

## Veterans' Health Care

### The VFW's Concerns:

In May 2020, the VFW conducted a health care survey of its membership. VFW members reported a significant increase in telehealth usage since the President's declaration of a national emergency on March 13, 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the dynamic of the American health care system. As Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities and other health care systems throughout the nation applied a public health response, health care providers converted patient appointments to communication through telephone or video. Telehealth is playing a critical role in maintaining veterans' mental and physical well-being during a time of social distancing and quarantine. VFW respondents reported that a majority 47% of VHA routine care appointments were converted to telehealth. From March to mid-August 2020, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) increased telehealth visits by 1,309%.

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. More than 20 VFW posts have been identified as possible telehealth centers, with plans to deploy five VFW ATLAS sites in the first phase of the program.

Veterans total 13 percent of adult suicides in the United States, with an average of 17.5 veterans and service members who die by suicide every day, according to the *VA 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report*. Of those veterans, only six are actively enrolled in VA. Reports have also consistently indicated veterans ages 18-34 are the most likely to die by suicide.

Women veterans comprise approximately 10 percent of the veteran population and are the fastest growing cohort within the veteran community. They remain 2.2 times more likely to die by suicide than non-veteran women. VA has made progress in gender-specific health care for women, but more is needed. VA must ensure it addresses privacy concerns, expands the amount of time new mothers are given to find health care coverage for their newborns, increases staff cultural competency, eliminates harassment and assault, and makes other improvements to women veterans health care.

### The VFW's Solutions:

- Congress must pass H.R. 7879, *VA Telehealth Expansion Act*, which awards grants for the expansion of telehealth capabilities and provision of telehealth services to veterans through VA and the Veterans Community Care Program.
- The Senate must pass S. 514/H.R. 3224, *Deborah Sampson Act*.
- The House must pass the Senate-passed version of S. 785, *Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019*, which would provide VA the authority it needs to expand suicide prevention efforts, and provide the opportunity to expand telehealth capabilities to veterans in rural and highly rural areas.