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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**“IOWA: A LEADER IN VETERAN HEALTHCARE INNOVATION”**

**MAY 13, 2024**

Good morning, Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for this opportunity to join you in the “Hawkeye State” today to discuss the status of Veteran health care in Iowa and the state’s leadership in health care innovation, especially around ophthalmology. I am joined today by Dr. Victoria Sharp, who serves as the Deputy Chief of Staff at the VA Iowa City Healthcare System (VAICHS).

**Status of Health Care in Iowa**

The Department takes pride in providing a comprehensive range of health care services to Veterans in Iowa through one of the leading health care systems serving Veterans in Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 23: VA Midwest Health Care Network. The Iowa City VA Medical Center (VAMC), rated 5 stars by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, offers a wide array of primary and specialty care services, including Veteran-directed care programs, internal medicine, surgery, mental health, kidney and pancreas transplants, and more. The facility is equipped with state-of-the-art technology and staffed by a team of experienced and dedicated health care professionals committed to delivering high-quality care to the Veterans they serve. VA Central Iowa Healthcare System also offers innovative technology such as the virtual reality treatment used within the Physical Therapy (PT) department to treat multiple sclerosis. This treatment allows Veterans to safely exercise and regain mobility while measuring range of motion, perform assessments, work on strength training, and improve balance. Additionally, Iowa delivers care at 15 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC) throughout the state, making it easier for Veterans to access care closer to home. These clinics provide services like routine check-ups, chronic disease management, and preventive care. Our dedicated network of facilities and clinics across the state ensures Veterans have access to high-quality medical care, including primary care, mental health services, specialty care, and rehabilitation programs.

## Access to Diverse Care and Support Modalities

Through a combination of in-person visits, telehealth services, and community partnerships, Veterans have more options than ever before to receive high-quality, timely care when and where they need it. Universities are important partners in delivering care to Veterans through the Community Care Network (CCN). There are 12 universities actively participating in the CCN throughout Iowa. When eligible, Veterans can access care in the community through the CCN, which has 21,224 active providers. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, Veterans in Iowa had nearly 500,000 Community Care outpatient appointments, a 75% increase over the last 5 fiscal years.<sup>1</sup>

Community Resource and Referral Centers also play a vital role in supporting Veterans and their families. These Centers provide a wide range of services and resources to address the diverse needs of the Veteran community. One key service offered is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-VA Supportive Housing (VASH) program, which combines HUD housing vouchers with VA supportive services to help homeless Veterans and their families find and sustain permanent housing. Additionally, the Grant and Per Diem program assists in providing transitional housing and supportive services to homeless Veterans. Another service that homeless veterans are referred to is the Department of Labor's (DOL) Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP), a competitive grant program whose sole purpose is to work with veterans who are experiencing homelessness, or who are at risk of homelessness. DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) funds two HVRP grantees in Iowa, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists Inc. and Goodwill Industries of the Heartland.

Beyond housing and outreach, these Centers connect Veterans with Vocational Rehabilitation programs to help them develop job skills and find employment opportunities. Many Centers maintain a food pantry, clothing closet, and facilities for showers and laundry, ensuring basic necessities are met. Equally important are the regular visits and personalized support provided by dedicated staff. They work tirelessly to assess each Veteran's unique situation and connect them with appropriate resources and services to address their specific needs.

## Innovative Uses of Telehealth

VAICHS has taken significant strides to strategically incorporate telehealth, enhancing access and delivering specialized care to Veterans across its service area. Notably, the system implemented a robust telehealth program for audiology and speech pathology services, providing diagnostic and treatment services to Veterans in CBOCs and patient homes. The Mobile Audiology Clinic serves over 1,000 Veterans annually, while the cochlear implant surgical site offers specialized services for deafened Veterans.

An additional telehealth program was developed and piloted to deliver infectious disease (ID) physician expertise to rural VAMCs. The pilot program reduced unnecessary antibiotic use in three Community Living Centers by 30% and was well-

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<sup>1</sup> Between FY 2019 and FY 2023, Community Care outpatient appointments in Iowa have increased by 75%, rising from 371,603 to 497,931.

received by frontline providers due to its user-friendly design, seamless integration into workflows, ease of administration, and ability to connect experts with their patients.

The Department also launched VA Health Connect, modernizing the Veteran health care experience by offering a 24/7 virtual care option on the phone, through VA Video Connect or through chat with a real person. It offers Veterans in Iowa the opportunity to speak with a nurse, schedule, confirm or cancel medical appointments, talk to a medical provider about an urgent or developing medical issue, refill and request medication renewals, and check on the status of medications with the help of pharmacy professionals.

As part of VA Health Connect, VA developed a Tele-Emergency Care capability known as Tele-EC, which will be available in VISN 23 by the final quarter of FY 2024. Tele-EC is similar to a nurse advice line that many Veterans with private insurance may have experienced. VA's Tele-EC model utilizes Health Connect clinical contact centers to triage and connect Veterans or caregivers to a licensed emergency medicine practitioner. They address the Veterans' acute medical needs over video or phone or direct them to the appropriate resources based on their situation. Since last year, Tele-EC has triaged over 15,000 calls, with a median wait time to speak to a provider under 10 minutes. The data show that Veterans utilizing Tele-EC are less likely to need a Community Care appointment because nearly 70% of Veterans' concerns were resolved over the phone, ultimately reducing Community Care costs. Over the past year, nearly 85% of Veterans who have used Tele-EC say they were satisfied with their visit, and the same percentage of Veterans trust using Tele-EC in the future.

### Orthotic, Prosthetic, and Pedorthic Clinical Services

VA has also increased its Orthotic, Prosthetic, and Pedorthic Clinical Services (OPPCS) staff in Iowa from three to eight clinicians to better serve the needs of Iowa Veterans. The facility expanded its services in 2023 to include in-facility custom orthotic and prosthetic care, attracting positive responses from Veterans. Des Moines' Knoxville CBOC now offers custom orthotic and prosthetic care to Veterans, while the Mobile Prosthetic and Orthotic Care program is being rolled out in Iowa City, offering VA-provided care in Dubuque, Waterloo, and Ottumwa CBOCs starting in May 2024. These expansions aim to improve accessibility and quality of care for Iowa's Veteran community by increasing the number of clinicians and establishing new facilities.

Beyond direct care, OPPCS is partnering with the University of Iowa's Human Performance and Clinical Outcomes Lab to improve understanding and treatment of musculoskeletal and neurological conditions. The collaboration aims to use advanced biomechanical analysis techniques and clinical expertise to explore innovative approaches to orthotic and prosthetic design, rehabilitation protocols, and patient-centered care strategies. The lab will utilize revolutionary motion capture and analysis capabilities to evaluate gait patterns, joint mechanics, and functional performance in individuals with limb loss or musculoskeletal impairments. This data-driven approach will guide the development of tailored orthotic and prosthetic interventions. The

collaboration will also facilitate the integration of clinical expertise from VA OPPCS, ensuring research findings are directly applicable to real-world patient scenarios and aligned with the latest clinical practices.

### Rehabilitation Therapies

The Iowa City VAMC is actively collaborating with local universities and research institutions to stay at the forefront of rehabilitation research. It is making strides in incorporating complementary and integrative health approaches into rehabilitation therapies, including PT and occupational therapy (OT), benefiting approximately 61,000 Veterans. Central Iowa, in particular, is leading in embedding PT into primary care, which has resulted in noticeable reductions in wait times and opioid prescribing.

VA is also producing virtual reality content for PT/OT and implementing a tele-wheelchair clinic, utilizing clinical telehealth technology for wheelchair assessments. These data can help therapists personalize treatment plans and track progress more effectively. Other rehabilitative initiatives include piloting home health agency programs, hiring physical therapists and chiropractors into community-based offices, establishing a Geriatric Accredited Emergency Department, participating in the Enhancing Pelvic Health Across the Continuum, and expanding its Home-Based Primary Care Teams.

### Local Partnerships

VA consistently prioritizes community engagements and effective partnerships to provide Veterans and their beneficiaries with well-rounded care and support. One of the most successful collaborations to date includes the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic (NDVGC), a week-long adaptive golf program presented by VA and Disabled American Veterans (DAV). This annual event promotes rehabilitation by instructing Veterans with specific life-changing disabilities in adaptive golf. VA and DAV began partnering with the University of Iowa's Department of Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation Science in 2019 and have continued to collaborate each year since. The NDVGC Director works directly with the Clinical Assistant Professor and Co-Director of Clinical Education to connect University of Iowa students with the program. These students are supervised throughout their involvement, supporting registration, fall risk assessments, seating stations, and alternative activities offered at NDVGC. In 2023, these activities included cycling, kayaking, rock wall climbing, disc golf, bowling, water aerobics, and cornhole. Through this collaboration, NDVGC not only provides the opportunity to earn college credit towards coursework completion but also offers participating university students an intimate introduction to the populations of Veterans they serve.

Other partnerships include affiliation agreements with local universities for audiology, speech pathology, PT/OT, chiropractic, and nurse practitioner programs. Additionally, there are collaborations with Des Moines University and UnityPoint Health Care System on stroke camps and stroke support groups. In 2023, the National Veterans Golden Age Games was hosted by the VA Central Iowa Health Care System,

who partnered with many local sponsors and volunteers. Over 600 Veteran athletes aged 55 and older, from 107 VAMCs, competed in 19 medaled sports and 4 exhibition events, demonstrating their commitment to "Fitness for Life."

### Cutting-Edge Research

The VAICHS has been a top VA system for over 50 years, funding research in infectious diseases, immunology, transplantation, dermatology, and pulmonary, cardiovascular, and diabetic diseases. Presently, VA has 102 active researchers in Iowa, working on 254 projects funded by approximately \$34 million through VA's Office of Research and Development. Through the system, VA has advanced patient-focused clinical trials for cancer, kidney, and liver diseases, and developed projects to better understand and manage patients with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Specifically, Iowa City investigators have identified vulnerabilities for Veterans with chronic pain and PTSD, partnering with the National Center for PTSD and the Pain Management, Opioid Safety, and Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs to educate providers. Jointly, they have evaluated a short message service (or SMS) messaging intervention system, named Annie, to improve antidepressant adherence and depression outcomes in Veterans. They are also exploring innovative approaches to address the complex challenges faced by Veterans with chronic pain and PTSD, such as virtual reality exposure therapy and advanced neuroimaging techniques.

### **Artificial Intelligence in Ophthalmology**

Since 1998, the VA Ophthalmology service in Iowa City has witnessed a significant increase in patient visits and surgeries, with over 8,000 visits per year. This growth has provided opportunities for the service staff, residents, and faculty to deliver top-notch ophthalmologic care. The Eye Clinic boasts a dedicated team of experienced nurses, an optometrist, an ophthalmic technician, and a clerk, all committed to serving Veterans and the Veteran community. VA prioritizes education, supporting three University of Iowa residents and stationing three residents directly at the VAMC.

Complementing Iowa City's direct care efforts, the Iowa City Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Visual Loss is a cutting-edge research facility dedicated to advancing ophthalmology and finding innovative solutions for various eye conditions. Significantly funded by VA's Rehabilitation Research and Development Division, the Center receives an annual core funding of \$1.2 million, leveraged into additional Federal grants totaling around \$7 million per year. This funding supports faculty members, pilot grants, equipment, and research personnel, fostering innovation and advances in ophthalmologic care, ultimately benefiting Veterans and the broader medical community.

Currently, the Center has two active awards involving deep learning and artificial intelligence (AI) in ophthalmology. The first focuses on improving glaucoma diagnosis,

progression monitoring, and treatment outcomes using structural imaging and visual field testing. The second aims at developing automated assessment of ocular misalignments and enhancing diagnosis through AI and eye-tracking devices. With a strong focus on early detection and treatment of blinding disorders like retinal disease, glaucoma, and TBI, the Center employs a multidisciplinary approach. It explores areas such as telemedicine, computer-aided diagnosis, neuroprotection, and neurotrophic growth factors. One project aims to develop automated image analysis approaches to determine the severity and cause of optic nerve edema using machine learning on clinically acquired imaging data. The approach will predict measures of severity and causation from novel image-analysis-based parameters, utilizing optical coherence tomography volumes and fundus photographs across multiple visits.

### Conclusion

Madam Chair, Ranking Member, thank you again for the invitation to join you for this important discussion. VA remains dedicated to providing exceptional health care services to the Nation's heroes in Iowa and beyond. As we navigate the evolving health care landscape, VA is committed to upholding its mission of serving those who have served by continuously striving for excellence, innovation, and accessibility in the services we provide.