

## Health Care

### **The VFW's Concerns:**

Vet Centers are the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) most unheralded program. For 42 years, they have been offering an array of services including individual and family counseling, benefits explanation, substance abuse assessment and referral, and many others. These centers operate without a proper staffing model to provide service for an increasingly eligible group of veterans and families.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to burden health care systems. While frontline health care staff adjusted for the wave of patients needing COVID-19 testing, treatment, vaccinations, and rescheduling overdue appointments, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) shortened the onboarding process and decreased vacancies by 17,000 positions in the past year. VHA needs to expedite staff hiring and onboarding to fill the remaining 29,787 vacancies.

From March 2020 to August 2021, VA increased telehealth visits by 1,407%. According to two VFW COVID-19 health surveys conducted in April of 2020 and 2021, veterans and retirees indicated the majority of their VA appointments were converted to telehealth. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted critical issue needs like the enhancement of telehealth platforms and capabilities that the VFW urges VHA to continue beyond the pandemic. For many rural and underserved veterans, connectivity remains a critical issue. Through Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS), the VFW has worked with VA and Philips to leverage VA's anywhere-to-anywhere authority to expand telehealth options for veterans who live in rural areas. VHA needs to explore ways to proliferate the program by expanding into urban areas that lack public transportation.

According to VA's *2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*, fewer veterans died by suicide in 2019 than the year before. We will have to wait another year to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected veteran suicide protective factors. The VFW urges Congress to pressure VA to create a report on protective factors to include VBA benefits.

Women veterans comprise approximately 10 percent of the veteran population and are the fastest growing cohort within the veteran community. VA must ensure it addresses privacy concerns, expands women-specific substance abuse treatments and programs, increases VA staff cultural training, eliminates harassment and assault, and makes other improvements to women veterans' health care including maternity care.

### **The VFW urges Congress to:**

- Pass H.R. 3575 / S. 1944, *Vet Center Improvement Act of 2021*, and H.R. 4233, *Student Veterans Counseling Centers Eligibility Act*, which would require VA to assess Vet Centers, and expand eligibility to include certain veterans who are using educational assistance benefits.
- Amend VA's hiring practices in order to fill critical vacancies in a timely manner.
- Pass H.R. 239, *Equal Access to Contraception for Veterans Act*, which would provide women veterans access to the same no-cost contraceptive care as their non-veteran counterparts.
- Pass H.R. 958 / S. 796, *Protecting Moms Who Served Act*, which would provide an understanding of fertility and infertility of women veterans, and shed light where gaps and barriers may exist.