

Testimony
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House Committee on Veteran's Affairs Subcommittee on Health
"Technology and Treatment: Telemedicine in the VA Healthcare System"
Oversight Field Hearing
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MISTER CHAIRMAN AND DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE, thank you for hosting this important oversight hearing today on the topic of telemedicine in the VA Healthcare System. This is a vitally important technology that can increase much needed access to care for our veterans at a significantly reduced cost. It is my pleasure to participate in this hearing and share some private sector solutions for the VA Healthcare crisis.

STATEMENT

My name is Dr. Randy Hickle, MD and I am the Founder/CEO of the Grace Health System located in Lubbock, Texas. Grace Health System started in 2006 as Grace Clinic with just eight doctors on staff. Over the past decade, we have grown to more than 50 doctors and other specialists along with 22 centers of care offering patient-centered care to people from all of over the West Texas region.

The growth of Grace doesn't end there. Since 2012, we have started a new hospital, upgraded the in-house pharmacy, opened a new cardiac imaging center, and added 15 new doctor's offices. We are also changing the region's medical landscape by breaking ground on a new 350,000 square-foot hospital in the next several months. More importantly, we are planning for the future of medicine and have launched a telemedicine program reaching medically underserved and chronically ill patients in rural communities throughout Texas and New Mexico. It is Grace's telemedicine program that has inspired me to share my thoughts with you today.

While West Texas comprises almost half the state in geographic size, it is home to mostly rural towns that make up only 12 percent of the state of Texas' population. Telemedicine provides a way for these rural patients to receive critical access to care by eliminating the cost and inconvenience of traveling to a population center. We are experiencing great success in monitoring and treating patients that otherwise may have gone untreated which often result in higher costs to the overall system from unnecessary hospitalizations and ER admissions. About a year-and-a-half ago after reading about some of the tragic consequences of some of our veterans that are committing suicide at alarming rates, I decided that it was time to employ some of the telemedicine successes we are experiencing in the private sector with the VA.

Last year, I was honored to visit with House Veteran's Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Florida) and his staff about my successful experiences with treating patients through Grace's

telemedicine program and how I would like to help provide such a solution to our veterans who have given so much for their country. We owe them nothing less. Chairman Miller and his staff have been supportive of my efforts to provide proven private sector solutions to address this VA Healthcare crisis. Unfortunately, my attempts to collaborate with the VA directly have been frustrating.

I was encouraged to hear VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald state recently, "A brick-and-mortar facility is not the only option for health care. We are exploring how we can more efficiently and effectively deliver health care services to better serve our veterans and improve their lives. Telehealth is one of those areas we have identified for growth."

I could not agree more with Secretary McDonald. And I would implore the Secretary and the Members of this Subcommittee to not reinvent the wheel with telemedicine. There are many talented and successful telemedicine programs that are currently available to immediately assist with the VA's alarming backlog. In September 2015, the Teas VA facilities required a wait time of over 30 days for 34,665 appointments. This is unacceptable, and we can do much better.

My whole career has been focused on creating innovative solutions for areas where I see real health care needs. Your decision to hold this hearing today tells me that you all feel the same way. There are many private sector solutions across this great country, and I would strongly encourage you to review the Grace Veterans Telehealth Initiative. I believe telemedicine can improve healthcare for all veterans by improving accessibility, affordability, and accountability. I collaborated with a leading expert in addiction recovery, Dr. Kitty Harris, to create a behavioral health program for veterans that would serve their needs for PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. I have asked that a one-page summary be submitted to the record for your review and consideration.

Once again, I thank Chairman Dan Benishek, MD and the distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Health for hosting today's Oversight hearing on Telemedicine in the VA System. This is a very important and vital health care solution that deserves a congressional hearing. I would also like to thank House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Florida) and Ms. Christine Hill, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Health for their continued leadership to find proven telemedicine techniques that increase access to quality care for our veteran patients.