

Putting **You** at the Center of Your Care



2020 Annual Report

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System



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Improvise. Adapt. Overcome.

As service members, we embraced this concept for learning to work together and never give up. As Veterans, that same concept served us well during 2020, a year that introduced challenges unlike any of us had previously weathered. Here at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, we, too, drew strength from that very same concept in finding ways to continue to serve you safely during the pandemic.

We improvised by expanding your telehealth options so you could receive care safely. Telehealth allows you to see your provider via secure electronic means – such as your internet-connected mobile phone or computer – from the safety of your home. In fact, in 2020, we saw a 42% increase in telehealth encounters and a 38% increase in telemental health care encounters.

We adapted by establishing a drive-through COVID-19 testing site at University Drive; acquiring in-house testing machines; and partnering with the Human Engineering Research Laboratories to design and print swabs for the tests when demand for testing created nationwide supply shortages.

We overcame by keeping our doors open to continue to provide you with the health care you earned and deserve in a timely, professional and safe manner. To keep you safe when you visited for in-person care, we screened everyone at the door for COVID-19 symptoms, staggered appointments, and limited occupancy, to name a few of the precautions we implemented.

Thank you for choosing us for your health care in 2020. We were honored to serve you and look forward to continuing to meet your health care needs.

Donald E. Koenig
Director

Barbara Forsha, MSN, RN, ET
Deputy Director

Ali F. Sonel, MD
Chief of Staff

Lovetta Ford, LCSW
Associate Director

Alan Petrazzi, MPT, MPM, FACHE
Assistant Director

Brenda Shaffer, DNP, RN-BC, NE-BC
Associate Director Patient Care
Services

Sachin Yende, MD
Interim Deputy Chief of Staff

Vital Signs

Totals for FY20 (Oct. 1, 2019 - Sept. 30, 2020)

BUDGET

\$732.5 Million Allocation

\$553.7M Medical
\$65.9M Facilities
\$44.3M Administrative

\$68.6 Million Care in the Community
Paid to non-VA providers for Veterans' care

\$30.4 Million Dedicated Collections
Revenue from third party private insurance, patient copays, etc.



NETWORK OF CARE

2 Medical Centers

University Drive (Oakland)
H.J. Heinz III (O'Hara Township)

5 VA Outpatient Clinics

Beaver, Fayette, Washington, Westmoreland counties in PA; Belmont County, OH



HOSPITAL CAPACITY

549 Patient Beds

University Drive
87 Medicine
78 Psychiatry
59 Surgical

H.J. Heinz III
225 Community Living Center
88 Veterans Recovery Center
12 Compensated Work Therapy/TR



EMPLOYEES

3,893 Total Employees

297 Physicians
961 Nurses

1,161 Veterans

Nearly 1/3 of all VAPHS employees

235 Academic Affiliations



VETERANS SERVED

72,647 Unique Patients

11,830 Admissions

5,543 Surgical Procedures

37 Kidney transplants
Including 7 from living donors
39 Liver transplants
1 Living donor liver transplant
In partnership with UPMC

675,675 Outpatient Visits

49,904 Telehealth Encounters

42% increase from 2019



WOMEN'S HEALTH

5,157 Women Veteran Appointments

590 Mammograms
49 Expecting moms received maternity care

122 Newly Enrolled Women Veterans



SUICIDE PREVENTION

89 Outreach Events

885 Veterans Crisis Line Calls Answered



RESEARCH

373 Active Projects

118 Investigators

\$13.2 Million Research Funding



VOLUNTEERS

430 Volunteers

40,335 Volunteer Hours

\$577,154 in Donations

Money, goods and services

WHOLE HEALTH

VA's Whole Health approach starts with a simple question: What matters to you? It empowers and equips you to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest.



PATHWAY

Pathway is Whole Health's core program. It includes an introductory class in which Veterans complete a personal inventory and reflect on what really matters to them. Veterans go on to work with a Whole Health coach or join a group such as Taking Charge of My Life and Health.



In 2020, we completed 214 face-to-face and virtual Pathway encounters.

WELL-BEING

Well-Being programs provide Veterans with tools and skills to improve their health and life. In 2020, we:



Completed over 200 virtual movement and expressive arts therapy clinics that provided Veterans with wellness tools and skills such as yoga and tai chi.



Averaged 12 participants per each virtual mindfulness class. Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations.



Partnered with Ompractice to give Veterans, caregivers, volunteers and staff free online access to virtual yoga and wellness classes. As of early 2021, more than 160 participants signed up for 266 classes and counting.



Veterans participate in a socially distanced Whole Health Taking Charge of My Life and Health group.




CLINICAL CARE

Clinical care for outpatients and inpatients centers around healing environments and healing relationships, including acupuncture and chiropractic therapy:

Battlefield Acupuncture

We introduced battlefield acupuncture (BFA) as a safe and inexpensive alternative to opioids primarily for Veterans with severe pain lasting longer than six months. BFA is modeled on the U.S. military's BFA program. Needles placed at specific points on the ear trigger the release of analgesic endorphins and anti-inflammatory cytokines.

BFA costs just \$5 for supplies per treatment, reduces overall pain by 2.87 points on a 10-point pain scale, can be completed in a variety of health care settings, and provides immediate and long-term relief up to 30 days after treatment. Used in combination with other therapies, it also lowers stress and improves mood and sleep.

 **In 2020, we provided 198 BFA treatments to 24 Veterans in our Community Living Center and 149 treatments to 78 Veterans at the Fayette County VA Outpatient Clinic.**

Chiropractic

Our chiropractic service used telehealth during the pandemic to screen Veterans for serious problems, prioritize in-person care, and implement supported self-managed care when clinically appropriate.



WHOLE HEALTH at a **GLANCE**

18

Take Charge of My Life
and Health group meetings

5

Introduction to
Whole Health classes

8

Whole Health education
group sessions

219

Chiropractic sessions

106

Expressive Arts sessions

4

Movement Therapy sessions

90

Yoga classes



Ophthalmologist Dr. Seshaiyengar Venkatesh wears personal protective equipment during an eye exam.



TELEHEALTH at a **GLANCE**

49,904

Telehealth encounters
42% increase from 2019

21,717

Telemental health care encounters
38% increase from 2019

16,729

Unique Veterans used secure messaging
6.5% increase from 2019

23,503

VA Video Connect visits
63% increase from 2019

23,503

Clinical Video Telehealth patients served
74% increase from 2019

SCREENING CLC RESIDENTS FOR TELEHEALTH

We developed a standardized screening process to identify Veterans in our Community Living Center (CLC) who might benefit from using internet-connected tablets for telehealth visits. We assessed Veterans' visual, fine motor, hearing and speech abilities to identify 36 residents who could successfully participate either on their own or with caregiver support. At the close of the fiscal year, we continued to work to identify ways to increase participation or expand to other clinical settings.

AT-HOME LOW VISION REHABILITATION

We partnered with Erie VA Medical Center to use telehealth to provide Veterans with close-to-home, low-vision rehabilitation, a service many found to be invaluable during COVID-19. Our low-vision occupational therapist sees Erie Veterans in their homes or nearby clinics via telehealth.

TELE-ONCOLOGY PROGRAM

Hematology oncologist Dr. Vida Passero and her team continued to serve chemotherapy patients in Altoona—plus started serving patients in Erie—through our virtual cancer care network, saving Veterans a four-hour roundtrip to Pittsburgh and avoiding potential exposure to COVID-19. Patients meet via Clinical Video Telehealth with their Pittsburgh-based oncologist, but receive anti-cancer and supportive therapy in Altoona or Erie.

TRAVELING OPHTHALMOLOGIST

Ophthalmologist Dr. Seshaiyengar Venkatesh voluntarily traveled to Erie numerous times over an 18-month period without financial incentive to provide patients with close-to-home cataract surgery.

Keeping You Connected to Your Care

Limiting exposure is key to avoiding the coronavirus. To keep Veterans safe, we looked to virtual options to provide health care in 2020, when clinically appropriate. We gave Veterans the option to see their providers either in person or from the safety of their homes via secure methods such as VA Video Connect and Clinical Video Telehealth.

BRINGING OUR SERVICES TO YOU

During the pandemic, our telehealth staff ensured VAPHS providers had the necessary equipment to transition from traditional face-to-face patient encounters to virtual visits by phone and internet-connected devices such as tablets and smartphones. Telehealth staff trained and equipped VAPHS staff and thousands of Veterans in just a few months to ensure the uninterrupted, timely delivery of high-quality health care VAPHS Veterans have earned and deserve.

Home Telehealth

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Home Telehealth has been on duty seven days a week to triage care and educate Veterans infected with COVID-19.

My HealtheVet (MHV)

MHV—VA's online personal health record—empowers Veterans to take an active role in managing their health care. In 2020, **152,589 messages were sent and received, a 25% increase** from 2019.

MHV advantage: COVID-19 test results are available immediately in MHV once added to the patient's medical record.

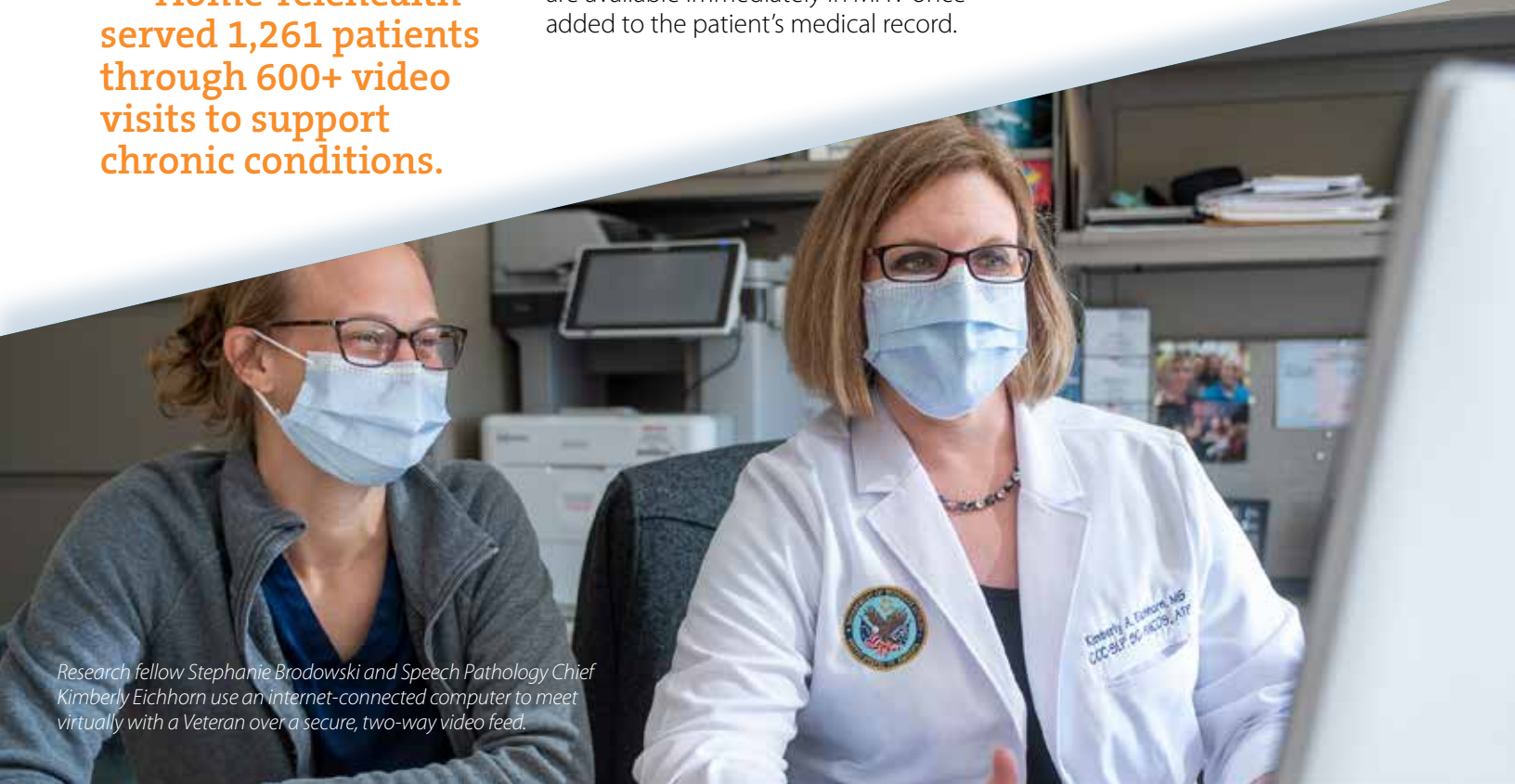
VEText

VA's interactive text-message tool prescreens Veterans for COVID-19 upon arrival at our medical facilities, books appointments for the vaccine, and lets Veterans check in for appointments from their vehicle. During FY20 the system generated over **736,984 messages**.



Home Telehealth served 1,261 patients through 600+ video visits to support chronic conditions.

Research fellow Stephanie Brodowski and Speech Pathology Chief Kimberly Eichhorn use an internet-connected computer to meet virtually with a Veteran over a secure, two-way video feed.



Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged us to find new ways to provide timely care safely. We met those challenges through innovation.

Communications, Safety and Testing

KEEPING VETERANS INFORMED

To keep Veterans up to date on our evolving COVID-19 policies, we posted notices to our website, Facebook page and Twitter feed; sent text messages and letters; installed signs throughout our two Pittsburgh campuses; and provided information in our Veterans Connect newsletter.

CLEANLINESS AND SAFETY

To keep COVID-19 out of our facilities, we expanded telehealth services, preregistered Veterans by phone for in-person appointments, staggered appointments to limit the number of people in our buildings at any given time, mailed to Veterans' homes all but urgently needed prescriptions, limited outpatient escorts initially to support persons only (then to one per patient when COVID-19 cases declined regionally), screened all entrants for COVID-19 symptoms and took their temperature, required everyone to wear face coverings, placed signs and floor stickers for physical distancing, limited elevator occupancy, maintained 6 feet between chairs in waiting areas, limited inpatient visitation but arranged for video visits, installed sneeze guards at reception desks, and followed CDC cleaning and sanitizing guidelines.



HERL's Garrett Grindle, associate director for engineering, and Ian Eckstein, clinical coordinator assistant, print 3D nasal swabs for COVID-19 testing.



3D PRINTED NASAL SWABS

When global supply chain disruptions created worldwide shortages of critical medical testing supplies, we collaborated with the Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL) to use 3D printing to ensure ample access to items such as nasal swabs.

Nasal swabs for COVID-19 testing are inserted in the patient's nostril to the nasopharynx, or from the nose to the ear. Our ear, nose and throat physicians, or ENTs, worked with HERL staff to design and create strong, sterile, flexible swabs that meet Food and Drug Administration manufacturing requirements as Class I medical devices.

QUICK AND EASY TESTING

We established drive-through COVID-19 testing at University Drive; coordinated testing at our H.J. Heinz III campus and the state-run Southwestern Veterans' Home; and acquired in-house testing machines to quickly identify COVID-positive patients.

CLC RESIDENTS FIRST TO RECEIVE VACCINE

We were the first provider in the greater Pittsburgh area to vaccinate nursing home residents: In December, we provided our first round of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to Community Living Center residents.

IMPROVISED FACE SHIELDS

To ensure uninterrupted access to personal protective equipment early in the pandemic, our prosthetics, transportation and Health Administration Service (HAS) staff assembled 1,000 improvised face shields. Staff packaged the shields in individual brown paper bags labeled with words of encouragement such as "Pittsburgh Strong" for delivery to frontline staff.

Associate Director Lovetta Ford writes encouraging notes on bags containing face shields for frontline workers.



HERL produced over 20,000 of the 3-D printed nasal swabs for COVID-19 testing. The innovation ensured Veterans' access to COVID-19 testing during a worldwide shortage of swabs and other critical supplies.



In-Home, Home-Based and Home-Setting Care

VIRTUAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

We quickly established virtual mental health care services for Veterans who prefer phone call and video visits to face-to-face care during the pandemic. Some providers made video and phone calls to Veterans from home; others remained on-site at both of our Pittsburgh campuses. Veterans chose whether to see their providers in person or by phone and VA Video Connect.

HOME-BASED COVID-19 REHABILITATION

We created a home-based program to support the rehabilitation needs of Veterans who either recovered from COVID-19 at home or were discharged home after inpatient treatment for COVID-19. Staff assessed Veterans for health issues such as depression and shortness of breath and provided education on stress management, nutrition, safety and self-monitoring of vital signs and symptoms.

COVID-19 WELLNESS CALLS

We identified 479 Veterans with high-risk chronic illnesses or mental health challenges and called them often to assess their health, screen for COVID-19 symptoms, order lab work, place consults, give safety tips, manage medications, address food insecurities, develop personal health plans, and encourage participation in stress-relieving virtual yoga and mindfulness sessions. The innovative wellness calls kept at-risk Veterans healthy while reducing Emergency Department visits, hospital readmissions, and exposure to the coronavirus. Veterans who participated reported a 95% satisfaction rate with the calls during the third quarter of the fiscal year and 86% of nurse participants rated the calls as helpful.

ON-SITE CLC DIALYSIS

We stood up an on-site dialysis unit at our Community Living Center (CLC) that set the national standard for implementation at other VA medical centers.

In just four weeks, we converted a 14-bed inpatient unit in the CLC into VA's first-ever home-setting dialysis unit. Our CLC Veterans on our H.J. Heinz III campus who need dialysis no longer must travel to University Drive for the life-sustaining treatment. Eliminating travel improves quality and continuity of care; prevents unnecessary exposure to COVID-19; and creates a potential savings of \$1 million annually in transportation costs.

We made our standard operating procedure (SOP) for the unit available to all VA medical centers.

At the close of fiscal year 2020, VA medical centers in California and South Carolina used our SOP to create their own CLC home-setting dialysis units.



Army Veteran William Boyd receives dialysis treatment in his room at the Community Living Center on the H.J. Heinz III campus.

VIRTUAL VIDEO VISITS

Our chaplains were among the first providers to use video conferencing to connect families with hospitalized loved ones. Chaplains donned personal protective equipment including masks, gowns and face shields to not only provide the critically ill with spiritual care, but also use internet-connected tablets to arrange virtual visits with families.



COVID-19 RESPONSE at a **GLANCE**

200+

New employees hired

1,215

Wellness-check birthday calls
to quarantined Veterans

33

Staff deployed to COVID-19
hot spots through VA's
Disaster Emergency Medical
Personnel System (DEMPS)

24

Staff volunteered to help
with COVID-19 response at
state Veterans homes and
other VA medical centers

5

Ventilators loaned to
Philadelphia VA Medical Center

Leading the Way in Quality Care

Awards

Gears of Government Agency Award

Michael Boland, David Julian and William Pileggi: developed emergence delirium safety training for staff and Veterans.

David M. Worthen Rising Star Award

Dr. Deborah DiNardo, Women's Health director, for championing health professions trainee education.

The Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America Antibiotic Steward Scholar Award

Dr. Katie Suda for ongoing research into antimicrobial stewardship.

Society of Family Planning Beacon of Science Award

Dr. Sonya Borrero, associate director, Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, for advancing reproductive health equity.

VHA Clinical Excellence in Dentistry

Dr. Jarrette Kalp

Association of VA Audiologists System Innovation/Redesign Award

Cara Michaux, Au.D.

Association of VA Audiologists Honors of the Association Award

Maureen Wargo, Au.D., MBA, CCC-A

American Academy of Audiology Early-Career Audiologist Award

David P. Jedlicka, Au.D.

Accreditations

The Joint Commission

Hospital, home care, behavioral health and opioid substitution therapy. The accreditation is a known universal symbol of quality.

Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs

Research program.

Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International

Research program.

Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF)

Behavioral health, employment and community services, intensive rehabilitation, interdisciplinary pain rehabilitation and intermediate low vision programs. The accreditation is recognized as an assurance of quality care provided by health and human services organizations.

American College of Radiology

Radiation/oncology department.

Accomplishments

Human Rights Campaign Foundation LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Index Leader

Achieved a top score of 100 for promoting equitable and inclusive care.

Greenhealth Partner for Change

H.J. Heinz III campus recognized for superior performance in environmental sustainability.

Greenhealth Partner Recognition

University Drive campus recognized for commitment to environmental improvements.

93% | 

of VAPHS patients surveyed
**trust us to fulfill our nation's
commitment to Veterans.**

Success Stories: Where Are They Now



Army Veteran Timothy Yablonski with his stepdaughter, Alyssa Last.

Army Veteran Timothy Yablonski, VA's first living-donor liver recipient

We partnered with UPMC in March 2020 to perform VA's first living-donor liver transplant (LDLT) surgery. Yablonski received a portion of liver from his stepdaughter, Alyssa Last. The New York man has since gained weight and the strength to take up activities such as putting up Christmas decorations, enclosing a front porch to keep mosquitos at bay, exercising daily, and even clearing snow.

Yablonski walks on a treadmill every morning and accompanies his wife, Pam, and their dogs to a nearby

park. The couple even hosted Last, of Florida, for a COVID-safe visit in September during the pair's six-month checkup.

Since Yablonski's historic surgery, we performed one other LDLT through our partnership with UPMC. We anticipate providing more LDLTs moving forward: We are one of 15 VA transplant centers nationwide and the only one offering LDLT surgeries. Any Veteran eligible for VA care in the country who needs a transplant has the option of a living donor.

“He's alive and we're so thankful for that. There's no answer they can give, other than this being a miracle.”

—Pam Yablonski, wife of Veteran Tim Yablonski

▶ Story first appeared Aug. 17, 2020, on www.pittsburgh.va.gov. Read the full story: <https://go.usa.gov/xHbGa>



Marine Corps Veteran Richard Franklin, Homeless to Employed

A bout with depression left Franklin homeless. After a brief hospitalization, he enrolled in our Compensated Work Therapy program. He learned patience and other skills that helped

him re-enter the workforce. Franklin is still employed and has rebuilt much of the life he enjoyed before he was homeless.

“The program gave me real guidance and a chance to think. I'm growing to get back to where I was.” —Veteran Richard Franklin

▶ Story first appeared in issue 7 of our Veterans Connect newsletter.





In fiscal year 2020, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System **served Veterans from all 50 states, plus Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.**

From as few as four from North Dakota to as many as 4,626 from West Virginia, Veterans from all over America trusted VAPHS for their health care.

- 4,840 from Ohio
- 1,104 from Florida
- 653 from Texas
- 483 from Georgia
- 468 from Tennessee
- 282 from New Jersey
- 9 from Hawaii

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