

## Staffers at the VA Lebanon Healthcare System VAMC Find ‘VA Direct’ the ‘Perfect Name’ for the Service Provided

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Pennsylvania’s VA Lebanon Healthcare System has been successful in using Legacy VA Direct—also known as Direct—to complete referrals, with more than 5,400 Direct messages. Ms. Ashley Klick and Ms. Monique Harner are key to VA Direct’s<sup>1</sup> success there. VA Direct is a secure messaging tool used by providers to coordinate care and is managed by the Veterans Health Information Exchange (VHIE) Program Office.

Klick is the VA Lebanon Healthcare System’s Chief of Integrated Veteran Care (IVC), Office of Community Care (OCC), and oversees all of community care referrals<sup>2</sup> for the VA Lebanon Healthcare System, as well as the system’s new referral coordination team. “Lebanon is a Level-2 facility, and we do lots of procedures here, but anything that involves a high level of complexity usually gets referred out to a Level-1 facility,” Klick explained. Harner has been a Medical Support Assistant (MSA) for 11 years and is a MSA supervisor in the VA Lebanon Healthcare System OCC. “I have been through a lot of changes with the [MSA] department and grew with them,” Harner said. “I feel like I’m a life-timer with OCC.”

VA Lebanon Healthcare System was introduced to Legacy VA Direct through the VA Direct National Team’s outreach efforts. Penn State University’s Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, a non-VA facility that frequently communicates and works with the VA Lebanon Healthcare System, agreed to be partners with the facility. “We send a lot of referrals to them, so [Direct] works great,” Harner said. “Faxes can be very unreliable, and doing it this way, we have a clear trail of where our referral went, when it was accepted and when it was scheduled,” Harner added. “It’s just working really, really well.” Importantly, Direct is a key tool because it streamlines the process for VA patients and helps “get them care sooner, faster,” she added. “With faxes, we have to follow up, and then if we don’t hear anything from the facility, we have to follow up.” Faxes require MSAs to ask: Did the facility get the referral? Does it need to be re-faxed? Accountability and reliability mean everything in service to VA patients, and when time is spent questioning where something is or whether or not something was received, it costs valuable time and resources that could have been better spent serving patients, Harner explained. “With VA Direct, it’s just direct. It’s a perfect name. It goes directly to the facility, and we’re getting the Veterans care faster,” Harner stated.

## A Look Forward: Continuing to Streamline Referrals with More Partners

Looking forward to continuing to better provide clinical care to VA patients with Direct, “I would love to see more facilities want to use this system because it does work so well with Hershey,” Klick said. “I would love to see this grow more, if possible.” She pointed out that many health care providers outside of the VA Healthcare System find it a challenge to get their staff to depart from the decades-old fax machine. From July 1, 2021, to July 1, 2022, 14,709 VA patients from the] VA Lebanon Healthcare System received referrals to Hershey and other community providers for services ranging from emergency care, dental care and mental health care, and specialist referrals including cardiology, rheumatology, urology, audiology, oncology, and ophthalmology. These referrals represent vital care to VA patients, and Klick would like to see the use of Direct expanded to continue the improvement in care coordination.

Direct, in its current state, goes far beyond the pitfalls that come with relying on the fax machine, Klick added. In trying to complete referrals at facilities that do not have Direct, a fax will be sent, it appears to go through, but the teams at those facilities may say they never received it, “and we play the back-and-forth game,” she commented. With Direct, however, “we can see the message was sent, you read it, we know you got it,” Klick explains, and “we can follow through and hold the facility accountable for taking the action to schedule” the referrals. In the end, reliability and accountability in the service to VA patients are what matter most, Klick and Harner agreed.

<sup>1</sup> VA Direct may also be utilized for care coordination of care with any provider organizations

<sup>2</sup> Community care referrals – referred care funded by VA outside of the VA Healthcare System for care coordination

To learn more about VA Direct, check out this [video](#).