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

Technology-based Eye Care Services (TECS)

Background

Technology-based Eye Care Services (TECS) is a remote eye telehealth program that provides eyeglasses and an ocular health examination. The program works by placing a specially trained ophthalmology technician in the primary medical care home. Operating out of a single 10 x 12 ft. room outfitted with specialized eye equipment, TECS collects information about a patient's eyes by performing elements of a standard eye exam including vision, eyeglass prescription check, eye pressure measurement, and photographs of the patient's eyes. A remote eye doctor can then interpret the information, prescribe glasses and/or medications as needed, and determine if the patient needs a face-to-face evaluation.

TECS Exam Room

TECS uses asynchronous telehealth methods and aims to provide a tool for eye clinics to improve their eye care access problems. TECS re-aligns eye care delivery such that provider time is spent dedicated to patients who need face-to-face care the most – those with suspected or known disease. This EWI is designed for VHA healthcare systems whose eye clinics are tight on access and desire to use the TECS model to 1) improve routine eye care access and 2) provide eye care access to their rural Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). The EWI can operate using a standard model, where a center can be self-sufficient in terms of reading and program administration; or a hub/spoke model, where a regional hub takes care of multiple TECS spoke sites.

TECS began in March 2015 with pilot funds from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) and became an ORH Enterprise-Wide Initiative (EWI) in October 2017. TECS primarily focuses on providing rural eye care for Veterans who might otherwise have to drive very far to receive this care. It has been operational within the VHA for 10 years, having grown from 3 pilot sites in Georgia to more than 100 sites across the country.

Goals and Objectives

The TECS EWI aims to:

1. Provide eye care access to vulnerable Veteran populations, namely rural, highly rural, and homeless Veterans.
2. Improve Veterans' access for routine eye examinations via telehealth.
3. Reduce distance and travel time and cost for Veterans to receive eye care.

Methodology

Veterans in both rural and urban areas with limited access to eye care benefit greatly from TECS. The program provides better access to eye care by providing eye care in the Veterans' primary medical care home.

TECS collects information about a patient's eyes and a remote eye doctor can then interpret the information.

How does TECS work?

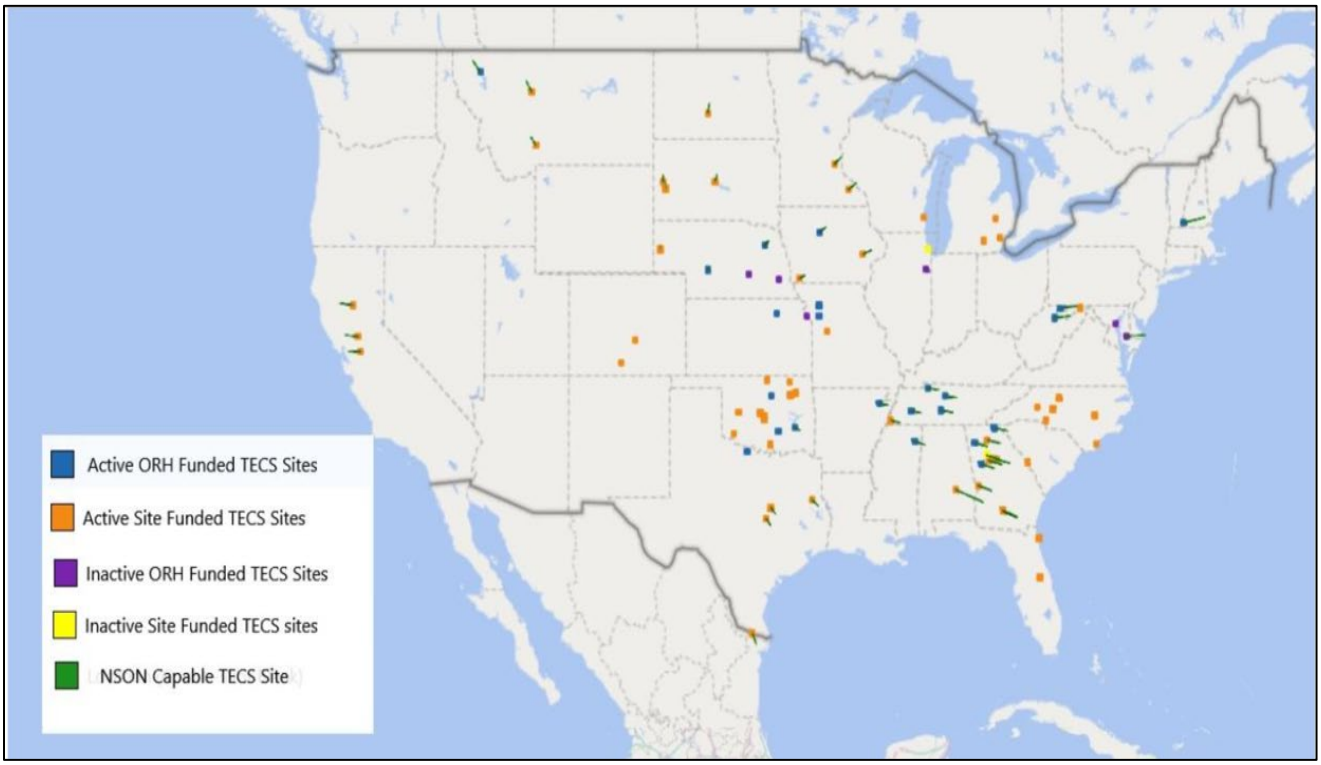
Patients are seen by a qualified eye technician in a local VHA facility (usually a Community Based Outpatient Clinic – CBOC). Here the patients receive the same eye exams components that they would receive in a traditional face-to-face eye clinic visit. This includes a vision check, measuring the power for glasses, eye pressure reading, and imaging of the retina. The patients can pick out and order new glasses on site. The data and images that are collected during the exam are reviewed by an eye care provider within 48 hours. The providers will contact the Veteran with exam results and will coordinate follow-up visits as needed.

Impact on Rural Veteran Health

TECS provides Veterans with more accessible access to eye care in rural areas. TECS sites are in local CBOCs which are often significantly closer to most Veterans than the closest medical center. This program also helps to reduce wait times for eye care services.

Our well-trained ophthalmology technicians can fit Veterans for glasses and know when to alert providers of a potential eye related emergency. The TECS providers can identify major ocular diseases that could otherwise go untreated, resulting in blindness.

There are currently more than 100 TECS sites across the VHA nationally, including a mobile van, with 37 of the 100+ TECS sites having received start-up funding or are currently supported by ORH.



Active and Inactive TECS Sites across the VHA

Key Takeaways

- TECS provides Veterans with an eyeglass check and an ocular health examination to detect eye disease at the patient's primary medical care home.
- Multiple published studies prove the safety, quality, and efficacy of the TECS program.
- Veterans have high satisfaction with the program and are able to get their eye exam with minimal wait time and in many cases, saved long distances in driving.
- TECS improves access for eye care and prevents blindness in our nations' heroes/sheroes.

TECS improves rural Veterans access to eye care.

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Contact

April Maa, MD, TECS EWI Program Lead. Director, National Subspeciality Ophthalmology Network (NSON) Virtual Eye Care Services VISN 23 CRH. April.Maa2@va.gov

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