

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) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) uses telehealth technology to overcome those challenges and deliver timely, high-quality services close to home for the more than 2.8 million rural Veterans who rely on VA for health care.

The largest provider of telehealth services in the country, VA conducted more than 2.18 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, VHA's Office of Rural Health (ORH) funded 24 enterprise wide telehealth initiatives totaling \$106.4 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 VHA's larger telehealth program, these rural focused programs alone reached more than 140,000 Veterans across the country.

Rural Telehealth by the Numbers

- ▶ Telehealth is available at 989 VA sites of care where 51 percent of encounters are² 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 289 percent in the past eight years³
- ▶ Rural Veterans accounted for 55 percent of all clinical video telehealth encounters in 2017³
- ▶ The number of rural Veterans who used home telemonitoring has increased 122 percent since 2009³
- ▶ Technology could save rural patients an estimated average of \$52,000 a year in travel costs and lost wages⁴

ORH-Funded Telehealth Enterprise-Wide Initiatives

- ▶ *Telehealth Equipment Modernization*
- ▶ *VA Video Connect CVT Patient Tablet Program*
- ▶ *Military Sexual Trauma Web Based Therapy*
- ▶ *National Telemental Health Center*
- ▶ *Telemental Health Hubs*
- ▶ *Teleprimary Care*
- ▶ *Clinical Video Telehealth for Multiple Sclerosis Care*
- ▶ *Genomic Counseling Services for Rural Families*
- ▶ *National Teleradiology Program*
- ▶ *National Telestroke Program*
- ▶ *Precision Oncology Program*
- ▶ *Remote Home-Based Delivery of Cardiac Rehabilitation*
- ▶ *Rural Veterans TeleRehabilitation Initiative*
- ▶ *Sleep Telemedicine*
- ▶ *State Veterans Homes Telehealth Initiative*
- ▶ *Technology Based Eye Care Services*
- ▶ *Teleaudiology*
- ▶ *Teledermatology*
- ▶ *Telehealth Collaborative Care for Rural Veterans with HIV Infection*
- ▶ *TeleICU*
- ▶ *Telerehabilitation*
- ▶ *VA-ECHO Expansion in Specialty Care*
- ▶ *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.

Anywhere to Anywhere

VA continues to work to expand telehealth access through the 'Anywhere to Anywhere' initiative, a new federal rule that allows VA doctors, nurses and other health-care providers to administer care to Veterans using telehealth, or virtual technology, regardless of where in the United States the provider or Veteran is located, including when care will occur across state lines or outside a VA facility.

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

► Clinical Video Telehealth

Rural Veterans at home or at local VA Community Based Outpatient Clinics 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 2017.

² Veteran Health Administration Telehealth Data, 2017.

³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Connected Care, September 2017.

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

Office of Rural Health

Congress established the Veterans Health Administration Office of Rural Health (ORH) in 2006 (38 USC § 7308) to conduct, coordinate, promote and disseminate research on issues that affect the nearly five million Veterans who reside in rural communities. The mandate also requires ORH to develop, refine and promulgate policies, best practices, lessons learned, and innovative and successful programs. Learn more at www.ruralhealth.va.gov.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health

Revised: November 2018

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