

# Office of Health Equity

## Veterans Health Administration

### Department of Veterans Affairs



## ROUTINE SCREENING OF VETERANS FOR DIGITAL NEEDS

### INFORMATION BRIEF

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#### 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.

Providing telehealth services is vital to increasing access high-quality healthcare for Veterans. Telehealth technology can increase access to care by removing barriers such as long travel times to appointments.

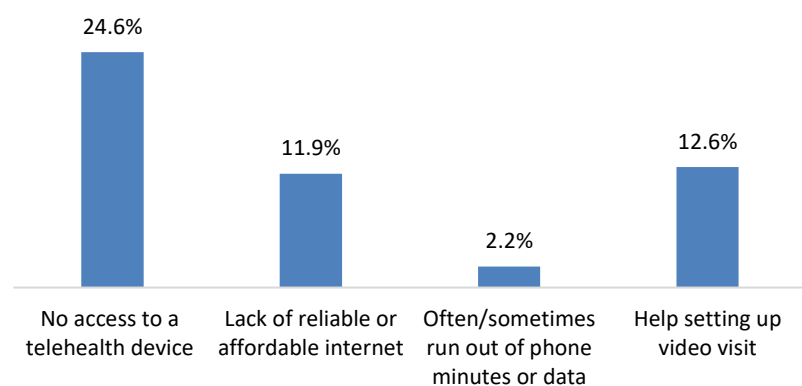
#### SCREENING FOR VETERANS' DIGITAL NEEDS

In August 2020, VHA implemented the national Digital Divide Consult to provide a loaned internet-connected device and/or assistance applying for federal internet subsidy to Veterans without reliable internet access or video-capable devices. To systematically identify Veterans who would benefit from a Digital Divide Consult, digital needs questions were integrated into an existing VHA social risk screening and referral program, "Assessing Circumstances & Offering Resources for Needs" (ACORN). ACORN is an

initiative that aims to systematically identify and address unmet social needs among all Veterans to improve health and advance health equity.

Among 540 Veterans screened at two rural VHA primary care clinics between July 2021 and June 2022, 41.1% screened positive for at least one digital need. Almost a quarter of Veterans reported not having access to any telehealth device, such as a Smart Phone, tablet, or computer, while roughly 12% lacked reliable or affordable internet, and a little over 2% reported often or sometimes running out of phone minutes or data. Nearly 13% of Veterans were interested in help setting up a telehealth visit; and of those, more than half needed help learning to use a device.

#### Percent of Veterans Screened with an Unmet Digital Need



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## REDUCING DISPARITIES AND IMPROVING ACCESS

When a VHA health care provider places a Digital Divide Consult, Veterans can receive assistance to determine if they might be eligible to be lent an internet-connected tablet from VA so Veterans can reach their VA care team through telehealth.

To care for marginally housed and Veterans experiencing homelessness, a long-standing partnership between VA and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) established the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. The HUD-VASH program provides permanent supportive housing for eligible Veterans. In September 2020 the VA initiated a nationwide program to specifically distribute video-enabled tablets and cell phones to HUD-VASH participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is one of the nation's largest programs focused on improving access to care for high-risk individuals by dispensing digital devices. VA researchers found that when Veterans eligible for HUD-VASH services received these devices, in-person and video-based visits increased. Specifically, 6 months following receipt, in-person and video engagement increased by an average of 1.4 visits (8%) and 3.4 visits (125%), respectively. Therefore, providing video-enabled devices to Veterans in a supportive housing program may facilitate their engagement in their health care.

A Digital Divide Consult can also provide Veterans with assistance in determining if they are eligible to receive a discount on home internet or phone service through two Federal Communications Commission (FCC) programs: Lifeline and the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). AT&T, SafeLink by TracFone, T-Mobile, and Verizon help Veteran subscribers



avoid data charges when using VA Video Connect on their networks. This enables Veterans to access their VA care teams through telehealth with fewer worries about data fees. The VA Mobile [website](#) provides more information about the mobile carrier programs and VA Video Connect.

**For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit this [link](#).  
To learn more about VA's available resources to help Veterans overcome the Digital Divide, click [here](#).**

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### References

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