



Provider shortages, long distances to health care facilities and few transportation options often hinder Veterans from obtaining timely, quality care for those who live in rural communities. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) uses telehealth technology to overcome those challenges and deliver timely, high-quality services close to home for the more than 2.7 million rural Veterans who rely on the VA for health care.

The largest provider of telehealth services in the country, VA conducted more than 2.1 million telehealth encounters with Veteran patients, 45 percent of whom were rural.¹ Rural Veterans use telehealth to access high-quality clinical care from their homes or from clinical locations closer to where they live. This is especially important for rural Veterans who face long travel times and health care provider shortages.

In 2017, VA's Office of Rural Health (ORH) funded 23 enterprise wide telehealth initiatives totaling \$106 million to build rural-focused health care solutions that enable Veterans, regardless of where they live, to obtain safe effective health care in remote VA facilities or even in their homes. A small part of the VA's larger telehealth program, these rural focused programs alone reached more than 327,000 Veterans across the country.

Rural Telehealth by the Numbers

- ▶ Telehealth is available at 900 VA sites of care with 45%² of rural Veterans accessing telehealth services in specialty areas such as mental health, radiology, neurology, ophthalmology, and primary care
- ▶ Telehealth visits between a rural Veteran and a VA primary care physician or specialist (clinical video telehealth) have increased more than 352 percent in the past seven years³
- ▶ Rural Veterans accounted for 55 percent of all clinical video telehealth encounters in 2016³
- ▶ The number of rural Veterans who used home telemonitoring has increased 151 percent since 2009³
- ▶ Technology could save rural patients an estimated average of \$41,000 a year in travel costs and lost wages⁴

The Office of Rural Health Funded Telehealth Enterprise-Wide Initiatives

- ▶ *Teleprimary Care*
- ▶ *Telemental Health Hubs*
- ▶ *Teledermatology*
- ▶ *Telerehabilitation*
- ▶ *Tele-ICU*
- ▶ *Remote Home Based Delivery of Cardiac Rehabilitation*
- ▶ *Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes (VA-ECHO) Expansion in Specialty Care*
- ▶ *Rural Veterans TeleRehabilitation Initiative*
- ▶ *National Teleradiology Program*
- ▶ *State Veterans Homes Telehealth Initiative*
- ▶ *Clinical Video Telehealth (CVT) for Multiple Sclerosis Care*
- ▶ *CVT Patient Tablets Program*
- ▶ *Genomic Counseling Services for Rural Families*
- ▶ *Military Sexual Trauma Web Based Therapy*
- ▶ *National Telemental Health Center*
- ▶ *National Telestroke Program*
- ▶ *Precision Oncology Program*
- ▶ *Sleep Telemedicine*
- ▶ *Technology Based Eye Care Services*
- ▶ *Telehealth Collaborative Care for Rural Veterans with HIV Infection*
- ▶ *Telehealth Equipment Modernization*
- ▶ *VA-ECHO Transgender*
- ▶ *Vets Prevail Web Based Behavioral Support*

Emerging Issues

Telehealth is a field with significant potential, but its success depends on the availability of supporting infrastructure. Access to the internet, limited in some rural and highly rural communities, is crucial to expand telehealth care further. VA is working to expand telehealth programs to more rural communities

ORH works closely with the Office of Connected Care, which oversees three modalities of telehealth:

Clinical Video Telehealth

Rural Veterans at local VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics or even from their own homes connect with VA primary care physicians or specialists through a secure video link. This model can be especially useful for homebound rural Veterans or for those without reliable transportation.

Home Telemonitoring

Clinicians and case managers use simple technology to remotely monitor health data from rural Veterans' homes to track conditions such as blood sugar levels, blood oxygen, blood pressure, or even to check on progress in a home-based rehabilitation program. Home telemonitoring is ideal for Veterans with chronic health problems that need continual monitoring, are complex in nature and where getting treatment facilities is inconvenient.

Store and Forward Telehealth

Providers electronically send images, sounds and videos to be evaluated by experts thousands of miles away. Some specialty examples include retinal imaging, dermatology, wound care, spirometry and sleep studies.

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Connected Care, September 2016.

² Veteran Health Administration Telehealth Data

³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Connected Care, September 2016.

⁴ <http://www.frs.org/images/AnticipatingEconomicReturnsOfRuralTelehealth.pdf>

⁵ <https://healthtechmagazine.net/article/2017/08/va-plans-telemedicine-expansion-reach-more-rural-veterans>

⁶ <https://fcw.com/articles/2017/08/03/va-telehealth-white-house.aspx>

"We're removing geography as a barrier so that we can speed up access to Veterans and really honor our commitment to them."⁵ Secretary of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin, M.D. said. He further emphasized, "That means we're going to be able to use VA providers in cities where there are a lot of doctors, and be able to use those doctors to help our Veterans in rural areas where there aren't many healthcare professionals."⁶

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.

