

**One in every five Veterans returns from combat with at least one serious mental health issue.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, civilian life may also 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.<sup>2</sup> Rural Veterans are more likely to have current or lifetime depression, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and ethnicity.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, rural Veterans are at significantly higher risk of suicide.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> In fact, more than 85 percent of rural residents live in a mental health professional shortage area.<sup>6</sup> Rural community providers report feeling less knowledgeable than urban providers about PTSD, substance abuse, depression and suicide treatments.<sup>7-8</sup> 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), along with its partners, creates and implements national programs known as enterprise-wide initiatives. ORH's mental health enterprise-wide initiatives aim to 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.

- ▶ **The Rural Expansion of National Telemental Health Center** extends expert subspecialty telemental health services to rural VA facilities to increase rural Veterans' access to expert clinical recommendations and therapy.
- ▶ **Rural Expansion of Social Work in Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT)** promotes the integration of rural social workers into the PACT model to improve care coordination for rural Veterans with their interdisciplinary care teams.

Rural Veterans have greater odds of having current and lifetime depression than their peers who live in urban areas and face higher rates of suicide. They may also face greater access challenges when seeking mental health support.

- ▶ **Web-Based Behavioral Support through VetsPrevail.org**, a web-based intervention, combines principles of cognitive behavioral therapy with interactive e-learning techniques to provide all Veterans with tools to overcome mental health challenges such as depression or PTSD.

Additionally, ORH identifies and disseminates beneficial and cost-effective rural service delivery programs through its Rural Promising Practices program. Community Clergy Training to Support Rural Veterans' Mental Health, an ORH Rural Promising Practice, increases Veterans' access to mental health care in rural communities by educating local religious leaders about the signs of mental health difficulties and teaching them how to make referrals to VA.

Innovative collaborations like these as well as telehealth technology and workforce integration will continue to help close the gap between urban and rural Veterans seeking mental health treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> RAND National Security Research Division (2008). *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences and Services to Assist Recovery*. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Massey, C. et al. (2010). Improving Diabetes Care in Rural Communities: An Overview of Current Initiatives and a Call for Renewed Efforts. *Clinical Diabetes*. 28(1): 20-27.

<sup>3</sup> Dittrich, K. et al. (2015). A Population-based Cross-sectional Study Comparing Depression and Health Service Deficits Between Rural and Nonrural U.S. Military Veterans. 180(4): 428-435.

<sup>4</sup> McCarthy, J. et al. (2012). Suicide Among Patients in the Veterans Affairs Health System: Rural–Urban Differences in Rates, Risks, and Methods. *American Journal of Public Health*. 102(Suppl 1):S111–S117.

<sup>5</sup> American Psychological Association via Dail, P. (2015). *Hard Living in America's Heartland: Rural Poverty in the 21st Century Midwest*, pp. 186.

<sup>6</sup> Smalley, K. et al. (2010). Rural Mental Health and Psychological Treatment: A Review for Practitioners. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 66(5): 479-489.

<sup>7</sup> Boscarino, J. et al. (2010). Mental Health Experiences and Needs Among Primary Care Providers Treating OEF/OIF Veterans: Preliminary Findings from the Geisinger Veterans Initiative. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health and Human Resilience*. 12(3): 161-170.

<sup>8</sup> Kilpatrick, D. et al. (2011). *Serving those who have served: Educational needs of health care providers working with military members, veterans, and their families*. Charleston, SC: Medical University of South Carolina Department of Psychiatry, National Crime Victims Research & Treatment Center.

## Office of Rural Health

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) implements a targeted, solution-driven approach to increase access to care for the 3 million Veterans living in rural communities who rely on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for health care. As VA's lead advocate for rural Veterans, ORH works to see that America's Veterans thrive in rural communities. To accomplish this, ORH leverages its resources to increase rural Veterans' access to care and services. To learn more, visit [www.ruralhealth.va.gov](http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov).