THE RURAL **CONNECTION**

VA Office of Rural Health ◆ Winter 2024

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

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

As winter settles in and we say goodbye to 2023, let's take a moment to reflect on this year's successes for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH). Since its inception, ORH's mission has been to increase rural Veteran's access to the care and services they have earned. As we embark on 2024, that mission will continue to guide us forward as we serve millions of rural Veterans.

This year for National Rural Health Day, ORH spotlighted Home-based Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation programs that provide life sustaining care to rural Veterans.

Read more in Home-based Programs Bridge the Gap in Rural Veteran Care on page 2.

VA Care Technician, Jayme Turner, is using his military experience to bring VA services to Veterans at home.

Read more in Care Technician Brings VA Services to Veterans at Home on pages 2-4.

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Message from the VA Office of Rural Health's Executive Director *(continued from page 1)*

The VA Health and Benefits mobile app helps rural Veterans connect to their VA health and benefits services regardless of Wi-Fi or broadband access.

Read more in VA's Official Mobile App Helps Rural Veterans Connect to VA Services on pages 4-5.

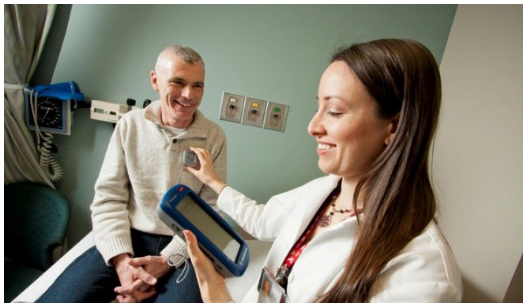
Home-based Programs Bridge the Gap in Rural Veteran Care

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

On November 17th, the Office of Rural Health honored National Rural Health Day (NRHD) by spotlighting two programs that support the unique needs of rural Veterans. For NRHD, ORH showcased its Home-based Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation programs, which connect Veterans to the care they need, close to home.

Rural Veterans are more likely to experience serious medical issues, such as heart and lung conditions, than urban Veterans. While rural communities have many benefits, they often lack access to the specialized care that rural Veterans need. These access challenges can be further exacerbated by the hospital closures and provider shortages that are prevalent in rural areas.

To provide Veterans with the most comprehensive care, ORH pioneered an approach that brings heart and lung rehabilitative care to Veterans at home. Home-based Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation utilize telehealth to reduce barriers such as lack of availability, long distances, and cost.



Patient is assessed by their health care team.

ORH's home-based rehabilitation programs incorporate guidance tailored to each Veteran's unique needs including:

- Stress management
- Exercise
- Medication management
- Tobacco cessation
- Nutrition counseling

One rural Veteran credited an ORH home-based rehabilitation program with improving his health care and overall quality of life. "I felt better on my 70th birthday than I did on my 50th," he said.

To learn more about Home-Based Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation, watch this video.

Patient meets with their health care practitioner.

Care Technician Brings VA Services to Veterans at Home

BY **THE VHA OFFICE OF PRIMARY CARE**

Jayme Turner is no stranger to serving in key positions that make an impact.

The retired Army Sergeant 1st Class was awarded a Bronze Star and John R. Teal Leadership Award for exceptional service during his military career, including deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn.

In December 2021, Turner took on a new role at VA: Intermediate Care Technician for Primary Care at the Saint George Community-Based Outpatient Clinic, VA Salt Lake City Healthcare System. *(continued on page 3)*

Care Technician Brings VA Services to Veterans at Home
(continued from page 3)

It was a natural next step for the former combat medic, who said his military experience helps him connect with his patients on a different level.

"There's a value you can't get anywhere else when you've got that shared experience of military service," Turner said. "I've had patients open up to me when they find out I was an Army medic because they feel more comfortable."

In 2022, Turner was selected to lead the expansion of the Supporting Community, Outpatient, Urgent Care and Telehealth Services (SCOUTS) pilot program into primary care operations.

The SCOUTS initiative is a post-emergency department transition-of-care program for vulnerable adults over the age of sixty. The program addresses gaps in virtual care accessibility, unmet health care needs, and the 4Ms of an age-friendly health system: mobility, mentation, medication, and "what matters." SCOUTS identifies Veterans who have recently been seen in a non-VA ED and provides a rapid follow up home visit.

"The transition to self-care at home after a trip to the ED can be a vulnerable time for older adults," said Dr. Colleen McQuown, the SCOUTS program National Medical Director. "Often, ED visits are prompted by functional decline, caregiver burden, unmet health care needs, or a minor illness in the setting of frailty. A SCOUTS home visit gives an opportunity to discover the underlying cause of the ED visit and to prevent a revisit by providing acute interventions."

During a home visit, ICTs like Turner identify needs, perform geriatric syndrome screens, conduct home safety and risk evaluations, and connect Veterans back to their assigned patient-aligned care team.

The ICT can also function as a facilitator for telehealth services, providing Veterans the opportunity for a face-to-face visit from the comfort of their own home.

Dr. Candice Daniel, a VA clinical psychologist specializing in geropsychology, sees many aging rural Veterans who struggle with limited access to supportive technology resources like VA Video Connect.

"Many older adults are not comfortable using technology, thus limiting our independent ability to provide VVC services," Daniel said. "The SCOUTS program provides a unique opportunity to connect with hard-to-reach Veterans."

The SCOUTS Primary Care integration initiative gets to the heart of the PACT-based approach: promoting patient-centered care with a multi-disciplinary team collaboration. Turner works with Dr. Daniel and other members of the PACT team to mobilize resources and develop safety plans to support Veterans' mental health and functional needs.

Often, the in-home visits provide a care team with more information than they might get in a typical primary care setting, potentially resulting in interventions like motorized chair lift installations, occupational therapy consultations, and fall-prevention bathroom equipment.

Turner described a patient who had several ED visits due to diabetic ketoacidosis. While following up with him in his home, Turner learned that the a bilateral amputee struggled to access healthy food necessary for a balanced diabetic diet.

"I noticed he was eating mostly processed foods," Turner explained. "I was able to connect him to a county food delivery program and he hasn't been back to the emergency room since." *(continued on page 4)*

Intermediate Care Technician Jayme Turner

Care Technician Brings VA Services to Veterans at Home
(continued from page 3)

Turner knows his role in expanding the SCOUTS program is saving lives. He is a strong advocate for suicide prevention and has assisted in supporting Veterans with crisis intervention.

"Mr. N" was one of those Veterans in crisis. He called VA, and Turner arrived in less than an hour.

"Mr. Turner arrived at my home to assist me in managing my health crisis," Mr. N said. "He arranged for me to speak to my primary health care provider through the telehealth system. The doctor recommended that I go to the ER immediately; Mr. Turner helped me get out of bed, get dressed, and lock my house. Mr. Turner helped me check into the ER, briefed the nurses, and waited for my results. I would like to thank VA and all of their exceptional staff for all of the services that they have provided to me. The SCOUTS program literally saved my life!"

Despite the praise, Turner is humble about the care he provides. "I've taken care of Veterans my whole life," he said, shrugging. "It's just part of who I am."

The SCOUTS program is one of the ways VA continues to implement new programs and expand care, ensuring Veterans get the services they've earned, no matter where they live. To learn more, visit: https://marketplace.va.gov/innovations/scouts/.

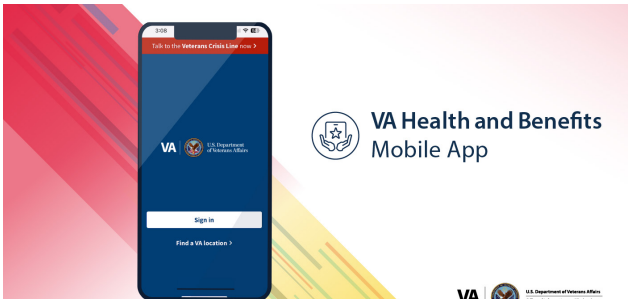
Intermediate Care Technician Jayme Turner poses for a photograph with Mr. N, a Veteran he helped through the Supporting Community, Outpatient, Urgent Care and Telehealth Services pilot program.

VA's Official Mobile App Helps Rural Veterans Connect to VA Services

BY **VA OFFICE OF INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY**

The official VA Health and Benefits mobile app is available to help rural Veterans connect to their VA health and benefits services. All you need is a smartphone with mobile data, even if you don't have access to Wi-Fi or broadband.

VA's Health and Benefits mobile app is free, easy-to-use, and accessible, which makes it easier for rural Veterans to connect to VA health care and benefits on-the-go.



Three new videos highlight the VA Health and Benefits mobile app's most popular features and how they make Veterans' lives easier.. The top features described in the VA Health and Benefits Mobile App playlist include:

- **Prescriptions** – Access, refill, and track refillable VA-dispensed prescriptions
- **Secure Messaging** – Communicate securely with your VA health care team
- **Claims and Appeals** – Check on your VA claims and upload supporting documents

Nearly two million Veterans have already downloaded the VA Health and Benefits mobile app and are discovering the benefits of using it every day. *(continued on page 5)*

VA's Official Mobile App Helps Rural Veterans Connect to VA Services (continued from page 4)

What can you do with the Health and Benefits mobile app?

With the Health and Benefits mobile app you can:

- Access and refill refillable VA-dispensed prescriptions,
- View your claims and appeals status
- Securely message your health care team
- View and cancel health care appointments
- Upload documentation to VA
- Get your vaccine records
- Locate VA facilities
- Access the Veterans Crisis Line
- Show retailers your Veteran status, and more.

"Overall, I highly recommend the VA app to any Veteran who wants to simplify their health care and benefits management. It's easy to use, reliable, and provides all the information I need to stay on top of my health and wellness. Thank you, VA, for creating such an excellent app for Veterans," shared one Veteran and VA Health and Benefits mobile app user.

And for the first time, Veterans who are blind can read their decision letter by themselves within the VA Health and Benefits mobile app.

Upcoming features

VA regularly releases new mobile app features. Upcoming VA Health and Benefits mobile app features planned for release in the next year will allow Veterans to:

- View lab and test results
- Receive travel pay reimbursement
- Receive additional push notifications
- And schedule appointments

The app's features will continue to expand and evolve based on Veteran needs.

Downloading the app is free, fast, and easy

To access the VA Health and Benefits mobile app, go to the Apple App Store or Google Play Store on your mobile device and simply search "VA" and download the VA: Health and Benefits mobile app.

VA is committed to making it easier for rural Veterans to connect, including through telehealth, mobile vet centers, and VA's Health and Benefits mobile app.

Gainesville VRHRC Empowers Women Veterans

BY **THE VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION**

ORH's Veterans Rural Health Resource Center in Gainesville, Florida highlighted the valuable contributions of physical therapists (PTs) and physical therapy assistants (PTAs) during Physical Therapy Month.

This year's Physical Therapy Month theme was "Value of PT." Physical therapy is a valuable resource at VA given its role in enhancing the quality of life for Veterans. For many Veterans, physical therapy can be the missing piece that allows them to regain mobility, function, and vitality, promoting their overall health and well-being.

The Gainesville VRHRC's physical therapy team works closely with VA's Office of Women's Health. This collaboration has driven them to initiate a rural pilot program, which will address the specific health care needs of women Veterans and provide essential pelvic health services.

VHA Nurse, Mrs. Johnita Brown, Honored for Her Exemplary Work

BY **KIMBERLY ROGERS,** PRIMARY CARE SOCIAL WORKER

Mrs. Johnita Brown started her career with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) in 2021 as a community contract nurse and is now a full-time employee at the Carl Vinson VA Medical Center in Dublin, Georgia. Mrs. Brown's journey started as a Certified Nurse Assistant, which paved the way for her nursing career.

As she continued to build her resume, she knew it was time for her to cultivate her skills, which helped her move into an administrative role life after nursing assistance. As a result, she became a Unit Coordinator.

Throughout her career, she will never forget what brought her to the profession she loves the most. She believes a caring heart for nursing led her to become a Licensed Practical Nurse. Mrs. Brown graduated from Altamaha Technical College, today known as the College of Coastal Georgia, in the fall of 2013. *(continued on page 6)*

VHA Nurse, Mrs. Johnita Brown, Honored for Her Exemplary Work (continued from page 5)

"I am Mrs. Johnita Brown, I am a VA rural nurse," she said. "I realized I had to make a change because the people in my community are all that I see. After all, they live in the hand of me. I am not in the city; I am not in the suburbs. I am the chosen one that patients (Veterans) depend on."

Mrs. Brown loves working with the Veteran population and spending time with her children, husband, and dog Lela. She ends each workday with a quote, "Nurses will go the whole health journey with you."

"A rural nurse knows it's [about] more than serving patients (Veterans). It is a calling to be true to yourself, your profession, the community," said Mrs. Brown.

The Carl Vinson VA Medical Center

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?

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