One in every five Servicemembers returns from combat with at least one serious mental health issue. Additionally, the transition to civilian life may trigger mental health struggles for Veterans. Mental health conditions that Veterans face include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), military sexual trauma, substance abuse, dementia, depression and suicidal crises. These can be caused by military service, the transition from military life, aging, or social determinants such as employment and financial issues.

Veterans who reside in rural communities are more likely to suffer from certain mental health conditions than their urban counterparts. Rural Veterans are more likely to have current or lifetime depression, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Additionally, rural Veterans are at significantly higher risk of suicide.

These problems are compounded by health care access challenges in rural communities. Overall, fewer resources exist to support the higher percentage of rural Veterans who struggle with mental health conditions. For instance, there are only 16 psychologists per every 100,000 rural residents, about half the amount in urban and suburban areas. In fact, more than 85 percent of rural residents live in a mental health professional shortage area. Primary care providers report feeling less knowledgeable than urban providers about PTSD, substance abuse, depression and suicide treatments. More than half do not typically ask if their patient is a Veteran—missing a crucial opportunity to identify unique mental health care needs.

Additionally, stigma associated with asking for mental health care may make some Veterans unlikely to volunteer information about their military experience or mental health status.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) uses the President’s Rural Health Initiative budget line item of $250 million to build rural-focused health care solutions that enable Veterans to obtain a similar standard of care regardless of where they live. In fiscal year 2017, ORH used 12 percent of its budget ($30 million) to fund 10 Enterprise-Wide Initiatives that increase rural Veterans’ access to mental health at 414 VA medical sites nationwide. ORH’s mental health Enterprise-Wide Initiatives provide programmatic support at VA medical centers that serve rural Veterans through telehealth solutions, community outreach programs, interactive online and phone-based resources, and workforce support. Fiscal year 2017 initiatives include:

- **National Telemental Health Center** extends expert mental health services to rural VA facilities to increase rural Veterans’ access to expert clinical recommendations and therapy.
As VA’s lead advocate for rural Veterans, the Office of Rural Health (ORH) works to see that America’s Veterans thrive in rural communities. To support the health and well-being of rural Veterans, ORH establishes and disseminates Enterprise-Wide Initiatives that increase access to care for the 2.7 million rural Veterans enrolled in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ health care system. Key focus areas include programs that address workforce shortages, transportation, primary care, mental health, telehealth and specialty care. To learn more, visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov.