

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs



Caring for Veterans in Rural Communities



VA Office of Rural Health



Care for Veterans in Rural Communities

Rural Health

77%
of rural
communities

currently experience shortages in primary care providers, which impacts the health care of nearly 25 percent of Americans. There are also shortages of specialty providers. For example, there are only 16 psychologists per 100,000 rural patients. Compounding this issue are rural Veterans' long drive times to care facilities, limited options for integrated health care, lack of public transportation, limited broadband access and socioeconomic challenges. Combined, these factors can impede the wellness of rural individuals and ultimately the community.

Rural Veterans

5.1
million rural
Veterans

or about one quarter of all Veterans in the United States return from active military careers to reside in rural communities. Veterans choose rural communities for a variety of reasons, such as closer proximity to family, friends and community; open space for recreation; more privacy; lower cost of living; or less crowded towns and schools. While they enjoy the benefits of rural living, these Veterans may also experience typical challenges accessing health care in rural areas such as provider shortages, distance to obtain care and lack of transportation options. These rural challenges may be exacerbated by injuries or illnesses related to one's military service.

Enrolled Rural Veterans in 2016

- ▶ 57% 65 or older
- ▶ 6% women
- ▶ 9% racial or ethnic minorities, with 1% Native Veterans/Alaska Natives
- ▶ 55% earn an annual household income of less than \$35,000
- ▶ Vermont, Maine, Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota had the highest percentage of enrolled Veterans in rural communities

Rural Solutions

In 2006, Congress passed legislation (Public Law 109-461, Sec. 212) to establish the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH). Congress recognized that the traditional model of health care delivery that stemmed from urban and suburban communities does not always work in rural communities due to provider shortages, geographic barriers and transportation challenges – among other barriers to care. Every year, 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. ORH invests in primary care, mental health, specialty care, transportation, and workforce training and education at 98 percent of VA medical centers. Fiscal year 2017 solutions include:



Increase access to providers: ORH funded 22 telehealth initiatives (\$102 million) at 609 VA sites of care to provide mental health, radiology, neurology, ophthalmology and primary care locally to rural Veterans. **Ten rural telemental health hubs** offer mental health **services to 18,000 Veterans**, many in rural communities, through approximately 165 spoke sites.



Increase rural workforce clinical skills: ORH funded seven training initiatives (\$12 million) at 51 VA medical sites to enable more local providers to deliver fundamental geriatric, obstetrics and gynecology, nephrology, and psychiatry specialty care services. More than **10,000 provider, staff and student attendees completed training** to support rural Veteran care.



Increase transportation assistance: ORH funded a transportation program (\$17 million) at 40 VA sites of care to reduce the travel burden experienced by rural Veterans due to distance, geography and lack of public transportation. Nearly **43,000 unique rural Veterans used ORH-provided transportation services** in fiscal year 2017.

▶ 11% served in Operation Iraqi Freedom/
Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation New
Dawn

▶ 35% service-related disability rating of 30%
or greater

▶ 48% of VA telehealth patients

▶ 25% do not access the internet

▶ Top diagnoses are hypertension, diabetes,
gastroesophageal reflux, depression, heart
disease and posttraumatic stress disorder

*“From my home, it’s 98 miles to the White River Junction VA Medical Center. But since I’ve been placed in a wheelchair, **my life has been made a lot easier** getting to the VA with the VA Transportation Service.”*

— R. Stetson, rural Veteran

Vision

America’s Veterans thrive in rural communities.

Mission

To improve the health and well-being of rural Veterans by increasing access to care and services.

Strategic Goals

- ▶ Promote health and well-being in the rural Veteran population
- ▶ Generate and diffuse knowledge regarding rural Veterans’ health
- ▶ Strengthen community health care infrastructure where rural Veterans reside
- ▶ Inform health care policy that impacts rural Veterans and rural health delivery

Sources

- *Rural Health Research and Policy Centers*
- *VA Office of the Actuary, fiscal year 2016*
- *VHA Support Service Center, fiscal year 2016*
- *VA Survey of Veteran Enrollees, 2016*

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Learn more at www.ruralhealth.va.gov

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