



## VETERANS RURAL HEALTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

April 17-18, 2019  
Iowa City, Iowa  
8:15 AM – 5:45 PM

### NOTES

#### Attendees:

##### **Committee Members Present:**

Dale Gibbs, Chair  
Graham Adams  
Andrew Behrman  
Stephanie Birdwell  
Angeline Bushy  
Francisco Ivarra  
Deanna Lamb  
Michael McLaughlin  
Brenda Moore  
Keith Mueller  
Joe Parsetich  
Lonnie Wangen

##### **Ex-Officio Members Present:**

Gary Bojes, U.S. Department of  
Agriculture  
Tom Morris, U.S. Department of Health  
and Human Services  
Ben Smith, Indian Health Service

##### **Presenters:**

Sherry Brewer  
Chuck Hanchett  
Lisa Irwin  
Peter Kaboli  
Dennis Oh  
Michael Ohl  
John Selby  
Fatma Simsek-Duran  
Fred Ullrich  
Xi Zhu  
Jaime Wilson

##### **Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Staff Present:**

Thomas Klobucar, Designated Federal  
Officer  
Anthony Achampong, Alternate  
Designated Federal Officer  
Judy Bowie, Committee Manager  
Byron Bair  
Judy Fristik  
Marsha Herke  
Bryant Howren  
Judith Johnson-Mekot  
Kelly Lora Lewis  
Robert McDivitt  
Victor Mizrachi  
Tammy Neff  
LaTonya Small  
Steve Smith  
Javed Tunio  
Carolyn Turvey  
Matt Vincenti  
Jaime Wilson  
Mark Yorek

##### **Consultants Present:**

Casey Hutchison  
Emily Oehler

**Public Attendees:**

Sophia Friedl, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee

Kara Carter

Cheryl Dyer

Ron Geiger

John Gaultier

Dale Henry

Rick Martin

Deborah Rubey

Heidi Tousignant

**Meeting Objectives**

- VRHAC will gain increased understanding of local Veteran care system and services.
- VRHAC will meet with local rural Veterans and obtain feedback on VA care – benefits and challenges.
- VRHAC will provide input into U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Rural Health's 2025 strategic plan.

**Wednesday, April 17, 2019**

**Presentation: Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO)**

*LaTonya Small, Program Specialist, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*

- Reviewed advisory committee resources and thanked the Committee for its work on behalf of the Secretary regarding rural Veterans' access to care

**Welcome, Introductions and Meeting Overview**

*Dale Gibbs, Chair, Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee*

- Convened the meeting, reviewed the meeting objectives, and stressed that the Committee serves the Secretary through the focus on national issues that impact rural Veterans' access to care

**Presentation: VA Midwest Health Care Network (VISN 23)**

*Robert McDivitt, Network Director, VA Midwest Health Care Network*

- Reviewed the footprint of the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 23 throughout Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota
- Explained the VISN 23 focus is to move care to where Veterans are located and some of those efforts are funded by the VA Office of Rural Health
- Provided major challenges including recruitment of primary care providers, licensed nurse practitioners, and surgeons; access to mental health care in rural areas; and limited connectivity to some Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC)
- Discussed associated solutions the VISN implemented such as a VISN-wide planning summit, clinician recruitment, Suicide Prevention Outreach and Education Specialists, and CBOC bandwidth upgrades
- Answered questions on geographical reach of the VISN Licensed Practical Nurse shortage; the role of nurse practitioners; employee demographics; Suicide Prevention Outreach and Education Specialists; Question, Persuade, Refer training for suicide prevention; and enrollment at rural CBOCs

**Presentation: Iowa City VA Health Care System**

*Judith Johnson-Mekota, Director, Iowa City VA Health Care System*

- Reviewed catchment area for the Iowa City VA Health Care System, sites of care, demographics of enrolled rural Veterans, and budget
- Provided information on key local initiatives that included community partnerships, telehealth expansion, and construction
- Shared major challenges such as engaging new enrollees in health care and services, cellular coverage in rural areas, and Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act, and suggested associated solutions such as a myth buster campaign, in-person/tele-town hall meetings, and VA / VA medical center contact wallet cards

- Answered questions about brain injury research, service enrollment, providers for un-enrolled Veterans, minority Veteran populations, and helping non-VA providers understand the MISSION Act

**Presentation: Office of Rural Health (ORH) Update**

*Thomas Klobucar, Executive Director, ORH*

- Provided enrolled rural Veteran demographics and comparative data against enrolled urban Veterans; highlighted that rural Veterans are more reliant on VA health care
- Reviewed ORH’s legislative mandate (38 USC § 7308) to research, innovate, and disseminate health care solutions that increase rural Veterans’ access to care
- Discussed the role of ORH’s Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers which resulted in 356 studies and innovations; 26 dissemination of innovations; and 617 manuscripts, briefs, and reports
- Explained fiscal year 2020 funding, with a multimillion-dollar allocation for implementation of clinical resource hubs to deliver primary and mental health care via telehealth, as well as providing surge support for in-person care
- Gave update on two pilot programs: Veteran Service Organization Wellness Centers and VA Farming and Recovery Mental Health Services (FARMS)
- Answered questions on status of previous recommendations and VA FARMS

**Presentation: Rural Scholars Fellowship**

*Michael Ohl, Rural Scholars Fellowship Director, Iowa City VA Health Care System; Sherry Brewer, Rural Scholars Fellow; and Jaime Wilson, Rural Scholars Fellow*

- Explained the Fellowship provides professional growth to VA providers (medical doctor, Advanced Practice Registered Nurse, or Physician Assistant) in rural communities through a two-year fellowship with virtual curriculum, a mentored innovation project, and networking
- The curriculum focuses on quality improvement and delivery innovation; leading change methods, measurement, and analysis; eHealth; rural health policy; professional networking; and Leadership Effectiveness Accountability and Development program participation
- Explained an outcome of this Fellowship will be a ground-level, rural-focused network that can provide a “bottom up” improvement model to integrate with top-down VISN leadership for a cohort of innovators
- Mentioned the Fellowship’s challenges (e.g., clinical coverage, leadership approval, mentorship), solutions, and proposed evaluation metrics
- Answered questions about program incentives, grassroots implementation models, marketing, and incentives for keeping fellows in the rural community

**Presentation: Medical Innovations in the Iowa City VA Health Care System**

*Javed Tunio, Chief of Staff, Iowa City VA Medical Center*

- Presented research and answered questions on two sleep apnea treatments

**Panel: ORH Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers' (VRHRC) Research**

*Carolyn Turvey, Clinical Director, VRHRC Iowa City, Iowa; Byron Bair, Clinical Director, VRHRC Salt Lake City, Utah; and Mathew Vincenti, Director, VRHRC White River Junction, Vermont*

- Explained ORH's research agenda that focuses on workforce, rural special populations, rural disparities, care coordination, rural access to care, operational adoption, practice infrastructure, and health policy
- Reviewed key research programs: opioid use disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder coordinated care between VA and Federally Qualified Healthcare Centers (FQHC), home-based telemedicine to improve diabetes care, postpartum depressed female Veterans, Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center consultation with CBOC providers, and community care within the MISSION Act
- Answered questions on Advanced Comprehensive Diabetes Care and community care usage by rural versus urban Veterans

**Panel: ORH-Funded Projects**

*Tele dermatology – Dennis Oh and John Selby; Rural Health Community Coordinators – Carolyn Turvey; Transitions Nurse Program – Lisa Irwin and Peter Kaboli; and Telemedicine for PTSD in Small Rural CBOCs – Fatma Simsek-Duran*

- Provided information and answered questions on the national ORH-funded Enterprise-Wide Initiatives that increase rural Veterans' access to care ([https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/providers/Enterprise\\_Wide\\_Initiatives.asp](https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/providers/Enterprise_Wide_Initiatives.asp))

**Panel: University of Iowa College of Public Health**

*Keith Mueller, Director, Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI); Xi Zhu, Investigator, RUPRI Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis; and Fred Ullrich, Research Specialist, RUPRI Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis*

- Presented data and key findings on access to care challenges for rural Veterans related to the Veterans Choice Program, and answered questions on rural hospital closures

**Presentation: Congressional Updates**

*Sophia Friedl, Legislative Assistant, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee*

- Provided update on MISSION Act, the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act, and the VA Tribal Advisory Committee Act
- Answered questions about the VA Tribal Advisory Committee Act timeline and Deborah Sampson Act reintroduction

**Discussion: Recap Day 1**

*Emily Oehler, Director, Grant Thornton*

- VRHAC reviewed highlights, concerns, and potential recommendations from the day's presentations

**Thursday, April 18, 2019**

**Strategic Planning Focus Group: Committee, Veterans, and Caregivers**

*Emily Oehler, Director, Grant Thornton*

*Eric Meade, Principal, Whole Mind Strategy Group*

- Participants provided and discussed solutions to increase rural Veterans' access to care

**Presentation: University of Iowa Military and Veteran Student Services**

*Matt Miller, Director, University of Iowa Military and Veteran Student Services and*

*Chuck Hanchett, Veteran Student, University of Iowa*

- Provided information and answered questions on how the Veteran Student services reaches and supports enrolled student Veterans

**Site Visit: VA Medical Center**

*Bryan Clark, Public Affairs Specialist, Iowa City VA Health Care System and Dave Lewis, Learning Manager, Iowa City VA Health Care System*

- Toured the Iowa City VA Medical Center

**Site Visit: Cedar Rapids Community Resource and Referral Center**

*Jen Smentek, Social Work Supervisor*

- Toured the Cedar Rapids Community Resource and Referral Center

**Site Visit: Cedar Rapids Vet Center**

*Rose Hulse, Director*

- Toured the Cedar Rapids Vet Center

**Site Visit: Cedar Rapids Community-Based Outpatient Clinic**

*Michele Carter, Primary Care Clinic Coordinator and Eugene Peterson, Program Specialist*

- Toured the Cedar Rapids Community-Based Outpatient Clinic

**Work Session**

*Dale Gibbs, Chair, VRHAC, and Emily Oehler, Director, Grant Thornton*

- Obtained input on Iowa meeting, key data points, and significant findings

**Meeting Recap and Evaluation**

*Emily Oehler, Director, Grant Thornton*

- Obtained input on meeting

**Public Comment Period**

*Dale Gibbs, Chair, VRHAC*

- No public comments