

# Office of Health Equity

## Veterans Health Administration

### Department of Veterans Affairs



## TELEHEALTH DISPARITIES INFORMATION BRIEF

Shakeria L Cohen, PhD, MSCR, AAAS Science & Technology Policy & Office of Health Equity Fellow, Ursula S. Myers, Ph.D., Charleston Health Equity and Rural Outreach Innovation Center (HEROIC), Elizabeth J. Santa Ana, Ph.D., Charleston Health Equity and Rural Outreach Innovation Center (HEROIC), Kelly J Hunt, PhD, Charleston Health Equity and Rural Outreach Innovation Center (HEROIC), Lauren Korshak, DHealth(c), MS, RCEP, Office of Health Equity

### INTRODUCTION

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves a Veteran population that is 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.

### VA TELEHEALTH TECHNOLOGY OUTCOMES

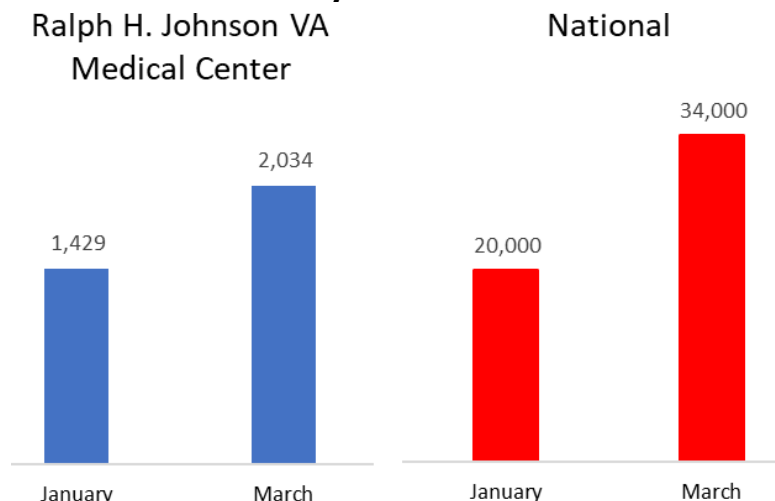
A top priority for the Veteran's Healthcare Administration is improving access to high-quality mental healthcare. Mobile and telemental healthcare are a vital component of increasing access for Veterans. Telephone appointments and videoconferencing can increase access to medical care by removing barriers such as distance, time limitations and safety. Mental health treatment delivered via telehealth is effective and Veterans who receive mental health care through VA telehealth report being very satisfied with their experiences.

The Veteran's Healthcare Administration is making efforts to expand how Veterans receive their care through VA Video Connect. VA Video Connect (VVC) is a videoconferencing application designed for VA medical providers to have virtual face-to-

face meetings with their patients. Veterans can use their smartphone, computer, or tablet to access the application so they can see their provider from a location where they are safe and comfortable.

Beginning in January 2019, The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center created a team to train mental health care providers to use VVC. Through this effort, coupled with the need to expand telehealth access during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center, VVC mental health sessions increased by 42% between January and March 2020. Nationally VVC mental health appointments increased by 70% across this same three-month period.

### Mental Health Appointments Conducted via VCC, January-March 2020



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## **REDUCING DISPARITIES AND IMPROVING ACCESS**

The Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center is piloting an initiative to offer additional support for Veterans with substance use disorders (SUD) by using VVC technology to reduce alcohol dependence and illicit drug use among Veterans with SUD. This initiative allows Veterans to receive important care and overcomes barriers that Veterans may experience when trying to receive care at VA Medical Centers. These barriers may include limited access to reliable transportation, living far away from a VA facility, or being unaware of available treatment options.

A small device delivers messages to patients and their responses are transmitted back through a secured server connected to the patient's computer or digital device. Mental health providers can also use this technology to meet through a video platform that allows them to speak to Veterans face-to-face without the Veterans needing to leave their homes.

The pilot at the Charleston VA Medical Center was a program that lasted 27 days and had Veterans complete two daily tasks that assessed

alcohol or drug use and risk, in addition to helping Veterans develop self-management skills. At the conclusion of their participation, Veterans reported that they found the therapy they received helpful and through their participation, they had an increased focus on their recovery, were motivated to abstain from alcohol and illicit drug use and felt more confident in their coping skills. Veterans also had a positive experience using the technology and reported that it was intuitive, easy to understand, convenient and helpful.

This pilot at the Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center demonstrates that using telehealth technology can be an effective way to expand access to SUD mental health treatment by overcoming many of the barriers to in-person appointments at a VA medical facility.



**For more information about the Office of Health Equity visit this [link](#).  
To learn more about VA telehealth, click [here](#).**