U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health
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ORH PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Pharmacist Providers Improve Access for Rural Veterans with Opioid Use Disorder

Background

The Pharmacist Providers Improve Access for Rural Veterans with Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) Enterprise-Wide Initiative (EWI), supported by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) since fiscal year (FY) 2020, aims to expand access to medication treatment for Veterans with OUD and other Substance Use Disorders (SUD). Endorsed by the Office of Mental Health (OMH), the program known as MH-REACHES: Mental Health Rural Expansion Access and Coordinated Health Efforts in SUD, integrates Clinical Pharmacist Practitioners (CPPs) into collaborative care team models within mental health and primary care settings.

CPPs deliver direct patient care across the continuum of SUD services, including prevention, treatment, and recovery support. They play a critical role in screening, managing OUD, providing overdose education, prescribing naloxone, and addressing related conditions such as unhealthy alcohol use and alcohol use disorder (AUD). Evidence demonstrates that CPP involvement improves access to OUD screening and treatment and enhances medication retention rates.[1-5] In response to the ongoing opioid crisis and rising substance use, this initiative leverages CPPs' medication expertise to expand access to mental health and SUD care for Veterans. As of February 2025, 58.7% and 73.5% of rural Veterans living with OUD and AUD, respectively, remained untreated, underscoring the urgent need to broaden care availability and reach underserved, vulnerable populations. This initiative targets CPP workforce expansion to increase access to rural Veterans within Primary Care Mental Health Integration (PCMHI) and Behavioral Health Integration Program (BHIP) with SUD care as an integral component of comprehensive behavioral services.

Goals and Objectives

CPPs collaborate with interprofessional team, Veterans, and caregivers, to deliver comprehensive medication management services for MH and SUD. Services include evaluation, monitoring, medication optimization, education, risk mitigation, and management of comorbidities, that improve treatment retention and recovery. Program priorities feature expanding care to rural Veterans, embedding SUD into routine practice outside of specialty SUD care settings, advancing MH specific performance metrics (e.g., Psychotropic Drug Safety Initiative), enhancing safety targets (suicide risk, risk mitigation, etc.), and reducing access and quality disparities in SUD.

Program objectives:

1. Increase rural Veteran access to MH and SUD medication treatment through integration of the CPP into team-based care models.
2. Enhance the knowledge of CPPs across practice settings with critical skill building to provide comprehensive medication management services to Veterans with MH and SUD care needs.
3. Support the provision of CPP services to rural Veterans through virtual modalities (e.g., telephone, clinical video telehealth (CVT), VA Video connect (VVC)).

Participating facility locations and practice areas.

Practice Area	Number of CPP
PCMHI	9
BHIP	17
Total CPP	**26**

Methodology

The program integrates CPPs on mental health and primary care teams to increase patient access, improve quality of care, and decrease provider burden. Launched in FY 2020, the program funded 35 CPPs at 34 facilities through FY 2023 and added 26 CPPs across 22 facilities in FY 2024 into PCMHI and BHIP practice through FY 2026. CPPs deliver MH and SUD care as part of team-based care, aligning with OMH practice standards for model fidelity. They receive on-going, project focused information via online communication, teleconferences, and invitations to national community of practice webinars. Their prescribing of evidence-based treatments in AUD and OUD contributes to improving quality of Veteran care and facility performance metrics. CPPs regularly perform suicide risk assessments and evaluations for patients as a component of the care, including safety planning.

Impact on Rural Veteran Health

- 26 CPPs provided care to 12,252 Veterans (60.4% rural), an increase of 19% from the previous year, across 38,768 encounters primarily through virtual modalities (73%) in FY 2025.
- 15 DEA registered CPPs prescribed 5,723 controlled substance prescriptions to 1,120 Veterans; 3,986 prescriptions to 721 rural Veterans. Buprenorphine for OUD was prescribed to 108 Veterans; 68 rural.
- Prioritizes AUD and OUD medication treatment and overdose education and naloxone prescribing.
- CPP testimonials on access: "…my [CPP] schedule … allows better access … so both Veterans and providers appreciate that." And "… I have a lot of patients … that like the virtual offerings. I have patients that still work or like to travel. They really appreciate having a virtual provider."
- CPP testimonials on creating a stigma-free environment: "I have done presentations to the … team about … patient friendly language and … examples of switching … old terminology to what we say now instead that's more considerate of the patient."

Key Takeaways

Veteran access to MH and SUD care has been positively impacted by the CPP workforce as a direct result of this program. This work has aligned directly with VA priorities to prevent Veteran suicide, support Veterans' whole health for their caregivers and survivors, accelerate our journey to High Reliability, and scale best practices and drive innovation for SUD screening, treatment, and recovery.

Veteran in OUD recovery credits CPP with saving his life.

- CPP led SUD care across VA has been nationally recognized as an American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) Best Practices Award program in 2024 (poster; podcast). This prestigious award honors innovative, successfully implemented systems that set the standard for pharmacy practice and CPPs are leading the way.
- CPPs attended the 2020 SUD Clinical Pharmacy virtual training that focused on barrier-free access to AUD and OUD prevention, medication treatment, recovery, and harm and risk reduction. CPPs have been integral in providing SUD care across practice settings meeting the Veteran when and where they want to receive treatment. This large scale, system-wide training sparked a surge of 352 more CPPs (96% increase) providing SUD care from FY 2018 to FY 2025. In FY 2025, 800 CPPs provided SUD care to 152,435 Veterans with over 45% of visits performed using virtual care. Changes in Federal law paved the way for 255 CPPs with controlled substance prescriptive authority to prescribe buprenorphine treating nearly 4,000 Veterans with OUD across 89 VA facilities from January 2023 through September 2025.
- *Veteran Stories - "Dr. [CPP] has always been there to help. I feel he goes way above and beyond his duty requirements with his knowledge, caring, and offers of help. [He] calls and checks on me during the month, every month, sometimes three or four or more times a month. [He] genuinely always wants to help me. I'm privileged to have Dr. CPP on my side, in my corner and always there for me! No matter where I'm at, Dr. CPP insures I always receive all my monthly medications in a fast and timely manner. I cannot help feeling and thinking Dr. CPP really does care and is concerned about me."*
- *Veteran Stories - "Dr. [CPP] manages all of it. And he knows so much about all of it…18 months ago I was not a good person, emotionally, physically, mentally…[I]t seems like an oxymoron that I'm telling you things should've been different but I'm glad that they weren't.*
- *Veteran Stories -* Pharmacist Providers Help Veterans Get Their Lives Back-Bath VA*:* Rural Veteran, Mr. Burger, tells his story of chronic pain and anxiety and recounts his ability to compose music drastically declined in recent years and he was ready for a change and to eliminate medications from his life. CPP are uniquely qualified to help Veteran reduce drug use with their knowledge, tools, experience, and the time to guide a Veteran through the process. Mr. Burger is now free of the dangerous medication combination and recounts an increased clarity in thought being able to compose music once again and is much happier in his life..

- *Veteran Stories* - Pharmacist Providers Help Veterans Get Their Lives Back-MSG Jerry K Crump VA Clinic, North Carolina*:* Rural Veterans Tim and Andrew received SUD care at primary care CBOC from CPP. Tim's medical conditions were complicated by cocaine and alcohol use and Andrew received medication treatment for OUD from a CPP with controlled substance prescriptive authority. Andrew was ready to make a change in his life for his daughter after seeing multiple friends die from overdose. Tim and Andrew thank the CPP at the clinic for getting their life back on track, saving their life, and living a happy life with family support.

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