

OFFICE OF RURAL HEALTH ANNUAL REPORT  
**THRIVE 2018**



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



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# EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Nearly 5 million American Veterans live in rural communities. And while their backgrounds are as varied as the neighborhoods they call home, they share a common need – access to high-quality medical care.

Since its inception, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Rural Health (ORH) has committed itself to overcoming the obstacles that often separate rural Veterans from clinical services. From telehealth to caregiver incentive programs, ORH partners on a wide array of innovative solutions to bridge physical distances and overcome provider shortages.

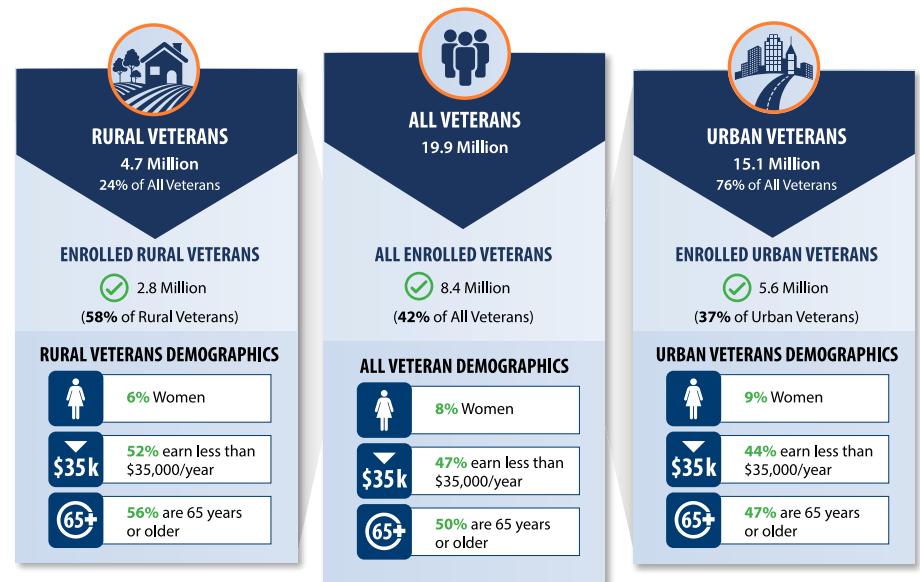
Innovation is more than a buzzword at ORH. It's at the center of everything we do, the principle on which we build each program. Initiatives such as ORH's award-winning Home-based Cardiac Rehabilitation program came about because we asked a simple but powerful question: how can we do things better? The result is an approach that combines breakthrough technology with fresh thinking to benefit rural Veterans.

But innovation doesn't happen in a vacuum. ORH relies on our collaborations with partners at the federal, state and local levels to identify rural community needs and develop lasting solutions. Our engagements with Microsoft, the Broadband Interagency Working Group and the Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee inform our perspective, enhance our capabilities and help us develop new ways to connect rural Veterans with quality care.

As we look beyond 2018, one thing remains certain – innovation and collaboration will continue to be the bedrock of ORH's mission. Powered by new ideas and strengthened by our partners, we will continue to drive solutions that help rural Veterans **thrive**.

**Thomas F. Klobucar, PhD**

*Executive Director, Office of Rural Health*



## WHO WE ARE

Rural Veterans often face a variety of obstacles – including hospital closings; greater geographic and distance barriers; and provider shortages – which separate them from quality medical care.

In recognition of the complex challenges facing rural communities, Congress established ORH under 38 U.S. Code § 7308 to build solutions that enable rural Veterans, regardless of where they live, to obtain a similar standard of care to their urban counterparts. These solutions range from high-tech platforms such as telehealth to incentive programs that encourage clinicians and volunteers to support underserved communities.

In collaboration with its Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers ([VRHRC](#)), ORH invests in innovative programs such as these to increase access to care for the 2.8 million rural Veterans who rely on VHA for care. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, ORH:



Served **1.35 million** rural Veterans



Cared for more than **84,500** rural Veterans through telehealth services



Trained more than **15,900** VA clinical, non-clinical and community-based clinical and non-clinical employees



Trained more than **1,400** students to serve rural Veterans



Collaborated with **21** VA program offices



Worked with more than **450** VA sites of care that participated in ORH-funded programs

In FY2018, ORH's VRHRCs continued to serve as hubs for rural health care research, innovation and dissemination. Located at VA medical centers in Iowa City, Iowa; Salt Lake City, Utah; and White River Junction, Vermont, the VRHRCs:

- ▶ Collaborated with VA Health Services Research & Development to conduct research on health care disparities affecting rural Veterans
- ▶ Used geospatial solutions to drive rural geographic database design, rural policy analysis, and strategic planning in support of rural Veteran health care, including map products to respond quickly to Hurricane Florence response efforts
- ▶ Identified primary care provider recruitment and retention techniques to address rural provider shortages
- ▶ Analyzed data to identify patterns and characteristics of rural populations associated with suicide, suicide-related behavior and substance abuse disorder



## VA PRIORITIES

Throughout FY2018, ORH collaborated with its VRHRCs, program office partners and external stakeholders to fulfill both the Office's strategic goals and VA's priorities, including the Secretary's pledge to improve access to health care in rural areas. VA priorities include:



**Customer Service**



**VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act Implementation**



**Business Transformation**



**VA and DoD Collaboration**

To help rural Veterans thrive in their communities, the Office aligns all of its activities to VA's priorities and ORH's [strategic plan](#) to identify, support and disseminate innovative health care solutions. In partnership with internal and external stakeholders, ORH initiatives support customer service, MISSION Act implementation and business transformation by increasing availability of care, incorporating community care partners into integrated solutions and deploying advanced technology.





## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

In FY18, ORH used the Rural Health Initiative budget of \$270 million to implement innovative, evidenced based programs and Rural Promising Practices in collaboration with more than 21 VA program offices to serve 1.35 million rural Veterans. ORH's 50 [Enterprise Wide Initiatives](#) impacted more than 1.2 million Veterans at 97 percent of VA Medical Centers across all 18 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN), and a total of over 950 VA sites of care.

### **Agricultural Vocation Training**

In 2018, Congress directed ORH to create a pilot program to provide Veterans with agricultural vocation training as well as behavioral health care services and treatments from licensed providers. In response, ORH collaborated with VA's Nutrition and Food Services program as well as the Offices of Care Management and Social Work, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention's Therapeutic and Supported Employment Service section, and Community Engagement to develop the Veterans Affairs Farming and Recovery Mental Health Services ([VA FARMS](#)) pilot program.

To generate nationwide interest in this innovative program, ORH opened applications to every VHA facility and encouraged each to partner with an existing community organization engaged in agricultural training. Representatives from partner offices reviewed applications for feasibility, probability of success and compliance with the Congressional mandate.

In July 2018, VA awarded ten VHA sites of care with funding to implement their proposed pilot programs. ORH will provide national oversight of the pilot program and evaluate outcomes, efficacy and lessons learned to determine agricultural therapy's ability to enhance the lives of Veterans with behavioral and mental health needs.



### **Innovative Home-based Cardiac Rehabilitation**

In the fall of 2018, VRHRC Iowa City's Home-based Cardiac Rehabilitation (HBCR) program received the 2018 American Associate of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation (AACVPR) Dr. Linda K. Hall Innovation Award. The award acknowledged a program that has enhanced delivery of care for a patient population in an innovative way, beyond the traditional model of cardiac rehabilitation. The HBCR model addresses access to cardiac rehabilitation for Veterans, especially those in rural regions who are not able to access traditional services.

Since the original pilot program began in 2010, the ORH Iowa City VRHRC team has disseminated this model to an additional 28 VA sites as "hubs" and nine VAMCs as VA "spokes". As of Spring 2018, the model had served nearly 3,000 Veterans nationwide.

### **Clinical Resource Hubs**

VA is leading the nation in telemedicine advancement as the largest provider of telehealth services in the country. Rural Veterans rely on telehealth technology to access high-quality clinical care from their homes or from clinical locations closer to where they live.

In FY18, ORH funded more than 20 virtual programs totaling \$120 million to build rural-focused health care solutions that enable Veterans to obtain safe and effective care at nearby facilities or in the comfort of their living rooms. As part of this commitment, ORH is partnering with the Office of Connected Care to develop Clinical Resource Hubs that will use telehealth technology to

connect rural Veterans with primary care and mental health services. In 2019, ORH will devote \$100M to support and expand these centers.

### **Rural Scholars Fellowship**

The Rural Scholars Fellowship is a two-year educational program in which fellows can continue to practice but are funded for protected time so they can participate in fellowship related research and innovation activities. This program also serves to support the recruitment and retention of talented VA providers. Funded by ORH, the program includes interactive didactic curriculum and mentored completion of an innovation project in a rural VA medical facility.

In 2018, VA selected two rural clinicians for the Rural Scholars Fellowship program – Dr. Sherry Brewer and nurse practitioner Jennifer Eickstaedt. Over the next two years, the fellowship will offer these practitioners the opportunity to become leading rural researchers and innovators.



# PARTNERSHIPS



ORH partners with federal, state and local entities to develop innovative programs and elevate the rural Veteran voice to a diverse group of stakeholders. These collaborations inform our perspective, helping us align program and policy development with the evolving needs of rural communities.

### Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

In 2018, ORH obtained input from a diverse range of local, state and federal rural health and Veteran stakeholders through the Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee ([VRHAC](#)). The Committee met in Biloxi, MS and Washington, DC to identify barriers to health access experienced by rural Veterans and recommend solutions.

In the past year, ORH helped VRHAC obtain 27 briefings from federal, state and local subject matter experts; meet with the VA Chief of Staff; and conduct three VA and community site visits. Key topics included rural health care innovations, workforce modernization and recruitment, telehealth services, and the VA MISSION Act.

During this year's Biloxi meeting, VRHAC visited Keesler Air Force Base's oncology and cardiac centers to better understand VA and the U.S. Department of the Army's patient sharing agreement. Through this partnership, two-thirds of Keesler's cardiac patients are enrolled in the VA health care system and participation in national oncology clinical trials is possible due to the combined larger patient base.





## Research and Innovation


Throughout the year, ORH addressed rural health care challenges through research, innovation and dissemination of new models of care.

To disseminate innovative and proven programs that increase rural Veterans' access to care, ORH plays an integral role in the VA Innovation Ecosystem. In 2018, ORH participated in the Diffusion of Excellence's VHA Shark Tank Competition, an opportunity to recognize top performers solving some of the toughest challenges across VHA. ORH's Caring for Older Adults and Caregivers at Home (COACH) program was selected as a finalist for providing dementia care to Veterans in their home and offering education in dementia care and resource assistance to Veteran caregivers. After one year, the program reduced agitated Veteran behaviors by 14 percent, reduced negative caregiver reactions to behaviors by 34 percent and reduced caregiver burnout.

ORH also sponsored a new Shark Tank priority category this year: Excellence in Employee Recruitment and Retention for Rural Facilities, which sought practices that improve employee recruitment and foster growth and opportunity for rural employees.

Further, ORH's VRHRCs continue to collaborate with VA Health Services Research & Development (HSR&D) to conduct research on health care disparities affecting rural Veterans.

### 2018 VHA SHARK TANK COMPETITION




**About the 2018 VHA Shark Tank Competition**  
The Competition offers a unique opportunity to recognize employees, who are solving some of the toughest challenges across VHA. To be eligible, applicants must have successfully implemented their practice in at least one facility, and it must address one of the VHA Shark Tank Priorities.

**Office of Rural Health (ORH)**  
This year, the Office of Rural Health is sponsoring a new priority category: Excellence in Employee Recruitment and Retention for Rural Facilities. The Competition seeks practices that improve employee recruitment and foster growth and opportunity for rural employees. Improve recruitment and morale among rural employees by submitting your practice to the 2018 VHA Shark Tank Competition!

**For more information, visit the Diffusion of Excellence page on VA Pulse or follow #VASHarkTank or #VADiffusion on Twitter.**

**2018 VHA Shark Tank Competition Timeline**



**About the Diffusion of Excellence Initiative**  
Through the Diffusion of Excellence model, VHA empowers frontline employees to solve some of the organization's toughest challenges and improve care and experiences for Veterans across the system. The Diffusion of Excellence identifies and spreads field-developed promising practices that promote positive outcomes for Veterans and VHA employees.

**Diffusion of EXCELLENCE**  
Disseminating Best Practices Across VHA



### **Broadband Access Partnerships**

Roughly one in four rural residents say access to high-speed internet is a major problem in their area, according to PEW Research Center. To help meet this need, ORH collaborated with public and private partners in FY18 to help expand broadband access to rural communities nationwide.

ORH and VA's Office of Connected Care partnered with Microsoft on the Microsoft Airband Initiative to define areas for broadband expansion using Airband technology to benefit rural Veterans.

In FY18, ORH worked with federal agencies in the Broadband Interagency Working Group (BIWG) to improve coordination across programs, reduce regulatory barriers to broadband deployment and promote awareness of the importance of federal support for broadband investment. Working alongside agencies like the Departments of Labor, Commerce and Transportation, ORH worked to expand rural broadband access and empower telehealth solutions that connect rural Veterans with needed care.

### **Memoranda of Understanding**

To spread innovation, ORH continued to develop its relationship with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offices through Memoranda of Understanding (MOU). ORH administers and manages MOUs with:

- ▶ Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA): ORH worked with HRSA to address issues related to improving the health care workforce, health care delivery and health outcomes for rural Veterans



- ▶ Indian Health Service (IHS): IHS and ORH partnered to advance collaboration, coordination and resource-sharing to improve the health status of American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans

In 2018, the VA-IHS partnership saw 256 in-person and online training events shared between agencies, 840,109 prescriptions processed through the VA Central Mail Out Pharmacy program for IHS Veteran patients enrolled in VA, and \$20 million reimbursed to IHS and Tribal Health Programs by VA for care of almost 5,300 enrolled AI/AN Veterans.

### Strategic Planning

During FY18, ORH engaged policy makers and rural stakeholders as part of its 2020-2025 strategic planning process. Through the 2025 Strategic Planning Advisory Group, two-day webinar and off-site meetings, ORH obtained cross-federal input from rural, Veteran and health care experts – including representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Rural Utilities Service and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Health Resources and Services Administration. These efforts helped ORH establish a conceptual framework around rural innovation, agreement on rural health care delivery opportunities and challenges, and highlighted the heterogeneous nature of rural Veterans as it continues its strategic planning process.

ORH relies on collaborations and partnerships, such as through its MOUs and the Strategic Planning Advisory Group, to build its strategic plan and better serve rural Veterans.



## COMMUNICATIONS

To inform and empower rural Veteran stakeholders, ORH created a variety of communications materials in FY18, including [fact sheets](#), social media posts, presentations, a [brochure](#), [newsletter articles](#) and [website content](#). ORH also unveiled a modernized visual style recognizable by ORH's partners and rural Veterans. Collectively, these efforts generated more than 8 million potential impressions.

In addition to these products, ORH focused significant effort on two innovative communications campaigns to tell the story of the complex challenges facing rural Veterans nationwide.

### National Rural Health Day

The ORH communications team unveiled a [new motion graphics video](#), "Meeting the Challenge of Rural Veteran Health Care," on National Rural Health Day to outline ORH's role in connecting rural Veterans with quality health care. The multi-channel communications campaign was designed to describe ORH's legal mandate and mission, identify health care access challenges facing rural Veterans, highlight select ORH programs, and direct rural Veterans to their local VAMCs for more information on available programs.

The video also served as the centerpiece of an awareness campaign – its content, coupled with promotional messaging around National Rural Health Day, provided ORH an opportunity to enhance its brand with familiar stakeholders and introduce itself to new audiences.

The campaign resulted in:



43,000 +

POTENTIAL VIEWS TO A  
NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH  
DAY EMAIL MESSAGE

400

VIDEO VIEWS IN  
LESS THAN TWO WEEKS



788,000

POTENTIAL IMPRESSIONS



101 LIKES AND 51 SHARES



ON FACEBOOK



38 RETWEETS AND 50 LIKES



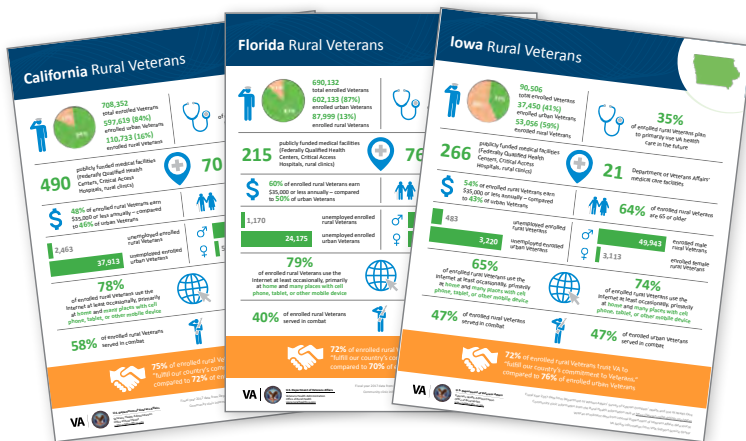
ON TWITTER



## State of the Rural Veteran Report

ORH and its VRHRC in White River Junction, VT developed the State of the Rural Veteran 2018 Report, a data-driven analysis of VA's enrolled rural patient population. The report, which used FY17 VA Survey of Veteran Enrollee's Health and Use of Health Care (Survey of Enrollees) data obtained from 43,654 surveys completed by Veterans enrolled in VA's health care system, provides a high-level understanding of rural Veteran demographics, health care, trust in VA and potential health care challenges.

To keep legislators as well as rural, health and Veteran leaders informed about their rural Veteran constituents, ORH also created state-specific snapshots of rural Veterans, including information on income, age, gender, VA health care utilization and combat services to help stakeholders understand the scope of rural Veteran health care challenges in their state.





## LOOK AHEAD

In FY18, ORH saw its first budget increase in over a decade. With these additional funds and a national focus on ORH's VRHRCs, the Office plans to increase the number of VRHRCs in 2019 to provide greater access to care for rural Veterans.

To streamline processes and provide greater support to VA Medical Centers, VISNs and other field entities who support rural communities, ORH also plans to adopt a new innovative and comprehensive program management system in 2019.

As the national health care landscape continues to evolve, ORH is poised to integrate public and private sector relationships and lead innovation in rural health care as it continues to develop its 2020-2025 strategic plan. In 2019, ORH will hold additional strategy sessions to include the Strategic Planning Advisory Group and key customer segment groups such as rural Veterans, caregivers and VA medical center leadership. The 2020-2025 strategic plan will address national issues while keeping the individual Veteran in mind.

Telehealth will continue to be a focus for ORH over the next year. Working alongside VHA Health Care Operations and the Office of Connected Care, ORH will dedicate \$100 million to the joint funding program for Clinical Resource Hubs that will offer combined primary care, mental health and specialty care services for rural Veterans through telehealth technology and sending out mobile deployment teams, if needed.

In the year ahead, ORH will continue its MOU engagements with IHS and HRSA in an effort to optimize the use of emerging technologies, leverage available resources, establish new access points to care and employ strategies to increase health care options and reduce barriers to care for all rural Veterans.

While ORH is VA's lead advocate for rural Veteran health, the Office cannot tackle the challenges facing rural Veterans alone. ORH relies on collaborations at all levels – from the White House to local Veteran advocates – to fulfill its mission. Through partnerships and innovation, ORH will maintain its singular focus: helping rural Veterans **thrive** in their communities.



**VA**



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