THE RURAL **CONNECTION**

VA Office of Rural Health ◆ Summer 2024

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Message from the Executive Director of the VA Office of Rural Health

PETER KABOLI, M.D., M.S., ORH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As spring transitions into summer, it's the perfect time to reflect on ORH's recent progress. Recently, ORH released the fiscal year (FY) 2023 annual report, Thrive, its annual report, which highlights the many ways ORH continues to increase health care access for rural Veterans nationwide. I encourage you to read more about how ORH delivers on its mission by clicking the link below.

Read more in *Office of Rural Health Publishes 2023 Annual Report* on pages 2.

It's ORH's privilege to support the Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) in its mission to develop Secretary-level recommendations that increase rural Veteran health care access. This April, VRHAC convened in Fayetteville. North Carolina to discuss a range of challenges and solutions available to rural Veterans.

Read more in *Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee Travels to North Carolina* on pages 3.

Office of Rural Health Publishes 2023 Annual Report

BY **MAGGIE WURST**, VA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH)'s mission is to improve the health and well-being of rural Veterans through research, innovation, and the dissemination of best practices.

To share its progress towards this mission and the Office's overarching goals, ORH recently published its 2023 annual report, Thrive. The report highlights ORH's focus areas, programs, and partnerships through sections dedicated to several topics:

Strategic Planning Overview

Thrive 2023 overviews ORH's strategic planning process, which began in late 2023 with the development of a working draft and will continue throughout 2024 with the creation of the operational plan and further stakeholder engagement.

Rural Health Challenges

The nation's 4.4 million rural Veterans face unique obstacles when seeking high-quality health care services – including provider shortages, limited broadband coverage, social determinants of health, and geographic and distance barriers. The 2023 annual report provides an in-depth look at these challenges and the ORH programs addressing them.

Rural Promising Practices and Enterprise-Wide Initiatives

Thrive 2023 outlines ORH's two program types: Enterprise-Wide Initiatives (EWIs) and Rural Promising Practices (RPPs).

RPPs are field-tested innovative projects that meet ORH criteria demonstrating improved access to care for rural Veterans, and EWIs expand national VA program offices' access to health care efforts to sites that serve rural Veterans.

The annual report highlights specific EWIs and RPPs, as well as related data points.

Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers

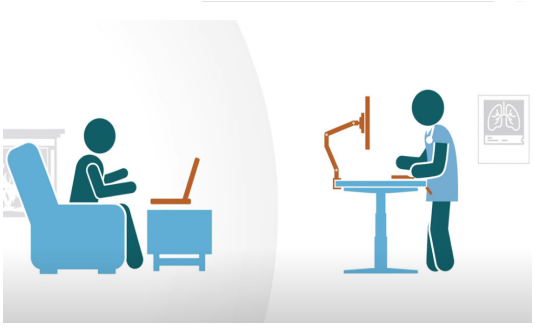
Each of ORH's five Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers (VRHRCs) – which are conduits for innovative health care research, innovation, and dissemination that yield practical interventions – are featured in the 2023 annual report.

Highlights include VRHRC leadership, focus areas, and research categories.

National Rural Health Day

Thrive 2023 provides an overview of ORH's 2023 National Rural Health Day campaign, which highlighted the Home-Based Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation (HBCPR) programs through a partnership with the National Institute of Health (NIH) Learn More Breathe Better® program and collaboration with the Health Resources and Services Administration.

The HBCPR programs eliminate barriers to rehabilitation services by allowing rural Veterans with heart and lung conditions to receive specialized telehealth rehabilitation services from their own homes.



Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

The annual report recaps the 2023 Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) meetings, including the April meeting in Anchorage, Alaska and the September meeting in Washington, D.C.

Chartered in 2008 by the Secretary of VA, VRHAC examines ways to enhance and improve VA's services for rural Veterans by assessing the current rural environment, existing health care opportunities, and barriers to access.

Read the full Thrive 2023 report here.

Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee Travels to North Carolina

BY **MAGGIE WURST,** VA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH

At the end of April, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) staff traveled to Fayetteville, North Carolina for the annual VRHAC Spring Meeting.

Chartered in 2008, VRHAC examines ways to enhance and improve VA's services for rural Veterans by assessing the current rural environment, existing health care opportunities, and challenges or barriers to access.

During the Spring 2024 VRHAC Meeting, ORH's Veterans Rural Health Resource Center (VRHRC) clinical directors highlighted the four main rural health care challenges – provider shortages, limited broadband coverage, social determinants of health, and geographic and distance barriers – and ORH's efforts to better understand and address them.

Committee members also learned more about specific ORH-supported programs and projects, including the:

- Supporting Community Outpatient Urgent Care and Telehealth Services (SCOUTS) program, which is a post-emergency department service that uses intermediate care technicians (advanced unlicensed assistive personnel who have graduated from specialized military medical training programs) to support care transitions.
- Rural Wellness and Veteran Engagement (WAVE) Initiative, which helps rural Veterans feel more connected to their communities and improves mental health concerns through volunteer and community service opportunities.
- Mobile Prosthetic and Orthotic Care (MoPOC) program, which brings state of the art prosthetic and orthotic services from hub sites to community based outpatient clinics and rural Veterans' homes.
- Veterans Transportation Program (VTP), which offers Veterans travel solutions to and from VA health care appointments through Beneficiary Travel (BT), Veterans Transportation Service (VTS), and Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG) initiatives

The meeting also included a panel discussion on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Dr. Beverly Edwards, Fayetteville State University's Master of Social Work Program Director, and Dr. Cynthia McArthur-Kearney, Durham Veterans Healthcare System's Chief Nurse for Education and Medicine, spoke about the importance of community and academic partnerships for VA, diversity in the rural health care workforce, and partnerships with HBCUs as rural workforce pipelines.

In fall 2024, the VRHAC Committee members will meet again to draft a series of recommendations for the Secretary of VA that are designed to increase rural Veterans' access to VA services nationwide.

To read previous VRHAC recommendations, visit the ORH website.

Support for Rural Veterans Thinking More About Military Experience as They Age

BY **HANNAH BASHIAN AND LOLA BAIRD, LICSW,** VA NEW ENGLAND GRECC AND BOSTON HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

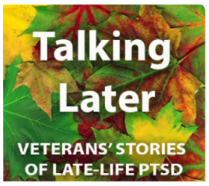
As we age, we often engage in "life review." More than just reminiscing, life review is the process of reflecting on life's challenges and ways we persevered to weave a deeper understanding of who we are. For many, life's challenges include trauma. In fact, most people will have experienced a traumatic event by the time they reach older age. This is especially true for Veterans, who are more likely to experience combat and/or military sexual trauma.

It's typical to avoid thinking about traumatic experiences. However, during life review, older Veterans may re-engage these memories as they face new challenges (e.g., retirement, medical illness, or losing people they love).
(continued on page 4)

Support for Rural Veterans Thinking More About Military Experience As They Age (continued from page 3)

This process is called later adulthood trauma re-engagement (LATR). LATR leads some Veterans to a deeper sense of meaning and resilience, while it causes others to experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Older rural Veterans experiencing LATR face unique challenges. They may have more difficulty accessing specialized trauma services, and their rural clinicians may have less training in geriatrics and trauma. To address these factors, and through ORH funding, the VA New England Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Center (GRECC) developed two tools for clinicians working with older rural Veterans experiencing LATR.



Talking Later: Veterans' Stories of Late-Life PTSD Podcast

Each of the podcast's 20 episodes features the life story of a real Veteran told through VA's My Life, My Story program. After listening to the story, two hosts discuss what it can teach the audience about LATR. The podcast can be accessed via phone, computer, or audio book (for those without internet access).

LATR Therapy Protocol

This therapy protocol includes session guides with activities and handouts to support Veterans experiencing LATR. Based on rural clinicians' requests for flexible resources, the guides were developed for use in group and one-on-one settings. Interested clinicians can email jennifer.moye@va.gov to access the guides on the VA Microsoft Teams site.

Overall Outcomes

As of April 2024:

- The podcast had more than 13,000 plays.
- More than 230 VA clinicians had joined the VA Microsoft Teams site to access the LATR therapy protocol.

These resources reflect VA's commitment to supporting older rural Veterans who are thinking more about their military experiences as they age, as well as the family members and clinicians who care for them.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

BY MARY ELDER, **VA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH**

Since its inception in 1942, Mental Health Awareness Month has focused on a singular goal - increasing awareness of the importance of mental health and wellness in Americans' lives and to celebrate recovery from mental illness remains steadfas.

But for too many rural Veterans facing mental health challenges, this goal remains elusive. Veterans in rural communities often lack access access to mental health services and face barriers such as long travel distances to access the limited services available.

This May, VA's Office of Rural Health celebrates Mental Health Awareness Month by highlighting programs that connect rural Veterans:

- **Community Clergy Training to Support Rural Veterans' Mental Health** educates rural community clergy on available VA health care resources and trains rural clergy to recognize common symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, and readjustment issues in Veterans returning to their rural communities upon separation from military service.
- **Gerofit** utilizes telehealth to connect rural Veterans over the age of 65 with exercise programming. The health and wellness program strives to improve participants' balance, endurance, and strength while building a sense of community. Participants have demonstrated improved health, mental and physical function, and overall well-being.
- **Rural Suicide Prevention** connects Veterans to comprehensive suicide prevention services and resources through enhanced education, public awareness campaigns, community training, crisis support, firearm safety, and care management for high-risk individuals.
- **Clinical Resource Hubs** are Veterans Integrated Service Network sites that provide primary, mental health, medical specialty, and rehabilitation and extended care, as well as surgery services, to Veterans in underserved areas.

Learn more about ORH's mental health resources, here.

Upcoming Webinar to Discuss Housing as a Social Driver of Rural Health

BY MAGGIE WURST, **VA OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) is dedicated to understanding and evaluating the social determinants of health that impact Veterans living in rural communities.

Housing, a social determinant of health that greatly affects rural Veteran well-being and health outcomes, will be covered in-depth during the Rural Health Research Gateway's upcoming webinar, "Understanding Housing as a Social Driver of Health for Rural Residents."

Scheduled for Wednesday, May 29 at 1:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, the free webinar included discussion on rural/urban differences in housing cost burden and the quality of housing stock. Hosts will also review the results of key informant interviews (regarding challenges and opportunities in supporting housing and improving the health of rural residents) will also be discussed.

Overall, the webinar will help attendees:

- Understand the differences in basic housing access and quality measures between rural and urban residents
- Identify opportunities to improve housing as a social driver of health through policy and programming

While attendance is limited to 500 pre-registered participants, a recording of the webinar will be available on the Rural Health Research Gateway website.

View the webinar recording and slides at https://www.ruralhealthresearch.org/webinars/understanding-housing.

Rural Health Research Gateway

VA Office of Rural Health

"The Rural Connection" is a quarterly publication of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH). 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 study, innovate and spread Enterprise-Wide Initiatives through partnerships.

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Questions? Comments?

Please feel free to email us at **ORHcomms@va.gov**

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