Shortages of clinical specialists are especially prevalent in rural communities. In fact, only 10 percent of physicians practice there.¹

To address medical provider shortages in rural communities, 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, regardless of where they live, to obtain a similar standard of care. Through research and development, ORH identifies, deploys and monitors Enterprise-Wide Initiatives. This national approach delivers standard care and services closer to home to the more than 2.7 million rural Veterans enrolled in VA’s health care system.

In fiscal year 2017, ORH used 30 percent of its budget ($74 million) to fund 17 initiatives that provided specialty care to rural Veterans at 377 VA medical sites nationwide. These programs increase rural Veterans’ access to geriatric, mental health, rehabilitation, pharmacy, intensivist and other specialty care services. Specialty care Enterprise-Wide Initiatives include:

**Tele-ICU**

Tele-ICUs use technology to connect VA facilities with VA intensivists nationwide to increase rural Veterans’ access to ICU services. The specialist uses the advanced technology to evaluate the patient and order medicines, labs and/or x-rays. Video cameras are used to view the patient, and the remote tele-ICU staff can use microphones to talk to the bedside nurse, doctor, or patient.

**Neurology**

To increase rural Veterans’ access to neurological care, ORH expanded VA’s tele-stroke program. This Enterprise-Wide Initiative delivers emergency stroke care via telehealth by qualified neurologists to Veterans with stroke symptoms in VA emergency departments that do not have stroke neurologists on site.

**Pharmacy**

Clinical pharmacy specialist providers deliver greater access to medication and chronic disease management services, sometimes using telehealth technology to bring experts into the Veteran's home, within a VA medical center, or to VA community based outpatient clinics.

**Geriatrics**

Fifty-seven percent of rural Veterans who rely on VA health care are 65 years or older. The Geriatric Scholars Program addresses geriatrician shortages through targeted education for rural health care providers, clinical pharmacists, social workers and psychologists. This initiative incorporates educational courses, virtual mentoring by specialists and clinical training exercises to increase geriatric care expertise throughout the local care team.
Mental Health

Due to travel barriers and specialist shortages, many rural Veterans rely on their primary care physicians for mental health support or may forgo mental health care altogether.² ORH’s tele-mental health hubs connect mental health specialists with VA’s rural sites of care to deliver same-day or urgent access to mental health services to rural Veterans.

Cardiac Rehabilitation

Treatment for chronic health conditions often requires repeat visits, which can create significant time and financial burdens for rural Veterans and their caregivers who have to travel long distances to access health care. The home-based cardiac rehabilitation program allows practitioners to connect with patients via phone, rather than requiring recurring in-person visits. Results showed rural patients who used this home-based rehabilitation reported higher levels of satisfaction and were more likely to complete the program.

Watch a 3 minute home-based cardiac rehabilitation video at www.ruralhealth.va.gov/newsroom/background.asp

1 Office of Rural Health, Rural Healthcare Workforce infosheet, September 2016.

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.