



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Rural Health

**VETERANS RURAL HEALTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

April 30: 9:00 am – 4:45 pm EST

May 1: 9:00 am – 4:45 pm EST

**Attendees:**

**Committee Members Present:**

Marcus Cox, Chair  
Pavithra Ellison (virtual)  
Vanessa E. Meade  
Joseph P. Parsetich  
David L. Albright  
Thomas M. Driskill Jr  
Angela Renae Mund  
Juanita J. Mullen  
Lonnie Wangen  
David “Clay” Ward  
Rodney Hummer  
Marcus Pigman

**Ex-Officio Members Present:**

Kellie Kubena  
Kristi Martinsen  
Ben Smith

**Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:**

Paul Boucher, Committee Manager  
Kristen Wing  
Peter Kaboli  
Robin Islam  
LaTonya Small  
Travis Lovejoy  
Sergio Romeo

Keith Myers  
Vince Watts  
Carolyn Turvey  
Vince Watts  
Byron Bair  
Colleen McGowan  
Kimber Parry (virtual)  
Dan Abrahamson (virtual)  
Eli Kaufman (virtual)  
Ben Williams (virtual)

**Virtual Attendees:**

Daniel Palmeri  
Patrice Luneski  
Maura Timm  
Mathew Vincenti  
Ryan Sharpe  
Nikki Sanchez  
Kristin Pettey  
Shannon Boyles  
Justin Heesakker  
Kathy Marchant-miros  
Tyana Johnson  
Karyn Johnstone  
Kelly Lora Lewis  
J. Lee Cook  
Bret Hicken  
Rachell Wall  
Anne Oumarou



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George Kaufman  
Anica Pless Kaiser  
Mindy LaCrone  
Marion Fera

**Consultants Present:**

Mary Elder  
Meghan Boryeskne  
Stephen Miles (virtual)  
Maggie Wurst (virtual)

**Public Attendees:**

Beverly Edwards  
Cynthia McArthur Kearney

**Meeting Objectives:**

1. VRHAC will gain an increased understanding of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) strategic and community partnerships that increase access to health care for rural Veterans.
2. VRHAC will gain an increased understanding of the Office of Rural Health's current programs and research initiatives.
3. VRHAC will develop recommendations for the VA Secretary.

**Tuesday, April 30, 2024**

**VRHAC Meeting Welcome and Opening**

Dr. Peter Kaboli, Executive Director, ORH; Dr. Marcus Cox, Chair, VRHAC

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) Executive Director and Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) Chair welcomed members to Fayetteville for the Spring 2024 meeting.
- The ORH Executive Director and VRHAC Chair reinforced the importance of the Committee and its responsibility to develop recommendations for the Secretary of VA.
- Marri "Nicki" Fryar, Executive Director, VA Fayetteville Coastal health care, provided an overview of its facilities, services, partnerships, challenges, growth, and collaboration with ORH.



## **Video: VA Under Secretary for Health Welcome to VRHAC**

Dr. Shereef Elnahal, Under Secretary for Health, VA

- Committee members watched a video address from the VA Under Secretary for Health.

## **Introductions and Meeting Overview**

Rob Islam, Interim Deputy Director, ORH

- The ORH Interim Deputy Director reviewed the meeting goals and acknowledged Committee member subject matter expertise.

## **Presentation: Review of VRHAC Recommendations and Discussion**

Dr. Byron Bair, Clinical Director, ORH's Salt Lake City VRHRC

- The ORH Salt Lake City VRHRC Clinical Director provided an overview of the Committee's previous recommendations for the Secretary of VA, highlighting key themes and outcomes.

## **Presentation: Defining "Rural" – Veterans and VA Facilities**

Dr. Peter Kaboli, Executive Director, ORH

- The ORH Executive Director shared that there isn't a single definition of rurality used across all federal agencies.
- The ORH Executive Director explained that ORH determines rurality using rural-urban commuting area (RUCA) codes, which use population density and commuting patterns to assign designations to census tracts.
  - ORH designates Veterans as rural, highly rural, or urban based on the census tract in which they reside.
  - ORH determines if a facility is rural by determining how much of the population it serves is rural.

## **Presentation: Preview of ORH Strategic Goals for 2025-2029**

Rob Islam, Interim Deputy Director, ORH

- The ORH Interim Deputy Director shared VA's strategic planning process, goals, and objectives.
- The ORH Interim Deputy Director shared ORH's vision, mission, and fiscal year (FY) 2020-2024 strategic goals and objectives.
- The ORH Interim Deputy Director overviewed ORH's FY 2025-2029 strategic planning timeline, as well as drafted goals and objectives.



- The ORH Interim Deputy Director fielded questions about including telehealth goals, staffing goals, and targeted programs in ORH's FY 2025-2029 Strategic Plan.

### **Presentation: The “Big Four” Rural Health Challenges**

Rob Islam, Interim Deputy Director, ORH

- The ORH Interim Deputy Director reviewed four main rural health care challenges – workforce, geography, digital divide, and social determinants of health.

### **Presentation: Rural Challenges Revisited: Geography Barriers and Solutions/Q&A**

Dr. Sergio Romero, Operations Director, ORH's Gainesville VRHRC; Dr. Keith Myers, Clinical Director, ORH's Gainesville VRHRC

- The presenters highlighted the ORH Geospatial Outcomes Division (GSOD), which designs maps, visualizations, and reports for rural health staff and leadership.
- The presenters described State of the Rural Veteran Reports, which are national and state-level reports that include information on enrolled Veteran demographics and health care access.
- The presenters spotlighted the Geospatial Analysis of Racial and Rural-Nonrural Disparities in Adherence to Follow-Up Lung Cancer Screening Recommendations in Veterans project.
- The presenters answered questions about GSOD.

### **Presentation: Rural Challenges Revisited: Workforce Recruitment and Retention/Q&A**

Dr. Vince Watts, Clinical Director, ORH's White River Junction VRHRC

- The ORH White River Junction VRHRC Clinical Director shared that rural Veterans are seeing more non-physician prescribing clinicians (e.g., nurse practitioners, physician assistants, specialty pharmacists) than urban Veterans.
- The ORH White River Junction VRHRC Clinical Director shared that rural Veterans are seeing fewer psychologists than urban Veterans.
- The ORH White River Junction VRHRC Clinical Director shared that rural mental health clinicians are less specialized than those serving urban areas.
- The ORH White River Junction VRHRC Clinical Director presented data that showed behavioral telehealth adoption has not increased significantly in rural areas.



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- The ORH White River Junction VRHRC Clinical Director answered questions regarding non-physician prescribing clinicians, rural behavioral health clinician specialization, prescriptive authority, and VA research into the impact of social workers on rural Veteran care.

### **Presentation: Rural Challenges Revisited: Broadband Internet Access/Q&A**

Dr. Carolyn Turvey, Clinical Director, ORH's Iowa City VRHRC

- The ORH Iowa City VRHRC Clinical Director shared that satellite internet and broadband investments via the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law continue to improve internet access for Veterans across the nation.
- The ORH Iowa City VRHRC Clinical Director highlighted that although Veterans may have home internet access, they may not have functional connection speeds.
- The ORH Iowa City VRHRC Clinical Director shared Veteran sentiments on telemedicine as well as their preferences for telehealth support.
- The ORH Iowa City VRHRC Clinical Director spotlighted various VA initiatives, including digital divide consults, Clinical Resource Hubs, Clinical Video Telehealth, and orientation phone calls.
- The ORH Iowa City VRHRC Clinical Director answered questions regarding inter-agency collaborations, how the discontinuation of the Affordable Connectivity Program will affect rural Veterans, Starlink, and provider-to-provider telehealth consults.

### **Presentation: Rural Challenges Revisited: Social Determinants of Health/Q&A**

Dr. Travis Lovejoy, Clinical Director, ORH's Portland VRHRC

- The ORH Portland VRHRC Clinical Director defined social determinants of health and highlighted examples that are common in rural communities.
- The ORH Portland VRHRC Clinical Director described a filmmaking workshop project for engaging rural Veterans, which allows medically indigent rural Veterans with untreated mental health needs to share their experiences and connect with others.
- The ORH Portland VRHRC Clinical Director described the Gender Affirming Program with Speech (GAPS) initiative, which includes speech pathologists who serve transgender rural Veterans and develop national training programs.
- The ORH Portland VRHRC Clinical Director discussed the Housing Insecurity Among Rural Veterans project, which seeks to determine the prevalence of homelessness among rural Veterans in the Pacific Northwest and identify existing VA and community housing programs.



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- The ORH Portland VRHRC Clinical Director answered questions about VA's role in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' social determinants of health projects, project sustainability, and societal perceptions of Veterans as a social determinant of health.

### **Presentation: ORH Spotlight: SCOUTS/Q&A**

Dr. Colleen McQuown, Medical Director, SCOUTS

- The Supporting Community Outpatient Urgent Care and Telehealth Services (SCOUTS) Medical Director presented on the SCOUTS program, a post-emergency department complementary service that utilizes intermediate care technicians (advanced unlicensed assistive personnel who have graduated from specialized military medical training programs) to support care transitions.
- The SCOUTS Medical Director shared positive program outcomes, including decreased inpatient admissions, emergency department re-visits, and community emergency department utilization, as well as increased telehealth usage, orders for durable medical equipment, and social work referrals.
- The SCOUTS Medical Director answered questions regarding Veteran perceptions of intermediate care technicians, how SCOUTS sites are determined, intermediate care technician job satisfaction, and community partnerships to enhance SCOUTS.

### **Virtual Presentation: ORH Spotlight: The Rural WAVE (Wellness and Veteran Engagement) Initiative/Q&A**

Kimber Parry, Population Scientist and Investigator, ORH's Salt Lake City VRHRC

- The presenter discussed the initial development of the Rural Wellness and Veteran Engagement (WAVE) Initiative, which resulted from research into moral injury.
- The presenter shared data that civic engagement and volunteerism help Veterans feel more connected to their communities, improve mental health symptoms and concerns, and decrease suicide rates in rural and urban areas.
- The presenter shared that the Rural WAVE program improves rural Veteran well-being through volunteerism and other community service activities in their local communities.
- The presenter shared that the Rural WAVE program is hosted by ORH's Salt Lake City VRHRC in partnership with the VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement (CDCE).



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- The presenter shared that Veteran participants note an improvement in mental health, a feeling of purpose and meaning, and a sense of comradery, friendship, and company with other Veterans.
- The presenter noted that CDCE will take over ownership of the project starting in FY 2026 and will focus on supporting rural transportation programs.

### **Day One Recap – Strategic Goals Revisited**

Dr. Peter Kaboli, Executive Director, ORH; Rob Islam, Interim Deputy Director, ORH

- The ORH Executive Director and Interim Deputy Director reviewed highlights, concerns, and outstanding questions regarding the day's presentations.

### **Wednesday, May 1, 2024**

#### **VRHAC Day One Review, Day Two Goals**

Rob Islam, Interim Deputy Director, ORH

- The ORH Interim Deputy Director reviewed topics and presentations from the previous day.
- The ORH Interim Deputy Director provided an overview of the day's panel discussion, presentations, and breakout session.

#### **Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO) Presentation**

Dr. LaTonya Small, Program Specialist, Office of the Secretary, VA

- The ACMO representative reviewed Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) requirements.
- The ACMO representative reviewed VA Federal Advisory Committee best practices.

#### **Video: VA Secretary Charge to Advisory Committees**

Denis McDonough, Secretary, VA

- The Committee members watched a video address from the Secretary of VA.



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## **Presentation: Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Contributions to Public Health and Addressing Rural Challenges/Q&A**

Dr. Marcus Cox, Chair, VRHAC; Dr. Beverly Edwards, Master of Social Work (MSW) Program Director, Fayetteville State University; Dr. Cynthia McArthur-Kearney, Chief Nurse for Education and Medicine, Durham Veterans Healthcare System

- The VRHAC Chair highlighted the importance of community and academic partnerships for VA and discussed partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as potential rural workforce pipelines.
- The Fayetteville State University MSW Program Director spoke about the program's curriculum, how graduates are trained in skills that are valuable to VA and rural Veterans, and Fayetteville State University's Military Behavioral Health Graduate Certificate program.
- The Durham Veterans Health Care System Chief Nurse for Education and Medicine spoke about types of nurses, nursing specialties, the importance of diversity in nursing, and Durham Veterans Health Care System's nursing workforce partnerships with Fayetteville State University, North Carolina Central University, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Methodist University, and Fayetteville Technical Community College.
- The panelists fielded questions about:
  - HBCU workforce pipelines to VA facilities.
  - Women and African American representation in the VA workforce.
  - Potential partnerships with the VA Office of Academic Affiliations.
  - Nursing and social work tuition reimbursement incentives.
  - Cultural competency training for students.

## **Virtual Presentation: ORH Spotlight: MoPOC/Q&A**

Daniel Abrahamson, National Program Manager, MoPOC; Eli Kaufman, National Program Coordinator, MoPOC

- The MoPOC National Program Manager described the MoPOC program, which brings state of the art prosthetic and orthotic services from hub sites to community based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) and rural Veterans' homes.
- The MoPOC National Program Manager provided an overview of MoPOC site eligibility, including drive time for clinicians, space, patient density, and rurality requirements.
- The MoPOC National Program Manager shared that the average rurality of Veterans served by MoPOC is 75%, and early data suggests up to \$150,000 of annual cost savings per clinician (when compared to purchased care).



- The MoPOC National Program Manager shared results of qualitative analysis, which found high satisfaction among Veterans served by the program.
- The MoPOC National Program Manager answered questions regarding funding for MoPOC, eligibility criteria for MoPOC sites, the potential of utilizing Starlink for video visits, and Veteran access to gender-specific prosthetic and orthotic devices.

### **Virtual Presentation: ORH Spotlight: Travel Benefits and Transportation/Q&A**

Ben Williams, Director, VTP

- The Veterans Transportation Program (VTP) Director shared background information and data on the Highly Rural Transportation Grant (HRTG) program, which provides grant funding to Veteran service organizations and state Veterans service agencies to provide transportation services for highly rural Veterans traveling to VA or VA-authorized health care facilities.
- The VTP Director provided information and data on the Veterans Transportation Service (VTS), which is available for VA and non-VA authorized medical appointments and features wheelchair accessible vans.
  - VTP is also establishing an emergency ambulance service under VTS, which will provide emergency transportation for participating VA sites.
- The VTP Director described Beneficiary Travel (BT) programs, which include a VA-initiated ride share process that coordinates transportation to and from medical appointments via ride share partners.
- The VTP Director answered questions regarding the VTP volunteer application processing timeline, HRTG eligibility, and the proposed rule change to rates VA pays for special modes of transportation.

### **Overcoming Rural Challenges Breakout Groups**

VRHAC Committee Members

- Committee members broke into small groups to discuss the four main rural health care challenges and brainstorm solutions.

### **Rural Challenges Large Group Discussion**

Dr. Peter Kaboli, Executive Director, ORH; Dr. Marcus Cox, Chair, VRHAC; Rob Islam, Interim Deputy Director, ORH

- Each breakout group shared ideas for improving and reducing the four main rural health care challenges.



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## **Wrap Up and Closing**

Dr. Marcus Cox, Chair, VRHAC

- The VRHAC Chair and ORH Executive Director thanked Committee members for their work and adjourned the meeting.

## **Public Comment Period**

Dr. Peter Kaboli, Executive Director, ORH; Dr. Marcus Cox, Chair, VRHAC

- A virtual attendee asked a question about a Veteran needing assistance who had not found success through traditional channels.
  - The ORH Interim Deputy Director and a VRHAC member recommended the Veteran reach out to their local Congressperson or Veterans Integrated Services Network (VISN) leadership team for support.
- The public comment period was closed after 15 minutes.