

# Rural Promising Practice: The Geriatrics Scholars Program

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

## Medical Issue

More than half of rural Veterans who rely on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for health care are 65 years or older<sup>i</sup>. Aging Veterans may require more complex medical care due to a higher likelihood of combat-related injuries overlapping with co-existing diseases and disorders such as cardiac conditions or diabetes.

## Access Challenge

There are too few geriatricians in rural areas to care for America's growing population of older Veterans. This is especially problematic in rural areas where there are fewer specialists and the patient population is older on average than in urban areas.

## Solution

This training program integrates state-of-the-art geriatrics care into primary care and specialty services located in VA's rural Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC). Participating providers, clinical pharmacists, social workers and psychologists who work in rural CBOCs or focus on rural home-based primary care receive tailored training to build their geriatric competency. As part of the multi-year training, learners receive:

- Academic courses
- Clinical experience
- Mentorship
- Education materials and other resources

To demonstrate and share new knowledge within their patient aligned care teams, each scholar initiates a quality improvement project at his or her local clinic.

By training VA clinicians already in rural areas, the program increases older Veterans' access to quality geriatric care in the rural communities where they live.

Since 2009, more than 600 VA providers completed the program. Geriatric Scholars Program alumni served more than 283,000 Veterans.

As part of the Geriatric Scholars Program, VA's rural clinics receive the Geriatric Scholars Program toolkit. The toolkit contains 12 training modules for clinicians, patients and caregivers. Each module covers an important geriatric syndrome, such as frailty or dementia, and includes multiple printed materials for clinician, patient, and caregiver education. More than 60 percent of rural clinicians self-reported changing one or more clinical processes after exposure to the Geriatric Scholar Program toolkit.

## 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](http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov) or email [rural.health.inquiry@va.gov](mailto:rural.health.inquiry@va.gov).

<sup>i</sup> Veterans Health Administration, Service Support Center Enrollment Cube, Fiscal Year 2015