

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

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. These initiatives, some of which increase Veterans' access to specialty care in rural communities, aim to provide programmatic support at VA medical centers that serve rural Veterans through geriatrics, mental health, rehabilitation and other specialty care services. Additionally, ORH identifies and disseminates beneficial and cost-effective rural service delivery programs through its Rural Promising Practices program.

Geriatrics

Rural populations are older overall compared to urban and suburban populations. In fact, 57 percent of rural Veterans who rely on VA for care are 65 years or older.² These older adults often face age-related health challenges like chronic disease and disability, which are exacerbated in rural communities because fewer geriatricians practice there. The Geriatric Scholars Program, an ORH Rural Promising Practice, addresses this gap in specialty care 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 address gaps in rural providers' medical knowledge to better serve aging Veterans closer to home.

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 all together.³ ORH's Telemental Health Hubs connect mental health specialists with VA's rural sites of care where Veterans require same-day or urgent access to mental health services, and where access is limited. Also, the Telephone Lifestyle Coaching program promotes individual patient change in a variety of health and lifestyle behaviors that can impact mental health, including healthy eating, physical activity, obesity control, tobacco cessation, and stress management.

**Only about 10 percent
of physicians practice
in rural areas, even
though a third of
Veterans who rely on
VA for care live there.**

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. As part of its Rural Promising Practices initiative, ORH funds a home-based cardiac rehabilitation program that allows practitioners to connect with patients via phone, rather than requiring recurring in-person visits. Results showed both health outcomes and costs were comparable with in-person programs, with no negative impacts from remote care. In fact, 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

“I think that cardiac telehealth is a great help to patients in a rural setting. We have the ability to access more patients and the home-based cardiac program can empower the patient to have them develop some sense of confidence that they can exercise, that they can overcome some of their impediments and go on to be more functional.”

—Dr Erik Funk, Noninvasive Cardiologist at the Manchester, New Hampshire VA Medical Center

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

² Veterans Health Administration Support Service Center Enrollment Cube, fiscal year 2015.

³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Office of Rural Health. “Rural Promising Practice: Community Clergy Training to Support Rural Veterans’ Mental Health.” May 2016.

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.



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs