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

VHA Rural Workforce Evaluation (CDPE)

Background

Reduced healthcare access in rural areas is due in large part to marked shortages of health professionals, particularly physicians and Advanced Practice Providers (APPs).[1-4] Staffing shortages prior to 2020 were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading the American Hospital Association to declare the national physician/APP workforce shortage as a "national emergency."[5] The impact is even more severe in rural areas. Dobis and Todd found that the most rural areas have significantly more restricted access to care.[6] In metropolitan and micropolitan areas, respectively, 16.3% and 16.8% of counties are in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), compared to 40% of counties in rural areas.

About 25% of Veterans live in areas designated as HPSAs.[7] The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has a higher rate of workforce attrition (9.6%) than growth (3% over past 5 years).

Goals and Objectives

To address the issue of provider (physician and advanced practice provider (APP)) shortages in rural VHA facilities, the VHA Office of Rural Health (ORH) Veterans Rural Health Resource Center-White River Junction project, *VA Rural Workforce Evaluation Center for Program Design and Evaluation (CDPE)*, has four objectives:

1. To describe the multi-level factors influencing provider (physician and advanced practice provider (APP) recruitment and retention at rural VHA facilities (within the context of the VA more broadly and non-VA rural settings).

2. To identify evidence-based and other promising solutions to addressing barriers to rural workforce recruitment and retention (with emphasis on but not exclusive to the VHA).

3. To describe the nature of the rural physician shortage within the VHA using VHA data

4. To identify gaps (opportunities) between what the evidence suggests and what is currently being implemented, identify strategies where evidence is not clear, and prioritize actions or additional research needed based on efficacy, feasibility, and fit for addressing VHA-specific barriers.

Methodology

This evaluation will use several strategies to achieve the intended aims. Specifically, a landscape analysis will be done to assess the VHA's rural workforce needs, identify effective strategies for addressing the need, and identify current efforts underway. We will also conduct a gap analysis to identify the need for additional data or research on evidence for strategies and prime opportunities to address the rural VHA workforce shortage. We will also conduct mixed-methods analysis of secondary data from multiple sources to address the overall aim and objectives.

Impact on Rural Veteran Health

The evaluation will provide guidance for addressing rural physician workforce shortages which have the potential to reduce wait times for rural veterans seeking primary and specialty healthcare appointments, enhance care continuity for veterans through reduced physician turnover, and broaden the healthcare service options for rural veterans through increased provider workforce.

Results of this evaluation will be spread through dissemination activities such as presentations and publications. The work in fiscal year 2024 will also support the planning of a multi-stakeholder national conference to address physician workforce barriers and solutions.

Key Takeaways

This project describes the nature of the rural VHA provider workforce shortage and identifies optimal strategies and opportunities for addressing this need.

- Ample research documents a substantial shortage of health care professionals, including physicians, nurses, and other advanced practice providers, and this shortage is expected to continue due to an aging population and an anticipated wave of physician retirements over the next decade.
- The lack of providers is particularly notable in rural counties of the U.S., 40% of which are designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs).
- Staffing shortages at VHA facilities are widespread and enhancing workforce supply is considered a key priority.
- It is unknown in what ways the proposed VHA workforce mitigation strategies may be relevant to unique characteristics of rurally located VHAs and the patients and providers residing in their geographic catchment areas.

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