ORH PROGRAM OVERVIEW

SCOUTS (Supporting Community, Outpatient, Urgent care, and Telehealth Services)

Background

More than a million high risk Veterans seek acute care each year and in many cases their need for care is triggered by functional decline, unmet care, or social needs. If these issues are not addressed, patients are at risk for hospitalization, falls, further functional decline, and institutionalization. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) Enterprise-Wide Initiative (EWI) called *SCOUTS (Supporting Community, Outpatient, Urgent care, and Telehealth Services)* focuses on older or medically complex community dwelling adults. These Veterans have been identified as high risk for functional decline, falls or hospitalization. Participants in the program have a recent visit to a VA or community Emergency Department (ED) or an emergency care telehealth visit.

"The transition to self-care at home after a trip to the ED can be a vulnerable time for older adults. Often, ED visits are prompted by caregiver burden, unmet health care needs, or a minor illness in the setting of frailty. A SCOUTS home visit gives an opportunity to discover the underlying cause of the ED visit and to prevent a revisit by providing acute interventions."

~ Dr. Colleen McQuown
SCOUTS National Medical Director

"Many older adults are not comfortable using technology, limiting our ability to provide services. The SCOUTS program provides a unique opportunity to connect with hard-to-reach Veterans."

~ Dr. Candice Danielz

SCOUTS was created in 2020 by a multidisciplinary team, representing the VHA Offices of Geriatrics and Extended Care, Primary Care, Emergency Medicine, Home Based Primary Care, and Connected Care. It was established to fill a need to support older adults by introducing them to telehealth technology and ensuring their home environment supported safe aging in place. The first six sites went live in 2021 and received continued support through the Office of Primary Care. SCOUTS has grown to 11 sites, including four active and one implementing sites supported by the ORH EWI, now in its third year of partnership.

SCOUTS focuses on the vulnerable time period when unmet physical, social, or medical needs cause an older or medically complex patient to seek acute care. This health care is defined as interdisciplinary, accessible, coordinated, and Veteran-focused.

SCOUTS is:

- **Interdisciplinary**: A core interdisciplinary SCOUTS team is established, and members collaborate with Veterans and caregivers in care planning and conduct home visits as appropriate. Home visits are completed by an *Intermediate Care Technician, or ICT*, who collaborates with a local SCOUTS physician medical director and other members of an interdisciplinary team such as nursing, pharmacy, social work, prosthetics, physical therapy.
- **Accessible:** The SCOUTS ICT may identify challenges either observed or expressed by the Veteran, family member or caregiver during rapid response in-home telehealth assisted appointments that initiate needed in-home supportive services.
- **Coordinated:** The SCOUTS ICT coordinates the patient's care with synchronous and asynchronous medical direction from a licensed independent practitioner (LIP) providing ICT clinical oversite. SCOUTS ICT equip Veterans and caregivers with resources and provide pertinent information to the primary care providers and other members of the Veterans care team, with a goal of transitional the care plan to the patient's primary care team.
- **Veteran Focused: ICTs** are advanced unlicensed assistive personnel who have graduated from intensive specialized military medical training programs and served as combat medics, medical technicians, and corpsman. ICTs can provide a Veteran-to Veteran connection, providing trust in the field.

"The whole reason I came to VA was to help take care of my fellow Veterans as my mother did before me. "It's been an awesome experience with SCOUTS going into the homes and getting that deeper connection with the Veteran."

~ Bill Kalacinski, ICT
White River Junction VA Medica Center

Goals and Objectives

1. **Promote** independent living for older and medically complex Veterans by providing a therapeutic and safe environment in the home.
2. **Provide** acute in-home screenings, deploy care services and resources, and increase connectivity to telehealth technologies for vulnerable older or medical complex Veterans with ambulatory care sensitive conditions who need support to remain at home.
3. **Reduce** caregiver strain and support Veteran caregivers.
4. **Reduce** preventable ED visits and hospital admissions, provide an acceptable alternative to in-person follow up, and decrease the number of patients diverted to non-VA facilities.

Methodology

In the SCOUTS program, Veterans receive a post-acute care home visit from an ICT. During the visit, the ICT performs home safety and mobility observations, screens for syndromes and unmet care needs, and gathers information on social determinates of health and caregiver involvement.

- Veterans are identified as being eligible for SCOUTS either during an acute care encounter or after a visit to a community ED. Veterans already enrolled in homecare programs or living in long-term care facilities are excluded to avoid duplication of services.
- SCOUTS home visits occur within 72 hours of acute care and typically sooner if only seen via tele-health initially.
- ICTs perform minor follow up procedures such as suture removal and provide patient education on durable medical equipment, VA services, and community resources.
- The ICT acts as telepresenter to an acute care or specialty service provider This video visit allows the patient's acute issue to be reassessed, any new issues to be addressed, and a plan to be developed to address the positive screens and home safety issues identified during the visit.
- Veterans receive at least one follow up phone call to assure the patient is connected to their primary care team, durable medical equipment has been delivered, referrals have been made and follow up appointments have been scheduled.

Impact on Rural Veteran Health

"It was nice to have him [ICT] here to make sure we're doing everything right.."

~ Mr. Schiernbeck

The SCOUTS program has been especially beneficial to frail rural Veterans whom lengthy travel to a VA medical center can lead to further functional decline. It allows the Veteran to experience the convenience of telehealth care with an acute care provider, without missing out on the benefits of an in-person visit through telehealth technology such as virtual wound cameras and tablet connected devices such as otoscopes and stethoscopes. As a result of the EWI with ORH, 38% more rural Veterans were served in fiscal year (FY) 2025 compared to FY 2024. EWI expansion impacts include:

- 1006 SCOUTS visits (out of a total of 4572 encounters across all SCOUTS sites).
- One in every eight Veterans' home set up was found to not be adequate for their current physical needs. These deficiencies were addressed with 1860 orders for durable medical equipment and additional referrals to VA and community services.
- SCOUTS patients had increased short term follow up: social work (8%), physical therapy (29%) and Primary Care (75%) compared to the general ED population over 65: social work (5%), physical therapy (19%) and Primary Care (69%).
- ICTs assisted with 337 interdisciplinary video visits while in the Veterans homes, increasing acute access to social work, physical therapy, pharmacy, audiology, and occupational therapy.

Key Takeaways

SCOUTS provides a pathway for older and medically complex adults to have acute care conditions addressed in their home, with the benefits of a medically trained telepresenter. VA Emergency Medicine Providers are more comfortable discharging patients or seeing them via Tele-Emergency Care rather than in person, knowing they can be seen by a SCOUTS ICT and have their condition rechecked by either themselves or an acute care colleague in a few days.

- SCOUTS patients have significant need for durable medical equipment and support of VA services, which can be provided through the interdisciplinary approach taken by SCOUTS.
- SCOUTS provides a new care approach that can be employed in a variety of acute care or follow-up settings, augmenting existing telehealth capabilities.
- SCOUTS home visit offers a unique opportunity for providers to view the patient in their home environment, allowing them to provide more Veteran centered care.

References

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