

# Rural Promising Practice: Telehealth Collaborative Care for Rural Veterans with HIV Infection

*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

An estimated 1.2 million people in the United States live with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)<sup>i</sup>, a virus that destroys infection-fighting white blood cells and weakens the immune system. If left untreated, HIV can become AIDS, an even more complex illness. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the largest provider of HIV care in the country. VA served nearly 26,000 Veterans with HIV in fiscal year 2015, of whom 15 percent lived in rural communities<sup>ii</sup>.

## Access Challenge

HIV-positive rural Veterans face access challenges such as availability of specialists, limited transportation options, geographic barriers and limited sick leave. Additionally, as HIV treatments become increasingly effective, many Veterans with the virus live longer. As they age, many acquire other health conditions such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease. Studies show that people with HIV have better health outcomes when they receive care from providers with specialized expertise in HIV medicine. However, HIV specialists may not have the experience or resources necessary to care for common co-existing conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, especially among an aging patient population.

## Solution

This Rural Promising Practice enables rural Veterans with HIV to receive both specialized HIV care and comprehensive primary care in VA's Community Based Outpatient Clinics.

The program goals are to:

- Reduce barriers to access care
- Allocate specialists' time to HIV-specific care
- Connect HIV specialists, local primary care teams, and otherwise fragmented networks of specialty and primary care providers

To deliver this new, integrated model of shared care, the medical team conducts:

- Clinical video telehealth visits with the HIV specialty team (i.e., provider, nurse, pharmacist)
- Post-telehealth visits to discuss follow-up goals and responsibilities in shared care
- Quarterly registry queries of Veterans in HIV care to identify those at risk for poor outcomes
- Outreach visits with local care teams to keep patients engaged

As a result, rural Veterans receive integrated specialty and primary care to manage their HIV and associated medical issues, as well as access to a nurse care manager who answers questions and coordinates ongoing care.

## 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> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012 (most recent available data)

<sup>ii</sup> Veterans Health Administration Support Service Center Encounter Cube (fiscal year 2015)