRC Project)

- **Dr. Ashutosh Shukla; ALIGN for Kidney Failure Care** (VRHRC-Gainesville)

Outstanding Evaluation Team(s) and Team (Enterprise-Wide Initiatives)

- **Dr. Kelly Hunt; Technology-based Eye Care Services and National Subspecialty Ophthalmology** (Dr. April Maa, Lead)

Congratulations to all recipients. Well done!

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Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health

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