Message from the Director of the VHA Office of Rural Health

Promoting Health and Well-Being in the Rural Veteran Population

At the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH), we focus on four strategic goals that support our mission to improve the health and well-being of rural Veterans. In 2015, we worked with colleagues and rural health advocates within and outside of VA to develop these goals as part of our strategic planning process.

This issue of “The Rural Connection” includes articles related to our strategic goal to promote health and well-being in the rural Veteran population. You may be familiar with the Veterans Choice Act, which was designed to offer Veterans greater access to care in their communities. This is especially important to better the health and well-being for rural Veterans, who otherwise may need to travel long distances for care. Read about recent improvements to the Act in the Health Care Reform: Greater Health Care Access for Rural Veterans article on page 2.

Also, I am excited to hear about VA’s partnership with Walgreens to offer enrolled Veteran patients their seasonal flu shot for the second year in a row. This partnership will help many rural Veterans get a flu shot in a location that is more convenient for them. Read more in the VA-Walgreens Partnership Gives Veterans 8,000 More Locations for Flu Shots article on page 3.

In fiscal year 2016, as we begin year two of our five-year strategic plan, we are placing an increased emphasis on enterprise-wide initiatives. To us, this means finding solutions to rural health care delivery challenges that can be adopted in rural communities across the nation. One example is our work with VA’s Health Services Research and Development office to establish the National Rural Evaluation Center. The Center will conduct a thorough national rural Veterans needs assessment to learn more about gaps in care for rural Veterans. Read more in the New National Rural Evaluation Center to Study Rural Veterans’ Needs article on page 6.

In 2016, we will also continue to expand our Rural Promising Practices program. Through this program, we identify new models of care that help overcome rural health delivery challenges, and that show promise to be advantageous for other communities to adopt. Learn more in the Rural Promising Practices Program Identifies Innovative Models of Care article on page 4.

(Continued on page 2)
Message from the Director of the VHA Office of Rural Health (continued from page 1)

These are just a few great examples of how we bring our strategic plan to life.

We don’t just see our goals as words on paper, but rather the driving force behind all that we do every day to support our vision—that America’s Veterans thrive in rural communities.

To join our rural Veteran community, please contact ORH Communications at ORHcomms@va.gov.

This issue of “The Rural Connection” focuses on ways VA and its partners promote health and well-being in the rural Veteran population.

Health Care Reform: Greater Health Care Access for Rural Veterans
By Policy Analysis Team, Office of Policy and Planning, Veterans Health Administration

Great news for the uninsured population and Veterans living in rural communities with limited access to health care providers and services. If you are a Veteran enrolled in, or eligible for, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care services, the Veterans Choice Act of 2014 and Choice Improvement Act of 2015 were created to offer you greater access to care in your community. If you are a Veteran who is not eligible for VA health care and do not have insurance, the Health Insurance Marketplace may be a great option for you.

The Veterans Choice Act increases access to health care for enrolled Veterans, and the Choice Improvement Act expands this access to a larger number of Veterans. For example, eligible Veterans who live more than 40 miles from a VA medical facility or are unable to schedule an appointment within 30 days may be eligible to use their Choice Card to see a provider in their community. To find out if you are eligible, please call 1-866-606-8198 or visit http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/.

Recent legislation (the Choice Improvement Act) amended the Veterans Choice Act to further expanded eligibility for Veterans to receive care in their communities. VA will implement these changes in several phases, with the first phase (waiver of the enrollment date) effective immediately. The legislation:

- Waives the enrollment date – now, all enrolled Veterans, regardless of when they enrolled, may be eligible
- Expands the 60-day episode for referral care – meaning, if an eligible Veteran is referred for care, they will have 60 days to complete the referral
- Allows for appointments less than 30 days when clinically indicated – soon, Veterans with an approved clinical need for an appointment can seek care in their community, even if it’s within 30 days
- Allows VA to expand it’s network – VA has now has authority to expand its Veterans Choice Program provider base
- Allows for Veterans Choice Program benefit where no VA full-time physician is present at the existing site of VA care

In addition, Veterans who receive hospital or medical services for a service-connected disability will be eligible to participate in a Health Savings Account effective December 31, 2015. VA wants to ensure that Veterans have options to access the health care they need, and that the care received also fully addresses their needs.

Veterans who are uninsured or not eligible to enroll in VA health care can consider enrollment in state or federal Health Insurance Marketplaces for affordable health insurance. Most people can find health insurance plans available for $75 or less per month. Learn about options available in your area by visiting https://www.healthcare.gov/ or call 1-800-318-2596. If you are a Veteran who is either enrolled or not enrolled in VA health care and want more Veteran-specific information about the Health Insurance Marketplace, visit www.va.gov/aca.
Flu season is here, and getting your flu shot is the single best way to protect yourself, as well as your loved ones, against the flu virus. For Veterans, getting a flu shot has never been easier. More than 8,000 locations now offer free flu shots for eligible Veterans through a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) partnership with Walgreens.

Studies show that if you plan when and where to get your flu shot, you are more likely to get one. So what are the options? Veterans enrolled in the VA health care system may opt to get a free flu shot at a local VA health care facility or at a neighborhood Walgreens drug store.

Veterans can receive a free flu shot at their VA health care facility during any scheduled appointment or at a convenient walk-in flu station. Alternatively, Veteran patients may visit their local Walgreens to get a flu shot where an appointment is not required. Participation is strictly voluntary, and while there is no cost, Veterans should show their Veteran Identification Card and another form of ID.

The record of the flu shot from Walgreens will be included in the Veteran’s VA electronic health record immunization record. Veterans who choose the Walgreens’ option should use Group Code # 5933XBAYV or download the flu form (http://www.ehealth.va.gov/campaign/rrcp/2015_VA_RCCP_W_Flu_RegForm_100815.pdf).

View the "Flu Shots for Veterans" video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x407C0yj70&feature=youtu.be) to learn about VA’s national immunization initiative to provide Veterans more options, easier access and seamless records when it comes to getting their seasonal flu shot. Wherever you choose to get vaccinated, the best choice for your health is to get a flu shot.

Note: Reference to non-VA pharmacies, including Walgreens, does not constitute or imply endorsement of these organizations, their services or products. If your local pharmacy is not currently participating in the VA Retail Immunization Program, they may participate in the future as the program expands. Vaccine is subject to availability. State and health-related restrictions may apply. If you do not have insurance coverage, there may be a charge for a flu shot after March 31, 2016.

Enrolled VA patients can get a no-cost flu shot at Walgreens now through March 31, 2016

To learn more call 1-877-771-8537 or visit www.ehealth.va.gov/immunization.asp.

ORH in the News

♦ Program helps rural Veterans find maternity care
  Rural Roads (http://www.ruralroadsonline.com/)

The National Rural Health Association recently featured the Office of Rural Health-funded Maternity Care Coordination program in its quarterly magazine, "Rural Roads." Read about the program on pages 21-23 at http://www.ruralroadsonline.com/.

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Rural Promising Practices Program Identifies Innovative Models of Care

By Krista Holyak, Communications Specialist, Office of Rural Health

Veterans in rural areas face unique challenges when seeking health care. Provider shortages, long travel distances and outdated public infrastructure often prevent Veterans from receiving all of the health care benefits they deserve. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) actively seeks solutions to these rural Veteran challenges through its Rural Promising Practices initiative. The initiative studies, innovates, and accelerates the spread of proven, new approaches in Veteran care and service delivery.

ORH uses six criteria to identify Rural Promising Practices:
- Improved access
- Evidence of clinical impact
- Customer satisfaction and/or patient experience
- Return on investment
- Operational feasibility
- Strong partnerships and/or working relationships

Once a care or service delivery innovation is identified as a Rural Promising Practice, ORH works closely with content experts in the field to promote expansion of those models. One example of such an innovation is the spread of telehealth collaborative care for rural Veterans with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

In the telehealth collaborative care Rural Promising Practice, Veterans in outlying areas of Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia, have the option to receive their care closer to home, eliminating long trips to a VA specialty care clinic. Through the use of telehealth, care coordination, and population health management tools first piloted at the Iowa City, Iowa VA Medical Center, health care providers were able to coordinate care for Veterans near their homes in 38 Community Based Outpatient Clinics.

In addition to saving travel time for Veterans, telehealth meetings between clinicians help to streamline care delivery. HIV specialists can dedicate their time to HIV-specific care, while primary care physicians address Veterans’ non-HIV medical needs. For more information on the Rural Promising Practices initiative, contact ORH at ORHcomms@va.gov.

Fiscal Year 2015 ORH Rural Promising Practices:
- Telephone-Based Cardiac Rehabilitation
- Telehealth Collaborative Care for Rural Veterans with HIV Infection
- More to come…

311VET Mobile App Provides VA Benefits Information at Your Fingertips

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs developed the 311VET mobile application for Veterans to ask general VA benefits questions and receive answers from any mobile device.

311VET allows Veterans to gather information on health care benefits, pensions, life insurance, dependents and survivors’ benefits, and much more.

Visit https://mobile.va.gov/app/311vet to download the app for Apple or Android today, or send a text with your general benefits questions to 311VET (311838).
Partnerships Build Capacity to Support Veterans

By Lelia Jackson, Director, VHA Office of Community Engagement

2015 was an exciting year for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Community Engagement (OCE). Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) inquired about partnerships with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to help Veterans. As a result, OCE orchestrated several new national public-private partnerships that will benefit Veterans and their families. There is a wealth of talent, resources and ingenuity in local communities. Working with NGOs not only helps further VA’s mission and priorities, but also builds capacity to better serve Veterans and their families, caregivers, survivors, and beneficiaries.

A public-private partnership is a voluntary, collaborative, and working relationship between VA and nongovernmental organizations in which the goals, structures, governance, roles, and responsibilities are mutually determined to deliver the best possible services to Veterans. Successful partnerships:

- Advance shared objectives or mutual programming goals,
- Enhance impact through resource sharing, and
- Integrate communications.

OCE is a national point of contact for organizations that seek to partner with VHA as it facilitates discussions and explores collaborations with appropriate subject matter experts.

OCE also provides tools, training, and information to empower VHA staff to build and maintain responsible and productive partnerships.

VA medical facilities and NGOs have long worked together to further the VA’s mission and priorities. There are thousands of partnerships across the nation to address the needs of Veterans and their families. The 2015 National VHA Community Partnership Challenge recognized three such successful partnerships. The contest theme was “Improving Veterans Access and Veterans Experience.” The VA Connecticut Health Care System, Kansas City VA Medical Center, and San Francisco VA Health Care System took top honors. Each of their partnerships uniquely demonstrated how well developed and innovative partnerships can enhance access to health care and improve the Veteran experience.

For more information about the Office of Community Engagement, or about partnering with VHA, contact Director Lelia Jackson at VHACommunityEngagement@va.gov.

MyVA Communities Model

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is taking a more active role in community-based efforts to maximize the collective impact of local services, stakeholders, and federal and state agencies working together to improve Veteran outcomes.

Across the country, VA leaders joined or increased their participation in existing community collaborative groups. Where there may be a need for increased collaboration, the MyVA Communities model provides a supportive framework.

For more information on the MyVA Communities model and toolkit, please visit http://www.va.gov/icbc/myVA.asp or contact MyVACommunities@va.gov.
Everyone, regardless of where they live, should have the opportunity to make choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life. To better assess and understand the needs of Veterans who live in rural areas, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) recently established the National Rural Evaluation Center (NREC) through the Quality Enhancement Research Initiative in VA's Health Services Research and Development office. ORH established NREC as part of its five-year rural health strategic plan; specifically, to support its goal to generate and diffuse knowledge regarding rural Veteran health.

NREC’s overarching goals are to gauge where gaps in care for rural Veterans exist, understand the likely reasons for their existence, and identify opportunities for innovative partnerships between ORH and other governmental and non-governmental entities. The needs assessment will go beyond access measures (for example, percent of Veterans living within 40 miles of a VA medical center) to include Veteran perceptions about access to care and satisfaction with care. The rural Veterans needs assessment will also expand upon past work and examine how where Veterans live and work plays a role in their health and well-being.

NREC’s assessment will concentrate on the more than 5.3 million Veterans who live in rural areas. NREC investigators are experts in health services research, epidemiology, anthropology, qualitative research methods, demography, geospatial analysis, psychiatry and economics. The investigators will talk to Veterans and members of their communities throughout the U.S. to find out firsthand about their health needs and to hear their ideas about resources that might help to better meet those needs.

NREC’s rural Veterans health needs assessment will:
- Help to better align VA resources to increase access, improve outcomes and reduce disparities among the rural Veteran population,
- Provide benchmarks for access, health outcomes, satisfaction and more, that ORH can use to better assess the effectiveness of its rural health programs
- Help identify areas of need that can be addressed by other federal, state, private and community-based entities that have Veteran focused programs, and
- Evaluate effectiveness and implementation strategies of ORH Rural Promising Practices.

NREC’s work will lay the groundwork for VA to develop enterprise-wide solutions and measurable outcomes to increase access to health care for rural Veterans.

Dr. Teresa Hudson of the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System in Little Rock, Arkansas leads the NREC research efforts. Dr. Alyson Littman of the VA Puget Sound Health Care system in Seattle, Washington, is the co-principal investigator. Co-investigators are Mary Bollinger and Erin Finley of the VA South Texan Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio, Texas; John Fortney, Edwin Wong and Edward Boyko of the VA Puget Sound Health Care System; Hayden Bosworth in Durham VA Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina; and Jeffrey Pyne, Traci Abraham, and Karen Drummond of the Central Arkansas Veterans Health Care System.

**NREC by the Numbers:**
- **5.3 million** Rural Veterans
- **730** Days to accomplish the work
- **188** Page grant application
- **11** Executive committee members
- **9** Co-investigators
- **2** Lead researchers

Dr. Teresa Hudson of the Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System in Little Rock, Arkansas leads the NREC research efforts. Dr. Alyson Littman of the VA Puget Sound Health Care system in Seattle, Washington, is the co-principal investigator. Co-investigators are Mary Bollinger and Erin Finley of the VA South Texan Veterans Health Care System in San Antonio, Texas; John Fortney, Edwin Wong and Edward Boyko of the VA Puget Sound Health Care System; Hayden Bosworth in Durham VA Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina; and Jeffrey Pyne, Traci Abraham, and Karen Drummond of the Central Arkansas Veterans Health Care System.
Veterans Transportation Program and Office of Rural Health Team Up to Advance Access to Care for Rural Veterans

By Veterans Transportation Program, Chief Business Office, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Office of Rural Health (ORH) and Veterans Transportation Program (VTP) completed its first full year of implementation in fiscal year 2015. The MOU further cemented the partnership between the two programs, and advanced access to care for rural Veterans through accessible, reliable, and safe transportation provided by VTP.

The MOU formalized a multi-year partnership between ORH and VTP, and facilitated consistency in joint funding, program proposal reviews, metrics sharing, and strategic planning. The MOU enabled funding of VTP’s rural Veterans Transportation Service efforts that help bring rural Veterans to health care facilities. In fiscal year 2015, ORH provided more than $7 million for these efforts. This represents approximately one-third of total Veterans Transportation Service funding for related initiatives at 36 rural U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers (VAMC) across the nation. This also represents a 30 percent increase from the fiscal year 2014 contribution—which is part of ORH’s efforts to elevate transportation to an enterprise-wide approach.

Through the MOU in fiscal year 2015, ORH funded more than 197,000 one-way trips to take rural Veterans to and from their VA and authorized non-VA health care appointments. These transports included more than 35,000 Veterans with severe barriers to obtain care (e.g., elderly, non-ambulatory, or those who live in a geographic area that lacks transportation resources or experiences severe weather conditions).

The partnership between ORH and VTP also helped transport rural Veterans who faced significant challenges in access to care and required a special mode of transportation, or who were not able to travel independently. ORH funding for the transport of these Veteran patients eliminated the need to hire contractors or reimburse mileage for Veterans who use their own vehicle—both resulting in significant savings.

The MOU continues to improve access to VA health care for rural Veterans and assures the responsible management of funds expended for rural Veterans transportation. For more information on the Veterans Transportation Program, visit http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vtp/.

ORH Communications Products Win Three Awards

As the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ lead advocate for rural Veteran health, the Office of Rural Health (ORH) recognizes the critical role of effective communications in the accomplishment of its strategic goals. ORH is excited about its three communications awards for products which were built to energize conversations about rural Veterans amongst partners.

In 2015, ORH received the following communications awards:

“Caring for Rural Veterans” Video (http://youtu.be/yyiljKAa-kv0)

- First place: 2015 Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Communicators Award in the “video” category
- Award of Distinction: 2015 Videographer Awards in the “government” category

“The Rural Connection” Newsletter (http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/news/)

- Third place: 2015 VHA Communicators Award in the “newsletter/magazine” category

ORH strategic communications team members Krista Holyak (left) and Emily Oehler (right) accept the 2015 VHA Communicators Awards. For more information about ORH communications, please contact ORHcomms@va.gov. 
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Hepatitis C: What You Need to Know

By Dr. Uchenna S. Uchendu, Executive Director, Office of Health Equity

Despite the seriousness of the hepatitis C virus in vulnerable Veteran populations, few Veterans know about the disease or get tested for it. Due to the epidemic of injection drug use, new cases of hepatitis C are increasing in the U.S., particularly in rural areas. In fact, 28 percent of Veterans with hepatitis C live in rural areas (State of Care for Veterans with Hepatitis C 2014).

A major risk of untreated hepatitis C virus infection is advanced liver disease, which is usually fatal. The majority of Veterans enrolled for Veterans Health Administration care diagnosed with hepatitis C infection and advanced liver disease are white males born between 1945 and 1965; however, disparities are noted in racial and ethnic minorities, and Vietnam-era Veterans. One out of four enrolled Veterans with hepatitis C and advanced liver disease live in rural areas. Some rural Veterans lack access to specialists and life-saving treatments.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) leads the nation in assuring that all Veterans with advanced liver disease from hepatitis C receive state-of-the-art care and treatment, including the use of telemedicine. The Office of Health Equity Hepatitis C-Advanced Liver Disease Disparities Dashboard (http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/news/video/heap.cfm) is a new tool used to identify which vulnerable Veteran groups are disproportionately affected and where targeted intervention is warranted.

Outreach efforts are underway to reach Veterans at risk for hepatitis C. However, VA needs your help. Early detection of chronic viral hepatitis infection can save lives. VA currently recommends hepatitis C virus screening for Veterans born between 1945 and 1965 and those with known risk factors. Encourage conversations with Veterans about screening for hepatitis C. Care and treatment can limit disease advancement, prevent liver cancer deaths and help break the cycle of unknowingly transmitting the virus to others.

Learn more about hepatitis C and treatment options at http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/.

Did you know…

- Women are the fastest growing group within the Veteran population?
- Women represent six percent of enrolled, rural Veterans? And there has been a five percent increase of enrolled rural women Veterans since 2012.

For women Veteran health information, call the Women Veterans Call Center today.

Also, to learn more about the changing face of women Veterans and what VA is doing to meet their health care needs at http://www.womenshealth.va.gov/.

Learn more about hepatitis C and treatment options at http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/.
Rural Veterans Use MOVE! to Lose Nearly 20 Pounds

By Health Promotion Disease Prevention Program, Truman VA Medical Center

How can the Department of Veterans Affairs help a rural Veteran truck driver stay fit? That’s a question for which Health Promotion Disease Prevention Program Manager Melissa Mertensmeyer has an answer.

Mertensmeyer is the MOVE! Coordinator at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans’ Hospital in Columbia, Missouri. Through the MOVE! program, she offers weight management and education classes at the VA Medical Center. However, some Veterans in rural areas of Missouri spend a lot of their time away from home and have inconsistent schedules (as is the case with truck drivers). As a result, they often are unable to attend class in-person.

Mertensmeyer’s solution was to add Telephone Lifestyle Coaching to the local MOVE! program. The Telephone Lifestyle Coaching program lasts for 16 weeks. To date, each of the Veteran participants that Mertensmeyer works with lost an average of 19 pounds.

To get started, a Veteran is mailed two class workbooks developed by the national MOVE! program office. He or she then keeps a food journal. Mertensmeyer holds brief weekly calls with each Veteran to review the food journal and discuss healthier options for higher fat, salt and sugary items. She also discusses progress toward weekly nutrition and activity goals with each Veteran, along with a review of topics such as fat, sugar, salt, eating out, and physical activity.

The MOVE! program is designed to assist Veterans to lose weight and keep it off through education and support to live a healthier lifestyle. It uses behavioral, nutrition, and physical activity components and changes the focus each week to keep Veterans engaged. For more information about the MOVE! program, or to see how you can become involved, visit www.move.va.gov or ask for the MOVE! Coordinator at your local VA Medical Center.

Visit the Rural Health Research Gateway

The Rural Health Research Gateway (https://www.ruralhealthresearch.org/) is an online library of rural health research and expertise.

It’s free to use, searchable, and provides access to the work of 11 federally-funded Rural Health Research Centers (RHRC) and policy analysis initiatives from 1997 to present.

RHRC is the only federal program dedicated entirely to producing policy-relevant research on health care in rural areas. Visit the Gateway today to learn more.

The Rural Health Research Gateway is developed by the Department of Health and Human Services’ Federal Office of Rural Health Policy.