

**STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGING**

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Chairman Collins, Ranking Member McCaskill, and Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Aging, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the high quality care and support the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Telehealth Services programs are providing to our Veterans.

**VA Telehealth Services**

VA is recognized as a world leader in the development and use of telehealth. Telehealth services are mission-critical to the future direction of VA care to Veterans, and they are one of VA's major transformational initiatives aimed at ensuring care is convenient, accessible, and patient-centered. Telehealth in VA provides innovative services that help Veterans to live independently in their own homes and local communities.

We are committed to increasing access to care for Veterans by placing special emphasis on those in rural and remote locations. Telehealth increases access to high quality health care services by utilizing secure information and telecommunication technologies to provide health care services when the patient and practitioner are separated by geographical distance. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, VA provided care to more than 717,000 patients (12.6 percent of our enrolled Veterans) through telehealth modalities. This amounted to over 2,123,000 telehealth episodes of care. Forty-five percent (45 percent) of these Veterans lived in rural areas and may otherwise have had limited access to VA health care services.

In FY 2014, telehealth was implemented in over 900 sites of care and is available for over 45 specialty areas of care. The number of Veterans receiving care via VA's

telehealth services grew approximately 18 percent in FY 2014 and is anticipated to grow by approximately 28 percent in FY 2015. Of course Veterans can elect to have traditional in-person care instead of telehealth. Otherwise, providers determine patient appropriateness for telehealth. We train over 11,400 staff in telehealth annually, and in FY 2014, we provided 271 training sessions for physicians and other clinicians. We also conduct annual competency testing. Telehealth training is provided virtually across VA in order to effectively use VA resources to meet training needs in a timely and efficient manner.

### **VA Telehealth Modalities**

Operating the Nation's largest integrated health care system, VA uses a wide variety of technologies to ensure excellence in care delivery. New technologies are revolutionizing health care. VA utilizes the following three telehealth modalities to deliver care to Veterans:

#### Clinical Video Telehealth

Clinical Video Telehealth (CVT) is the use of real-time interactive video conferencing, sometimes with supportive peripheral technologies, to assess, treat, and provide care to a patient remotely. Typically, CVT links the patient(s) at a clinic to the provider(s) at another location. CVT can also provide video connectivity between a provider and a patient at home. CVT encompasses more than 45 clinical applications in VA such as in specialty and primary care.

#### Home Telehealth

Home Telehealth (HT) is a program for Veterans that applies care and case management principles to coordinate care using health informatics, disease management protocols, and technologies such as in-home and mobile monitoring, messaging, and/or video technologies. The goal of HT is to improve clinical outcomes and access to care while reducing complications, hospitalizations, and clinic or emergency room visits for Veterans in post-acute care settings, high-risk Veterans with chronic disease, or Veterans at-risk for placement in long-term care.

### Store and Forward Telehealth

Store and Forward Telehealth (SFT) is the use of technologies to asynchronously acquire and store clinical information (e.g. data, image, sound, and video) that is then forwarded to or retrieved by a provider at another location for clinical evaluation. VA's national SFT programs cover services that provide this care using a clinical consult pathway and a defined information technology platform to communicate the event/encounter between providers, as well as enabling documentation of the event/encounter and the associated clinical evaluation within the patient record. Teleretinal imaging to screen for diabetic retinopathy is the first such program, and along with Teledermatology, has increased access to care for almost 2 million Veterans.

### **Home and Community Based Care Programs for Older Veterans**

Home-Based Primary Care (HBPC) began in 1970 and provides long-term primary medical care to chronically-ill Veterans in their own homes under the coordination of an interdisciplinary treatment team. HBPC has led to guidelines for medical education as well as use of emerging technology in home care and improved care for Veterans with dementia and their families who support them. In 2015, HBPC programs were located in 157 VA medical centers and more than 165 Community-Based Outpatient Centers (CBOC). HBPC is provided through our Geriatrics and Extended Care Services and partners well with Telehealth Services.

### **VA Telehealth Outcomes**

VA Telehealth Services has delivered many positive outcomes. It has increased access to primary care and specialist consultations leading to reduced wait times. It has improved patient outcomes resulting in reduced utilization of inpatient care. For example, in FY 2014, Veterans receiving HT services for non-institutional care needs and chronic care management had a 54 percent decrease in VA bed days of care and a 32 percent decrease in VA hospital admissions compared to the same patient data prior

to their enrollment in HT. Veterans receiving mental health services via CVT (TeleMental Health) had a reduction in acute psychiatric bed days of care of 35 percent.

In addition, VA Telehealth Services programs reduce the necessity for Veterans to travel to VA facilities for care. CVT and SFT have been shown to result in an average cost-savings of \$35 to \$40 per patient, per consultation. HT has also decreased costs for VA and non-VA care and has been shown to reduce VA net patient costs by \$2,000 for Veterans that were receiving telehealth for a year.

Lastly, in FY 2014, Veteran satisfaction scores have rated high with 94 percent approval for CVT, 88 percent approval for HT, and 93 percent approval for SFT.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, VA is transforming health care services from being provider-centric to being Veteran-centric, reducing or eliminating the time required to travel to a VA medical facility. VA's Telehealth Services programs revolutionize this travel time challenge by changing the location where health care services are routinely provided, improving access to care for Veterans, and helping Veterans take a more active role in the management of their health and well-being. We are proud of our accomplishments in telehealth, and we strive to expand our virtual medical modalities to enhance high-performance, patient-centered care for Veterans.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to answer any questions you, or other Members of the Committee, may have.