

Rural Promising Practice: GRECC Connect Project: Connecting Rural Providers with Geriatric Specialists Through Telemedicine

This model of care shows promise to increase rural Veterans' access to care and services, and is recommended for replication at other facilities.

Access Challenges

Although nearly half of Veterans who seek health care annually at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are over the age of 65, VA has a lower ratio of geriatricians (i.e., specialists who provide health care services and case management to older patients who have multiple chronic diseases, geriatric syndromes, or functional limitations), compared to the United States (U.S.) average. This is even more problematic in rural areas, where there are fewer certified geriatricians, the patient population is older than in urban areas, and there is a higher prevalence of chronic disease.^{1,2} Limited access to specialized geriatric care, especially in rural areas, limits a Veteran's ability to receive critical health services.

Transportation can also be a challenge for rural Veterans.³ For example, rural Veterans reported traveling between 45 and 54 miles to VA primary care services.³ To avoid excess travel, enrolled Veterans often turn to local providers and rely more on local emergency departments, increasing their likelihood of experiencing fragmented care.³ Rural providers and staff also experience access challenges, such as limited opportunities for and access to educational training events and support regarding care management for older Veterans.

Solution

Experts from several VA Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Centers (GRECCs)

established the GRECC Connect Project, which provides educational and clinical support to rural providers and staff using telemedicine and a network of geriatric specialists.

The GRECC Connect Project helps providers manage care for older, rural Veterans and addresses medically- and psychosocially-complex cases with real-time input from interdisciplinary geriatric teams, using case-based conferences, electronic consultations, virtual meetings, and clinical video telehealth.

The GRECC Connect Project improves access to geriatric care while reducing the distance Veterans are required to travel. In 2015, the GRECC Connect Project served a total of 1,099 Veterans and 549 providers and staff and saved, among GRECC Connect Veterans, 94,470 miles of travel time (average of 86 miles per Veteran served).

To Learn More

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) 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 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 study, innovate and spread enterprise-wide initiatives through partnerships.

To discuss implementing a Rural Promising Practice at your facility or to learn more, visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov or email rural.health.inquiry@va.gov.

¹ Olivero, M. (2015). Doctor shortage: Who will take care of the elderly? Retrieved from <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/patientadvice/articles/2015/04/21/doctor-shortage-who-willtake-care-of-the-elderly>

² Department of Veterans Affairs. Office of Rural Health. Retrieved from <http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/>

³ Gale, J.A & Heady, H.R. (2013). Rural veterans: Their problems. Retrieved from <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/may-june-2013/rural-vets-their-barriers-problems-needs>

