

Office of Health Equity

Veterans Health Administration

Department of Veterans Affairs



ACCESS TO CARE AMONG RURAL VETERANS

Lei-Nikki Bowser, MHA, Office of Health Equity and Donna L. Washington, MD, MPH, Health Equity-QUERI National Partnered Evaluation Center.

OHE would like to extend a special thanks to Daniel Palmeri from VHA's Office of Rural Health for his input and guidance.

INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves a Veteran population that is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Equitable access to high-quality care for all Veterans is a major tenet of the VA healthcare mission. The Office of Health Equity (OHE) champions the elimination of health disparities and achieving health equity for all Veterans.

The Office of Health Equity-QUERI Partnered Evaluation Center examines and evaluates health outcomes and healthcare quality across the entire VA healthcare system paying special attention to whether gender, geographical location, or individuals that are members of minority population groups experience disparities in care.

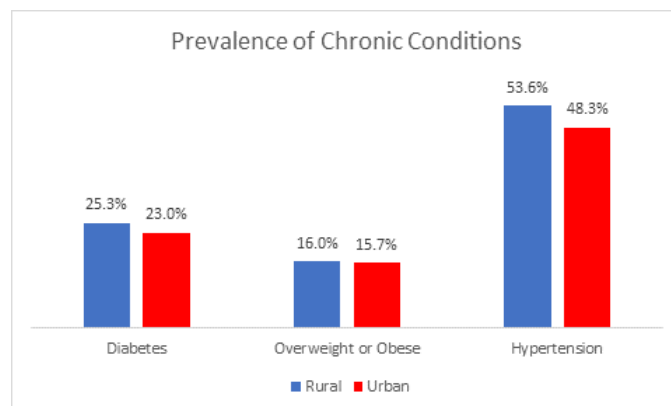
There are currently 4.7 million rural and highly rural Veterans. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) estimates that there are **2.8 million** rural Veterans who are enrolled in and rely on the VA's health care system.

Veterans residing in rural and highly rural areas don't always have the same access to VA health care as those in more suburban and urban areas. This

can often result in poor long-term health outcomes. For instance, the closest VA medical facility for Veterans residing in Hollis, AK is over 1,000 miles away.

HEALTH DISPARITIES

More than one-half (56.0%) of rural Veterans enrolled in the VA health system are over the age of 65. This population of Veterans are also likely to have more complex medical conditions and are more likely to be diagnosed with diabetes, high blood pressure and heart conditions than Veterans living in more urban areas.



Suicide rates among rural Veterans tend to be higher compared to Veterans that reside in urban areas. Veterans living in highly rural areas that use



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Health Equity

VA's healthcare system are 65% more likely to die from suicide than those residing in urban areas.

REDUCING DISPARITIES AND IMPROVING ACCESS

VA pioneered telehealth initiatives that have successfully connected Veterans to various medical services that they may have otherwise not received. However, according to ORH, 42% of Veterans residing in rural or highly rural areas enrolled in VA's health systems do not have internet access at home that could support VA telehealth services.

Collaborative efforts with both private and public organizations are imperative to bridging existing gaps to accessing care. The VA has several partnerships in place that will bring connectivity to millions over the next few years.



National Partnerships

VA and Walmart have partnered to offer telehealth services to reach underserved Veterans. According to the Secretary's Center for Strategic Partnerships, 90% of Americans live within 10 miles of a Walmart. Therefore, providing Veterans with the opportunity to access VA care through telehealth clinics at their local Walmart can assist in overcoming geographical barriers to health care.

The VA along with other federal agencies serve on the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) American Broadband Initiative's task force to expand our nation's broadband capacity. Through this interagency collaboration, VA has created the Connected Care Pilot Program which has brought broadband access to more rural places with limited capacity to support remote virtual care.

The Veterans Health Administration's remote patient monitoring program resulted in a 25% reduction in days of inpatient care and a 19% reduction in hospital admissions. To learn about the different VA Connected Care technologies, please visit the [Connected Care](#) webpage.

More information on how the VA is increasing access to care for rural Veterans can be found at: <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/impact.asp>

For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit: <https://www.va.gov/healthequity/>

References

Office of Rural Health. (2019). Rural Veterans. Retrieved on June 5, 2019, from <https://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/aboutus/ruralvets.asp>