VA Salem Health Care System – Smartphone Training Education for Veterans

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

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Developed by
VHA National Homeless Programs Office

INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Programs Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The VA Salem Health Care System (VASHCS) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for providing training and education on the use of smartphones to keep Veterans engaged in VA health care services.

Telehealth, or telemedicine, is a treatment option that allows medical providers to provide care to patients without an in-person office visit. It is primarily online with internet access on computers, tablets, or smartphones. Although adoption of telehealth progressed gradually throughout VA over the last decade, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic changed this trajectory. In March 2020, and consistent with guidance provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the VHA Homeless Program Office directed homeless programs across VA to decrease routine or non-emergent face-to-face encounters with Veterans. This necessitated swift and rapid adoption of telehealth and other video communication technology solutions to ensure that Veterans stayed engaged in care while minimizing their risk of infection from COVID-19.

While VA Video Connect (VVC) remained the preferred method to conduct video telehealth encounters between the Veterans and their providers, on March 19, 2020, VA's Assistant Secretary for Office of Information & Technology and Chief Information Officer issued guidance that permitted VHA clinicians to use video chats applications such as Apple FaceTime, Facebook Messenger video chat, Google Hangouts video, or Skype. This guidance was a critical stopgap measure that enabled clinicians to continue to provide care while the appropriate VVC and clinical documentation infrastructure was expanded. However, effective use of this new guidance could be challenging for Veterans who were currently experiencing homelessness or were formerly homeless as they often did not have cellphones, much less smartphones or other internet-connected devices. "Lack of telephones" had been a consistent barrier for Veterans experiencing homelessness prior to the pandemic, so the pivot to telehealth created new urgency to find national solutions. In response, VHA Homeless Programs Office Business Intelligence (BI) section began exploring opportunities to furnish Veterans with smartphones.

In April 2020, when VHA was granted authority to utilize funds provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) Act to secure disposable smartphone devices, BI launched the Homeless Programs Disposable Smartphone Initiative. This initiative provided smartphones, with time

limited data plans, to homeless or at-risk Veterans that were engaged in VHA Homeless Programs or other community partner homeless services. In contrast to VA's Digital Divide program, smartphones provided through this initiative would become the property of the Veteran recipients and would not need to be returned to VA at any point. Distribution of the devices began in July 2020 and continues today.

As BI shipped smartphones to local VA homeless programs for distribution throughout 2021, many sites observed that telehealth adoption was still lower than expected. When researching further, staff at the VASHCS's Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) program discovered some Veterans receiving smartphones did not know how to use them. When talking with these Veterans to better understand the challenges, it was noted that they were neither comfortable with the technology nor understood the full range of smartphone or tablet capabilities. Recognizing the need for additional education and hands on training, the VASHCS HCHV team developed and implemented a four-session psychoeducation group called "Phone and Technology Education".

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Focused and hands-on education is effective at increasing use of telehealth services for homeless and formerly homeless Veterans.

The Phone and Technology Education group provided an opportunity for Veterans to learn how to use smartphones and other internet-connected devices to meet their needs. A four-session structure of one-hour groups laid the groundwork for effective smartphone use. In Session 1, Veterans were provided with background history on how simple cellular telephones began incorporating the features of computers, eventually evolving into the smartphones and devices of today. Session 2 provided an overview of the different smartphone models and data carriers available through the Homeless Program Disposable Smartphone Initiative and VA Digital Divide program. Session 3 further highlighted the computer-like features that were available in smartphones, raising awareness of the full range of activities that Veterans could do. Lastly, Session 4 provided concrete steps on how Veterans could connect to their VHA providers using VVC or other video chat applications. At each session, Veterans had opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback on the education content. Additionally, at the end of all four sessions, Veterans were given a certificate for completing the program, as well as taking a survey for improvement of the group's material. Additional details about session content are available in Appendix A of this paper.

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When documenting Veteran group participation in the electronic health record (EHR), staff at VASHCS utilized existing clinic profiles to appropriately capture workload credit. As the majority of the participating Veterans were enrolled in the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program, existing HUD-VASH group clinic profiles were used. Each group session was documented using the following common procedural technology (CPT) code in 30-minute increments depending on number of Veterans served: S9445 – "Patient education, not otherwise classified, non-Physician Provider, Individual, per Session" for individual sessions; S9446 – "Patient education, not otherwise classified, non-Physician Provider, Group, per Session" for groups between two and 12 Veterans; and 99078 – "Physician or other Qualified Health Care Professional Qualified by Education, Training, Licensure/Regulation (when Applicable), Educational Services Rendered to Patients in a Group Setting" for groups of 13 Veterans or more.

CONCLUSION

Since beginning the Phone and Technology Education group sessions, Veterans served by VASHCS have reported that they have an increased sense of confidence when utilizing their smartphones, have more enjoyment from being able to access applications that would connect them to family and friends, and were more likely to utilize VVC sessions to receive care from their providers. As homeless programs throughout VA continue to grow and learn from expansions of telehealth and smartphone use, they will likely find Veterans becoming more self-sufficient and confident as they embrace both technology and telehealth services through VVC.

We would like to thank the dedicated staff at VASHCS for sharing their practice with us. For more information about this practice, please contact HomelessVets@va.gov.

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APPENDIX A: PHONE AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION GROUP SESSION OUTLINE

The following is the session outline for VASHCS's Phone and Technology Education groups.

Session 1: History of Telephones

During Session 1, facilitators provide Veterans with brief history of how smartphones evolved from cellular telephones. The purpose of this session is to help Veterans understand that smartphones are capable of more than simply making telephone calls. The facilitators also review innovations in touchscreen technology and the use of gestures to navigate their device's user interface. Visual examples of common smartphone interface layouts, functionality, and gestures are explored. Facilitators close the session with a participation exercise so that Veterans could practice concrete activities such as adding contact information to their phone.

Session 2: Cell Phone Carriers and Plans

During Session 2, facilitators provide Veterans with education on the major cellular telephone service carriers and service plans which includes a review on how data is used and consumed as part of their plan. The purpose of this session is to help Veterans understand the business and budgeting side of their smartphone use. Facilitators show how users of iOS (i.e., Apple) and Android smartphones could review their data usage to both effectively manage their available data as well as make informed decisions when purchasing or changing data plans or cellular telephone carriers in the future. Facilitators also provide Veterans with education on sending text messaging, making phone calls, retrieving voicemails, and how all these activities affect data and cellular minute usage. Facilitators close the session with a participation exercise so that Veterans could practice setting up, accessing, and managing their own personal voicemail.

Session 3: How Smart Phones are Like Traditional Computers

During Session 3, facilitators provide Veterans with education on accessing the internet and using web browser applications. The purpose of this session is to help Veterans understand how to effectively and safely navigate the internet. Facilitators spend time informing Veterans about safe internet browsing practices to reduce their risk of scams, phishing emails, malware, and other internet security issues. Facilitators also provide information in how to report possible scams or to receive help if they believe

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they are a victim of identity theft. Facilitators close the session with a participation exercise so that Veterans could practice setting up email accounts.

Session 4: Accessing HealthCare through Veterans Video Connect

During Session 4, facilitators provide Veterans with education accessing VA health care through VVC. The purpose of this session is to help Veterans understand how to effectively participate in telehealth. As VVC requires that Veterans have an email address, facilitators assist Veterans with creating an email address when needed and with downloading the VVC app from the app store. Facilitators close the session with a participation exercise so that Veterans could practice the steps of logging into a VVC appointment.

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