

Health Care

The VFW's Concerns:

Vet Centers are the most underappreciated resource of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). For forty-two 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 in need of COVID-19 testing, treatment, vaccinations, and rescheduling overdue appointments, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) shortened the onboarding process and decreased vacancies. VHA needs to expedite staff hiring and onboarding to fill the remaining 47,310 vacancies as of the fourth quarter of FY 2021.

From March 2020 to January 2022, VA increased telehealth visits by 1,796 percent, which is an increase of almost 400 percent in the last six months. In response to 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 *2021 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.

Women veterans comprise approximately ten 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*, which would evaluate productivity expectations for readjustment counselors and set guidelines for what type of workload each Vet Center counselor should maintain.
- Pass H.R. 4673, *Ensuring Veterans' Smooth Transition Act*, which would automatically enroll eligible veterans in VHA to provide a seamless transition of health care.
- 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. 5575, *VA Nurse and Physician Assistant RAISE Act*, which would increase pay for nurses and other medical positions, thereby making VA salaries competitive with those in the public sector.
- Instruct VA to include protective factors, such as VA benefits usage, in the annual suicide prevention report.