

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC)
Fiscal Year 2021 Recommendations

To the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, VRHAC makes the following recommendations:

The Committee is aware that the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has created a successful external grant program (the Highly Rural Transportation Grant program) to address transportation needs for some highly rural Veterans. However, the Committee also recognizes that many more rural and highly rural Veterans live in counties that are ineligible for this grant program, yet face the same rural transportation challenges as others. Therefore, the Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1: VA modify Highly Rural Transportation Grant program eligibility in three ways:

- Include both “highly rural” and “rural” geographic areas in the program.
- Use rural and highly rural commuting areas based on RUCA codes, rather than county boundaries, to determine geographic eligibility.
- Expand the types of organizations eligible to apply for transportation grants to include tribal Veteran organizations, tribal governments, and county Veteran organizations in addition to the currently authorized Veteran service organizations and state Veteran service agencies.

VA Response: Concur. VA recognizes that highly rural and rural areas are frequently in close proximity and that transportation resources are often similarly limited, or non-existent, in rural areas. The Rural Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes may also provide a more accurate depiction of actual rural and highly rural population distributions. Other types of organizations (other than those currently eligible for these grants) may indeed be the only resources available to Veterans located in small counties or on Tribal lands. Yet, in operating this grant program, VA is bound by the terms of law governing it. See § 307(d), the *Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010*, P. L.111-163 (2010), as amended by 5105 of the *Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other Extensions Act*, 116 H.R. 8337; 38 C.F.R. §§17.700 *et seq.* VA has no discretion to change the terms of law, even through formal rulemaking.

Recommendation 2: VA provides resources and training to increase provider awareness and adoption of telehealth technologies, particularly in rural areas of the U.S.

VA Response: Concur. Since 2018, VA has undergone expansion of video-to-home services, resulting in over 95% of VA's primary care and mental health providers nationally having provided care to Veterans in their homes using video telehealth and more than 9.5 million video telehealth visits to Veterans homes or offsite locations in fiscal year 2021. To support health care professionals, VA maintains a robust telehealth training program that offers asynchronous training opportunities for educating them on the key components of telehealth delivery. VA continues to invest resources to expand telehealth opportunities to deliver care to Veterans irrespective of their location in the country. To address telehealth in rural areas, VA's Office of Connected Care is taking the following actions in 2022:

- Updating VA's Digital Divide Consult to include the Federal Communication Commission's new Affordable Connectivity Program. The Digital Divide consult process helps Veterans obtain the technology and connectivity to participate in VA's telehealth programs.
- Development of an indicator within the electronic medical record to allow providers to readily convey which upcoming appointments may be appropriately delivered by telehealth, facilitating scheduling of telehealth visits.
- Continued expansion of clinical resource hubs in urban locations that can use telehealth to deliver their medical services, including critical care, neurology, mental health and primary care, to rural and underserved areas.
- Completing a strategic assessment of the Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS) program to inform future plans for expansion. ATLAS currently has 12 sites primarily in rural and remote locations offering video telehealth at sites with high-speed internet, in a private and secure location.
- Developing a suite of tools and resources that will raise the awareness of connected care tools for health care professionals and other members of the care team. Continuing national outreach campaigns to promote awareness and adoption of telehealth technologies via field-facing calls and sharing of best practices, including on calls hosted by the Office of Rural Health.
- Funding research projects to better understand barriers and facilitators to care at VA, particularly in rural areas.

Recommendation 3: VA work to improve telehealth access for rural Veterans by prioritizing geographic location during telehealth appointment scheduling

VA Response: Concur. VA is investing in telehealth services, also known as virtual care, to make it an outpatient medical service delivery option for all Veterans, irrespective of location, when clinically appropriate. To expand such options to Veterans seeking this mode of delivery, irrespective of their geographic location, VA's Office of Connected Care is working on the following actions:

- Developing tools that can identify telehealth clinical resources from VAs across the country, enabling Veterans to be scheduled for outpatient medical services that may not be available to them locally or even regionally (through VA medical facilities or authorized community providers). By identifying options for outpatient medical services through VA, VA will empower Veterans to prioritize the locations and modalities by which they choose to receive these services.
- Within the electronic medical record, building in a notification for ATLAS, when there is a site proximal to the Veteran's location.