

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

**OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH
ANNUAL REPORT**



THRIVE 2015



**The U.S. Department of
Veterans Affairs Office
of Rural Health strives
to eliminate the barriers
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increasing access to care.**

—Gina Capra
Director, Office of Rural Health

Thrive 2015

The rural communities I've visited are champions of the values that make America great—among them patriotism, close family ties and hard work. Despite these strengths, Veterans living in rural areas face challenges.



The disparity between health services available in urban hubs versus rural areas is impossible to ignore. For some, the gap is physical: long travel distances with limited public transit options mean more missed appointments. For others, unseen barriers block access to quality health care: too few specialists and uncertainty about enrollment eligibility keeps Veterans from services. Yet others struggle with social well-being in rural communities, where housing, educational and employment options may be limited.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health strives to eliminate these barriers between rural Veterans and the services they have earned and deserve, thus improving Veterans' health and wellbeing by increasing access to care. Thrive 2015 reflects our goal to not only help rural Veterans, but to see them flourish.

In fiscal year 2015, the Office of Rural Health supported nearly 600 programs that increased Veterans' access to health care and services. Our programs focused on the issues facing rural Veterans: expanding transportation, telehealth and community clinics, while training more providers and supporting specialty programs in mental health, geriatrics, oncology, stroke rehab and women's health.

We recognize that challenges of this scale cannot be overcome alone. This year, the Office of Rural Health implemented the Rural Veteran Coordination Pilot, forging new partnerships with state and community organizations to support rural Veterans and their families as they transition from military to civilian life.

In fiscal year 2015, the Office of Rural Health also supported the Veterans Choice Program and Project ARCH, Access Received Closer to Home, which connect eligible Veterans with community providers nearby.

Finally, this year we formalized an innovative way for rural practitioners to share emerging knowledge through the Rural Promising Practices initiative. This solidifies a legacy of rural health learning that can drive better care inside and beyond VA facilities.

The Office of Rural Health works tirelessly to make sure Veterans can access high-quality care and services. I come from a family with generations of military service. For me, and for so many other Americans, this mission is paramount. I hope you'll join us and continue to follow our progress in the years to come.

Gina Capra
Director, Office of Rural Health



Who We Serve

The term *rural* is a complex concept that may look and feel very different across the country. The Office of Rural Health determines rurality based on population density and commuting patterns. This measurement allows for a nuanced understanding of how far certain communities are from metropolitan areas and services like health care.

Veterans are more likely to live in rural areas than Americans who didn't serve in the military.

18%
of Americans live
in rural areas.

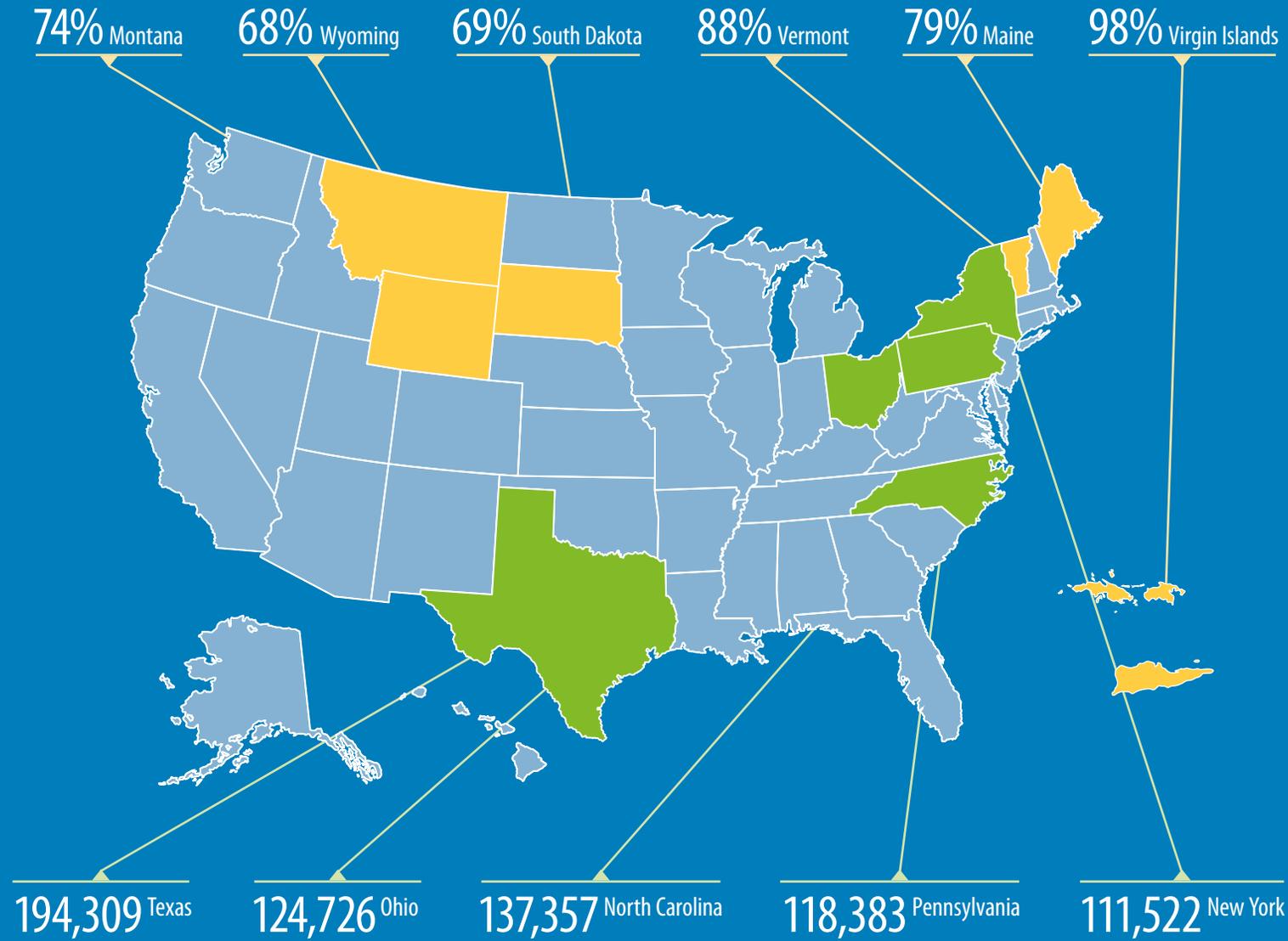
23%
of all Veterans live
in rural areas.

More than **3 million**
rural Veterans rely on VA for care.

Data collected from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Health Resources and Services Administration and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

5.2 million Veterans live in rural communities across the United States.

Highest percentage of rural vs. urban Veterans



Most enrolled rural Veterans by numbers



Rural Veterans are a unique group with specific needs.

- ▶ More than half (56 percent) of rural Veterans enrolled in VA health care are 65 years or older.
- ▶ A small but growing number of enrolled rural Veterans are women (6 percent total).
- ▶ Overall, 8 percent of enrolled rural Veterans report being racial or ethnic minorities.
- ▶ Four in ten rural Veterans have at least one service-connected disability.
- ▶ About 30 percent of rural Veterans enrolled in VA health care served in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Rural Veterans contend with diagnoses that may be complicated by military service experience.

- ▶ High blood pressure
- ▶ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- ▶ Type II Diabetes
- ▶ Depressive disorder
- ▶ One or more service-related disabilities

Rural life comes with lots of benefits.

- ▶ Close family and community ties
- ▶ More open space for recreation and privacy
- ▶ Lower cost of living
- ▶ Less crowded towns and schools
- ▶ Value and culture of military service

Living in rural areas also comes with challenges.

It may be difficult for rural Veterans to access quality health care and other services.

- ▶ Long driving distances
- ▶ Fewer health care providers and nurses per capita
- ▶ Limited broadband Internet
- ▶ Fewer housing and job options
- ▶ Lower average household income

In fact, 43 percent of rural Veterans earn an annual income of less than \$26,000.

We envision a time when Veterans thrive in rural communities. Understanding demographic trends and the unique needs of rural Veterans allows the Office of Rural Health to support programs and innovations that directly address these challenges.

43%
of rural Veterans do not have broad band internet access at home. This may be due to choice, limited income, or lack of availability, all of which limit accessibility to online health care supports.

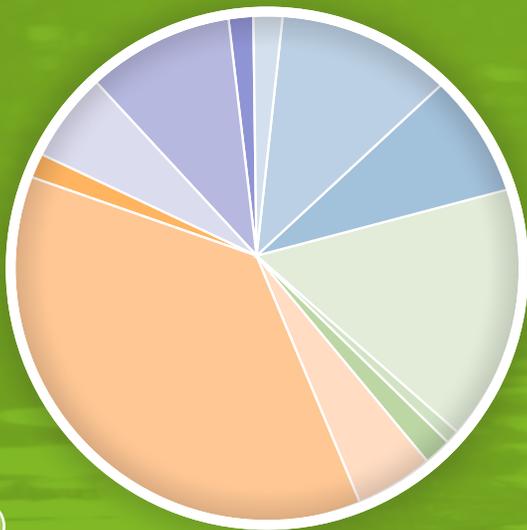
Making a Difference

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) studies, innovates and implements creative solutions to increase access to health care and services.

ORH supported a combination of innovative local pilots and national initiatives that numbered more than 600 in fiscal year 2015. That included **1,851** clinical and non-clinical care providers dedicated to working with rural Veterans. In 2015, ORH applied more than **\$239 million** to projects that increased access to care and services for Veterans who reside in rural areas of the United States.

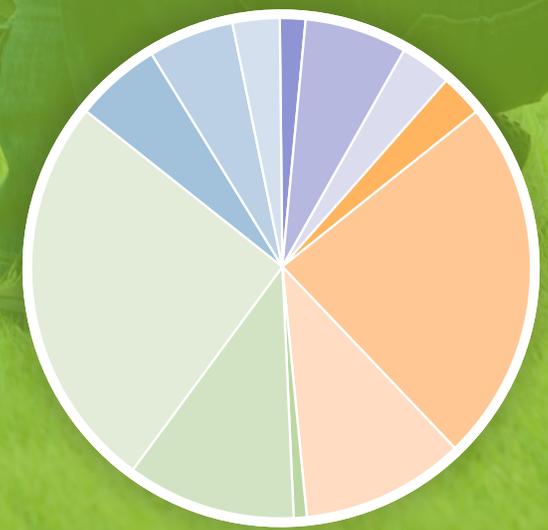


NUMBER OF PROGRAMS IN FISCAL YEAR 2015



EXPENDITURES IN FISCAL YEAR 2015
(IN MILLIONS)

13	Health Information Technology	\$7.5
66	Mental Health	\$13
46	Outreach	\$12.4
91	Primary Care	\$59.7
5	Project ARCH	\$25.1
10	Research, Investigations, Program Evaluation and Studies	\$1.9
27	Site of Care	\$24.6
216	Specialty Care	\$54.6
9	Veteran Transportation	\$6.1
37	VTS Partnership	\$7.7
58	Workforce Training and Education	\$15.6
9	Other	\$3.6
587	TOTAL	\$232



Highlights: Field Innovations

From more accurate lung cancer screening to specialized mental health services for American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans, the Office of Rural Health helps pioneer hundreds of new health care projects that bring care closer to home for rural Veterans. ORH supports projects that are proposed by local staff in VA Medical Centers and Community Based Outpatient Clinics across the country.

Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers in Salt Lake City, Utah, Iowa City, Iowa, and Gainesville, Florida, serve as ORH's on-the-ground hubs for program innovation, study and dissemination of new models of care.

Highlights: National Impacts

The Office of Rural Health increases rural Veterans' access to health care with nationwide programs, including workforce development, technology innovations and programs that address the social determinants of health some examples include: The Rural Provider and Staff Training Initiative funded education for medical students, psychologists, nurse practitioners, social workers and dentists—all of whom build a stronger network of care for Veterans living in rural areas.

The National Teleradiology Program allows small rural VA facilities to remotely access a radiologist 24-hours a day. Radiologists remotely reviewed and interpreted 104,872 patient images from 21 rural clinics in fiscal year 2014.

The Rural Veteran Transportation Program Partnership, with the support of the Veterans Health Administration Chief Business Office, continued to help rural Veterans overcome long travel distances. In fiscal year 2015, ORH funding helped save more than 5 million Veteran patient miles and facilitated more than 197,000 one-way patient trips. The transportation service is operational at 97 facilities, with additional sites planned for the future years.

The Virtual Lifetime Electronic Records Rural Health Community Coordinator Partnership allows rural Veterans and their private sector care providers to safely and effectively exchange patient health data, which makes it easier for VA and community partners to coordinate care to best serve Veterans.

The Specialty Care Access Network-Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes program allows a team of experts at an urban center to virtually lecture interested clinicians on specialized topics. Then the listeners, many of whom are rural primary care physicians, can present case studies from their local facilities and ask questions of the specialty team, digitally "doing rounds" from thousands of miles of away.



“Innovation in rural health care and service delivery at both the local and national levels is the key to meaningful improvement in access for rural Veterans in the communities where they live.”

—Thomas Klobucar,
Deputy Director, Office of Rural Health



Increasing Access

Rural Promising Practices

ORH endorses its strongest emerging projects as Rural Promising Practices to rapidly share new, evaluated models that are successfully increasing rural Veterans' access to care.

The Rural Promising Practices initiative:

- ▶ Expands health care access for rural Veterans
- ▶ Shares institutional knowledge among health experts inside and beyond the VA network
- ▶ Mentors other rural practitioners so they can implement promising programs
- ▶ Contributes to long-term improvements in rural health care

When a care team in one VA facility implements a pilot project, they carefully track how it improves outcomes for rural Veterans. The rigorous review process checks to ensure the program meets six Rural Promising Practices criteria:

- ▶ Increased Access
- ▶ Strong Partnerships and Working Relationships
- ▶ Evidence of Clinical Impact
- ▶ Return on Investment
- ▶ Operational Feasibility
- ▶ Customer Satisfaction

Rural Promising Practices Identified in 2015

- ▶ COVER to COVER: Connecting Older Veterans (Especially Rural) to Community or Veteran Eligible Resources
- ▶ Geriatric Scholars Program
- ▶ Telehealth Collaborative Care for Rural Veterans with HIV
- ▶ Telehealth Comprehensive Care to Rural Veterans with Multiple Sclerosis
- ▶ Telemental Health Clinics for Rural Native American Veterans
- ▶ Telephone-Based Cardiac Rehabilitation
- ▶ Training Community Clergy Partners to Improve Access to Care for Rural Veterans

Congressional Direction

The United States Congress is committed to expanding access to health care for rural Veterans. The Office of Rural Health implements congressionally mandated programs, including provision of the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014.

The Veterans Choice Program originated from the Veterans Choice Act, which Congress passed in 2014. ORH plays an integral role in implementing the Program, encouraging rural community providers to enroll and ensuring rural Veterans are educated about their care options.

Project ARCH connects Veterans in Virginia, Kansas, Maine, Montana and Arizona with community-based care. From fiscal year 2012 through fiscal year 2015, ORH committed \$97 million to this program.

Partnership Spotlight: The Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot

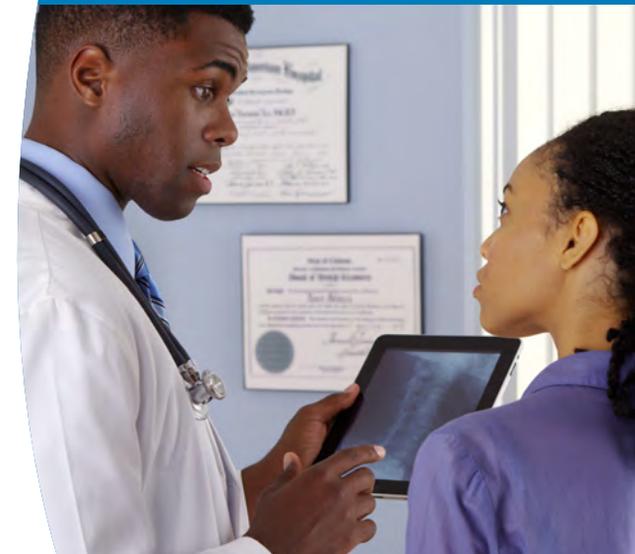
The Rural Veterans Coordination Pilot (RVCP) funds state agencies and local nonprofits that enhance the well-being of rural Veterans and their families during transition from military service. Five grantees were chosen from nearly 100 submissions. From finding a house off-base, to getting a civilian job or enrolling in VA health care, 25,000 Veterans and their families are expected to benefit from these ORH-supported programs.

- ▶ The **Maine Department of Labor** connects Veterans with career counselors who identify opportunities and help translate military skills to good civilian jobs.
- ▶ The **Nebraska Association of Local Health Directors** trains local health departments and community organizations to address Veteran-specific needs.
- ▶ The **New Mexico Department of Veteran Services** arranges job counseling, benefits advice and free mental health services to transitioning military families.
- ▶ The **Volunteers of America of North Louisiana** organizes telemedicine care and housing for rural Veterans and their families in four states.
- ▶ **WestCare Washington** provides health services, benefits advice and 24/7 phone counseling to Veterans and their families in Oregon and Washington.

In the first nine months of fiscal year 2015, 336 new community partnerships were established by RVCP grantees to support rural Veterans and their families.

“I have the unique privilege to serve and help the same people that I shop with, that my kids go to school with. These are not just clients to me—they and their respective families are my friends, and that is precious to me.”

—Nathan Rogers, Marine Veteran and Veterans’ benefit navigator for WestCare Washington’s Home Base initiative, on RVCP grantee



Building the Future

This year—eight years since its establishment—the Office of Rural Health launched a new strategic plan suited to the dynamic rural health landscape. The plan began with collaboration, calling together leaders and experts from federal agencies, VA program offices, Veteran Service Organizations and rural health groups to build a nuanced blueprint with measureable objectives. The plan plots a course that ORH will use to guide its priorities through fiscal year 2019. Partnerships within and beyond VA are an essential ingredient for ORH to succeed in its four major goals.

ORH's new strategic plan will help VA provide all Veterans with personalized, proactive, patient-centered care, regardless of where they live. Collaboration is essential to implement this plan and developing innovative and creative ways to serve rural Veterans.



Strategic Plan Goals

1. Promote the health and well-being of rural Veterans.

- ▶ Increase usage of VA's existing resources
- ▶ Expand rural providers' access to VA resources and training
- ▶ Decrease rural/urban health disparities
- ▶ Educate rural Veterans and their families about how and where to access existing resources

2. Generate and diffuse knowledge about rural Veteran health to improve access to quality care.

- ▶ Fund and evaluate pilot projects
- ▶ Increase the dissemination of Rural Promising Practices and innovations

3. Build partnerships to strengthen community health care infrastructure where rural Veterans reside.

- ▶ Support and train the rural workforce
- ▶ Support cost-effective and high-quality specialty and primary care services
- ▶ Innovate and use health information technology
- ▶ Enhance and expand health information exchange
- ▶ Increase capacity for non-institutional care



4. Inform health care policy that impacts rural Veterans and rural health care delivery.

- ▶ Increase integration of rural health issues into VA policies and planning
- ▶ Elevate awareness of the unique needs of rural Veterans in health care delivery

Measuring Success

To track the impact of these strategies, and to allow for real-time adjustments based on the evolving needs of Veterans, ORH will closely monitor a range of metrics in the years to come. These include:

- ▶ Customer satisfaction
- ▶ Employee satisfaction
- ▶ Overall impact
- ▶ Quality and timeliness of operations



Helping Hands

The VA Office of Rural Health is grateful to all the partners that helped formulate and launch its new strategic plan in fiscal year 2015.



Our heartfelt gratitude goes to representatives from the following organizations:

- ▶ National Rural Health Association
- ▶ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- ▶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration, Office of Rural Health Policy

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

- ▶ Chief Business Office
- ▶ Employee Education System
- ▶ Health Services Research & Development Service
- ▶ Healthcare Talent Management Office
- ▶ Homeless Office
- ▶ National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
- ▶ Office of Academic Affiliations
- ▶ Office of Community Engagement
- ▶ Office of Economic Opportunity
- ▶ Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care Services
- ▶ Office of Health Equity
- ▶ Office of Interagency Health Affairs
- ▶ Office of Mental Health Services
- ▶ Office Network Support
- ▶ Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation
- ▶ Office of Patient Care Services
- ▶ Office of Policy and Planning
- ▶ Office of Public Health
- ▶ Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
- ▶ Office of Telehealth Services
- ▶ Office of Transportation Services
- ▶ Office of Workforce Management
- ▶ Veterans and Consumer Health Informatics Office
- ▶ Veterans Rural Health Resource Center—Central Region
- ▶ Veterans Rural Health Resource Center—Eastern Region
- ▶ Veterans Rural Health Resource Center—Western Region
- ▶ Voluntary Services
- ▶ Women Veterans Health Care

Stay tuned

The Office of Rural Health accomplished much this year and our plans for fiscal year 2016 are just as exciting: in the coming year, ORH will form a National Rural Evaluation Center to assess rural health care needs across America. ORH will also continue to build strong community partnerships and advocate on behalf of rural Veterans.

Watch our award-winning video, “Caring for Rural Veterans,” and continue to follow ORH throughout the year at www.ruralhealth.va.gov

VA



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of Veterans Affairs



1100 1st Street NE
Washington, DC 20002

202-632-8578, Ext: 1928

email: rural.health.inquiry@va.gov

www.ruralhealth.va.gov