

**STATEMENT OF
MR. DANIEL ZOMCHEK
NETWORK DIRECTOR, VETERANS INTEGRATED SERVICE NETWORK (VISN) 12
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (VHA)
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION
FIELD HEARING
ON
"BEYOND THE CITY LIMITS: DELIVERING FOR RURAL VETERANS"**

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Good morning, Chairman Barrett, Ranking Member Budzinski, and distinguished guests, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) extensive efforts to enhance the well-being of Veterans living in rural areas broadly as well as in the VA Illiana Healthcare System service area. My name is Daniel Zomchek, and I am the Network Director of Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 12. I am accompanied today by Dr. Staci Williams, Executive Director of VA Illiana Healthcare System, and Dr. Peter Kaboli, Executive Director, Office of Rural Health (ORH), VHA.

Today, I will discuss key initiatives within the VA Illiana Healthcare System, VISN 12, and VA that exemplify our commitment to Veterans living in rural areas. From implementing advanced telehealth services to expanding our reach through community collaborations, VA, VISN 12, and the VA Illiana Healthcare System continually strive to bridge the gap in health care access faced by Veterans living in rural areas.

Our goal across VA, and certainly here in VISN 12, is to ensure that Veterans residing in rural areas have the same access to high-quality care as those in urban centers. ORH is instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by Veterans living in rural areas. VA is dedicated to putting Veterans first, prioritizing their needs, and

continually improving access to care – especially for Veterans in rural areas. ORH supports 34 innovative enterprise-wide initiatives (EWI), which are field-based solutions that have been tested in multiple locations – including here in VISN 12 – and shown to be effective and efficient methods for standardized care delivery.

We understand the unique circumstances and needs of Veterans living in rural areas and are dedicated to developing sustainable and impactful solutions to meet those needs. By sharing our experiences and strategies, we hope to provide a clearer understanding of both the challenges faced and the progress made in delivering high-quality health care to Veterans living in rural areas.

Status of Rural Health in the VA Illiana Healthcare System

We are proud of the comprehensive range of health care services we provide to Veterans through the VA Illiana Healthcare System. VA Illiana Healthcare System has been serving the Danville community for over 125 years. We employ over 1,500 health care professionals across our service area and deliver care to 30,000 Veterans annually. We are committed to expanding rural health access across our 34-county service area, reaching Veterans in both urban and rural areas in east-central Illinois and west-central Indiana.

Of the estimated 18 million Veterans living in the United States and its territories, approximately 4.7 million Veterans reside in rural areas. We also know that Veterans in rural areas enroll in VHA health care at a higher rate (65%) than their urban counterparts (47%). Out of the 62 VHA facilities in VISN 12, 43.5% (27 facilities) serve a population where 50% or more of enrolled Veterans are from rural areas. We understand the unique challenges they face, including difficulties accessing VA care due to geographical isolation.

I would like to highlight several areas of particular importance to us as we continue to put Veterans first and to enhance our outreach and capacity to reach Veterans living in rural areas: community care, telehealth to include virtual mental health care, and beneficiary travel.

Community Care

VA continues to enhance the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP) to ensure Veterans – especially those in rural or underserved areas—receive timely, high-quality care closer to home. Through VCCP, VA uses a network of more than 1.4 million non-VA providers to deliver essential hospital care and medical services (including mental health and specialty care), as well as extended care services, to eligible Veterans when they elect to receive care from such providers. This network is particularly vital for Veterans living in rural areas, who often face geographic and transportation barriers to care. VA has taken steps to streamline referrals, improve care coordination, and enhance oversight of community providers to ensure continuity and quality of care. The integration of community care with VA care reflects VA's commitment to meeting Veterans where they are and offering them more options while upholding the same high standards of Veteran-centered care.

Telehealth and Virtual Mental Health Services

Telehealth has become a lifeline for Veterans living in rural and remote areas, where distance and limited local health care options can make it difficult to access timely care. VA has invested significantly in the telehealth infrastructure, enabling Veterans and other beneficiaries in rural areas to connect with primary care providers, specialists, and care teams through platforms like VA Video Connect. This technology eliminates the need for long travel times, supports continuity of care, and improves the management of chronic conditions. By leveraging telehealth, VA is not only expanding access but also improving health outcomes for Veterans in rural areas, ensuring they receive high-quality care regardless of where they live.

An essential aspect of telehealth and virtual health services is its pivotal role in addressing the mental health needs of Veterans. Access to mental health care remains a critical need for Veterans living in rural areas, where provider shortages and geographic isolation can create significant barriers to timely treatment. Recognizing this, VA has significantly expanded its virtual mental health services, ensuring that such Veterans can connect with psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors from the privacy

and convenience of their homes. Through VA Video Connect, Veterans receive care ranging from therapy and medication management to crisis intervention, all while avoiding long travel times. This digital infrastructure is helping to close care gaps, reduce stigma, and provide continuous support for Veterans who might otherwise go without essential mental health services.

To further meet Veterans' needs, VA has launched several telehealth initiatives including the VA Clinical Resource Hub program; Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations, Digital Divide Consult, Mobile Connectivity Program, clinic-to-clinic telehealth links, and the My VA Images app. These initiatives help increase clinical capacity and enhance health care delivery in rural areas.

Beneficiary Travel

Veterans in rural areas can face significant barriers in accessing health care services due to longer travel distances. Recognizing these challenges, VA has developed a range of robust programs to facilitate transportation for Veterans designed to meet the diverse needs of Veterans and ensure that no Veteran – especially those living in rural areas – is left without options. VA operates several programs designed to meet the transportation needs of Veterans, including:

- Veterans Transportation Service (VTS): Through VTS, VA transports eligible persons to or from a VA or VA-authorized facility or other place for the purpose of examination, treatment, or care. VTS offers safe, reliable door-to-door transportation for Veterans, particularly those with disabilities, through a fleet of vehicles at many VA medical centers.
- Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRTG): VA's HRTG program provides grants to eligible entities to assist Veterans in highly rural areas through innovative transportation services to travel to VA medical centers and to otherwise assist in providing transportation services in connection with the provision of VA medical care to these Veterans.

- Volunteer Transportation Network (VTN): VTN, principally supported by the Veterans Service Organization, Disabled American Veterans, provides free transportation for Veterans through volunteers using personal or VA vehicles to ensure access to appointments.

VA's beneficiary travel program offers payments or allowances for eligible individuals. This includes both mileage reimbursement and special mode transportation, and beneficiaries can receive assistance when traveling for various examinations and care. This program helps reduce travel expenses, especially for those living in rural or remote areas.

Conclusion

Chairman Barrett and Ranking Member Budzinski, thank you for the opportunity to discuss VA's efforts to serve Veterans in rural areas and to highlight the work of VA broadly and here in the Urbana, Illinois area. Thanks to Congress' support, VA has expanded its reach, delivering more care to a greater number of Veterans than ever before. We value your ongoing efforts as we strive to better serve those who have served.