

**VA**

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
VA Healthcare-VISN 4

# VISION

*for Excellence*

Newsletter for Veterans and Stakeholders in VISN 4

Issue 29



## Connected Care Expands



### Telehealth use increases 1850%

In our efforts to ensure our Veterans remain safe during the pandemic, VISN 4 offered Veterans the opportunity to visit with their providers through virtual care. One of the primary ways Veterans connected to their providers has been through VA Video Connect (VVC).

VA Video Connect enables Veterans to see and talk to their health care team from anywhere, making VA health care more convenient and reducing travel times for Veterans, especially for those in very rural areas with limited access to VA health care facilities.

Use of VVC increased tremendously during the pandemic. As a network, VISN 4 completed 2,000 VVC visits in February 2020, but in March 2021, our network completed more than 39,000 VVC visits, an 1850% increase.

Our providers and health care professionals also innovated and developed new processes to ensure Veterans received the care they needed. Many in-person care groups were converted to virtual meetings, and clinicians who primarily visited Veterans in the home before the pandemic now connected through video to ensure safety for all.

Despite these changes in practice, patients reported comparable satisfaction to the in-person experience as they stayed safe, reduced travel, and avoided traveling during inclement weather.

# Dear Veterans, fellow employees, volunteers and friends of VISN 4:

I hope everyone is having an enjoyable and healthy summer.

VISN 4 staff continually strive to ensure that all Veterans who receive care in our network receive the kind of care they need when and where they need and want it. Our mission is to ensure that each experience a Veteran has at any of our facilities or clinics is characterized by compassion and outstanding care and service. As you will see in our feature story, VA Connected Care programs improve Veterans' access to care in VISN 4 and across the nation through reducing travel to our facilities and decreasing time away from work or other activities. Veterans have more options than ever to access care conveniently and safely without having to leave home! VISN 4's team of dedicated professionals is working together to provide Veterans in our region with a health care network that offers reliable access and a satisfying care experience no matter how or where the care is provided.

Inside this issue, I am also pleased to highlight several winners of our VISN 4 I CARE Award. This award is presented quarterly to an employee or team who not only demonstrates our I CARE values, but who go the extra mile to live by our I CARE ideals.

On behalf of all VISN 4 employees, I thank all Veterans and their families in VISN 4 for entrusting us to fulfill your health care needs. I also want to thank our service and community partners for your continued support of our network.

Please stay safe and make sure you have gotten your COVID vaccine.

It is our honor to serve you.

Sincerely,

Timothy W. Liezert  
Network Director



## VA Healthcare-VISN 4 Leadership Team

**Timothy W. Liezert**  
Network Director

**Charles R. Thilges**  
Deputy Network Director

**Timothy Burke, M.D.**  
Chief Medical Officer

**Joseph Haverstick**  
Chief Financial Officer

**Moira M. Hughes, FACHE**  
Quality Management Officer

**Amber Mesoras**  
Acting Human Resources Officer

**David E. Cowgill**  
Communications Manager

**Jo Petro**  
Executive Assistant

An advertisement for VA Tele-Urgent. It shows a woman wearing a headset and glasses, sitting at a desk and talking to a man via video call on a computer monitor. The monitor displays the VA logo and the text "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs". To the left, another computer screen shows a video of a man. The bottom of the ad features the phone number "1-833-TELE-URGENT (1-833-835-3874)" and the official seal of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

# AROUND the NETWORK

## Customer Service Update

VA began soliciting customer feedback in 2017 by inviting Veterans to respond to a survey after completing an outpatient appointment.

Nationally, VA's trust score over the last 90 days was 90.6. In VISN 4, our trust score was 92.8, which is the third highest VISN score in the nation.

The top 5 compliment themes over the last 90 days were:

- Interactions with staff
- Quality of care
- Satisfaction with specialty care
- Ear clinic services
- Allergy and immunology services



## Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System Upgraded

Veterans, caregivers, and beneficiaries who are eligible for reimbursement of mileage and other travel expenses to and from approved health care appointments can now enter claims in the newly upgraded Beneficiary Travel Self-Service System (BTSSS).

Because of your feedback, the first of two upgrades to BTSSS are now complete. BTSSS simplifies the current claim submission process for beneficiaries and ensures timely processing and payment of travel reimbursements.

- Submit claims online 24/7, 365 days a year
- Track the status of submitted claims and review all your claims activity
- Sign up for direct deposit
- Upload required claims documentation

The updated BTSSS offers two new ways to verify who you are. Now, you can also log into the portal using credentials for ID.me or My HealtheVet in addition to DS-Logon.

Combining electronic filing with direct deposit is the fastest way to get your beneficiary travel payment. While you may still file a paper claim or receive a paper check, paper methods will take longer for staff to process.

See for yourself how the updated system performs. File your next claim with BTSSS!

Have questions? Contact your local beneficiary travel office for more information or visit [www.va.gov/health-care/get-reimbursed-for-travel-pay/](http://www.va.gov/health-care/get-reimbursed-for-travel-pay/).

**Get your travel pay faster with electronic filing and direct deposit.**

Learn more: [\[QR code\]](#)

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The background of the ad features a blurred image of a car driving on a road with trees, suggesting travel.

# Veteran's family meets with full care team through VA Video Connect

As Veterans and their families navigate the challenges of accessing health care during the pandemic, video telehealth through VA Video Connect can help Veterans – and their families – access care together.

Kari Svirbly, a RN in the Home-Based Primary Care (HBPC) Program at the Erie (Pennsylvania) VA Medical Center, recently participated in her first VA Video Connect team/family conference.

The patient is a World War II Veteran, and former Prisoner of War, who now suffers from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe dementia. He lost his wife about two years ago, and his three daughters have been struggling to help him with his care.

Through VA Video Connect, the HBPC Team and all three daughters were able to connect to collectively explain the Veteran's health situation, discuss care options, and formulate a plan as a group.

In a time when most spouses or caregivers cannot accompany patients to in-person appointments due to



COVID-19 safety protocols, Svirbly said it was very helpful for the entire family to be able to virtually connect with the Veteran's HBPC Patient-Aligned Care Team (PACT).

Amy Tabatcher, LSW, took the lead and explained the Veteran's service-connected options for in-home care, programs available to the Veteran and his family, and long-term care options in their area and VA.

Anne Schwabenbauer, Ph.D., explained the Veteran's cognitive testing results, symptoms, and ways

his impairment was contributing to his decline in ability to manage his PTSD. She helped the daughters understand what to expect moving forward.

Julia Roussos, NP, expressed her concerns to all the daughters surrounding the patient's safety. The other team members also were able to share their safety concerns.

The Veterans' daughters were able to ask questions and voice their worries throughout the call.

All the participants were thrilled to be able to have a productive meeting together through VA Video Connect to make a care plan for the Veteran.

**"Having the video element to be able to see a smiling face and laugh together is priceless to some who get no other visitors. It is way better than a phone call."**

**Kari Svirbly, RN**  
Erie Home Based Primary Care



Svirbly said that after the call, she felt that the care team was truly aligned. Being able to meet as a full HBPC team with the Veteran's family was much better than each team member talking with the daughters separately.

VA Video Connect and the VVC session enabled the whole team to work together to deliver high quality, multidisciplinary care to this Veteran in need.

Use live video to meet with your doctor from wherever you are!

Introducing

VA Video Connect

Learn more at [mobile.va.gov/appstore](http://mobile.va.gov/appstore)

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs



## Put a Premium on Your Health

My HealtheVet, VA's online patient portal, gives you the information to understand and manage your VA health care.

**With a free My HealtheVet Premium account, you have secure, 24/7 access to the full suite of My HealtheVet tools and services.**



### Access your VA health records.

View, download, and print health information, reports, and images from your VA medical record.



### Send secure messages to your VA care team online.

Ask your VA care team nonurgent health questions, request referrals, and send updates on your condition.



### Refill your VA prescriptions.

Request refills of your VA prescriptions, track VA prescription shipments, and view your current VA prescriptions and VA prescription history.



### Manage your VA appointments.

View, schedule, and cancel appointments and join video visits using the VA Appointments tool.

My HealtheVet Premium accounts are free and upgrading takes just a few steps.



#### **Upgrade in Person**

by making an appointment with your local VA's My HealtheVet Coordinator



#### **Upgrade Online**

by using a Sign-In Partner (DS Logon or ID.me)



#### **Upgrade By Video Appointment**

by contacting the My HealtheVet Coordinator at your local VA for more information



**Upgrade to Premium by September 1, 2021!**

Learn More

[myhealth.va.gov/premium](http://myhealth.va.gov/premium)



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Connected Care

# Bridging the digital divide

**VA is helping Veterans get the internet access and technology they need for telehealth care.**

Many Veterans are turning to telehealth to access care from VA. But for Veterans living in rural areas or for those that may have limited broadband connectivity, VA telehealth services can be difficult to access. That's why VA is working to bridge this digital divide and ensure that all Veterans can access VA telehealth care.

If you would benefit from video telehealth services but don't have internet access or a video-capable device, VA can help. Through the Digital Divide Consult, your VA provider can refer you to a VA social worker who can determine your eligibility for programs to help you get the internet service or technology needed for VA telehealth.



To learn more about the Digital Divide Consult, talk to your provider or visit [telehealth.va.gov/digital-divide](https://telehealth.va.gov/digital-divide).

# Annie text messages help Veterans cope

As the coronavirus pandemic stretches into a second year, you may be feeling lonelier and more worried than ever. For those with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or other serious illnesses, the ongoing need to isolate and minimize interactions could make the outside world appear more threatening.



VA's Annie text messaging program is available to help. Annie is an automated texting system that sends you health information and self-care reminders. There are many types of Annie message protocols, and any cellphone with texting capabilities can receive Annie messages.

The Coping During COVID text message protocol helps you self-manage your stress levels and feel more connected during the pandemic. A few times a week, Annie will send you a text message asking if you would like information to assist with coping. If you reply 'yes,' Annie will send one of more than 60 tips that can help decrease feelings of anxiety, anger, depression, and isolation.

To receive Annie messages, you must first be registered for Annie. Once registered, you can self-subscribe to Coping During COVID messages simply texting SUB COPE to Annie (75338).

To learn more and to enroll, visit [mobile.va.gov/annie](https://mobile.va.gov/annie).

## Upgrade your My HealtheVet account today!

**Beginning in September 2021, My HealtheVet Advanced accounts will be discontinued.**

If you have an Advanced account and do not upgrade to a Premium account, your account will revert to a Basic account. If that occurs, you will lose access to the pharmacy features, including the ability to request and track your VA prescription refills.

Upgrading your My HealtheVet account takes just a few steps and is free. If you want to upgrade in person or through a video appointment, contact your local My HealtheVet Coordinator for your VA facility. For a listing, visit [www.visn4.va.gov/myhealthevet.asp](http://www.visn4.va.gov/myhealthevet.asp).



# Healthy Teaching Kitchen classes offered over VA Video Connect

The Nutrition and Food Services and Women's Health Programs at the James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center in Altoona, Pa. recently secured funding through a collaborative effort of the national programs to enhance the Women's Health Healthy Teaching Kitchen programming via VA Video Connect.

Women Veterans enrolled in the six-class series receive an individualized cooking equipment and supply box along with a recipe book. Class topics are aimed at helping improve participants' confidence in the ability to prepare healthy meals that taste great, too! Whole health and food safety concepts are built into each session.



Registered dietitian Megan Wall, Penn State nutrition student Lauren Mathews, and Penn State nutrition intern Autumn Bigger display items used during the healthy teaching kitchen classes.

The James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center in Altoona will be offering this class series three times through September 2021. For more about VA's Healthy Teaching Kitchen programs, please visit [www.nutrition.va.gov/Healthy\\_Teaching\\_Kitchen.asp](http://www.nutrition.va.gov/Healthy_Teaching_Kitchen.asp).

# Veterans with COPD benefit from remote patient monitoring program

Jennifer Snyder, RN, lead care coordinator for the Remote Patient Monitoring Program at the Coatesville VA Medical Center recently approached Karyn McNally, RT in the Home Oxygen Clinic to explore the idea of creating a collaboration to improve and manage Veterans with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).



The use of remote patient monitoring offers Veterans a proactive approach to the management of their chronic disease. This is beneficial because unmanaged COPD can lead to the risk of disease progression, respiratory infection, and heart problems. Remote patient monitoring can also assess the Veteran's current health status through a series of questions and biometrics that allows the health care team to make clinical decisions on the course of treatment in real-time.

If symptoms occur, Veterans can schedule video visits with their remote patient monitoring nurse care coordinator, respiratory therapist or clinical provider via video visit. This allows Veterans to receive care at home and eliminates unnecessary trips to the ER and lengthy hospital stays. This collaboration has been well received by Veterans co-managed by the remote patient monitoring program and the home oxygen clinic. The team hopes to expand this effort to more Veterans soon.

◀ Karyn McNally, RT (left) and Jennifer Snyder, RN (right)

# Continuing the Mission for Veteran's Care

Under the MISSION Act, Veterans have more access to health care. VA provides health care for Veterans from providers in your local community outside of VA. Veterans may be eligible to receive care from a community provider when VA cannot provide the care needed. This care is provided on behalf of and paid for by VA.

Community care is available to Veterans based on certain conditions and eligibility requirements, and in consideration of a Veteran's specific needs and circumstances. Community care must be first authorized by VA before a Veteran can receive care from a community provider.

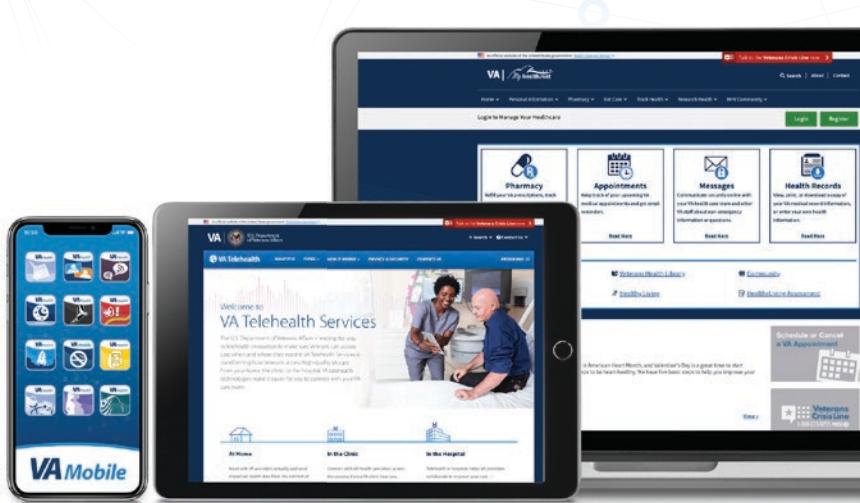
|                      | Care in the Community<br>Consults <sup>1</sup> | Non-VA Unique<br>Patients <sup>2</sup> |
|----------------------|--|--|
| FY18                 | 87,706   | 62,427                                 |
| FY19                 | 101,068  | 70,376                                 |
| FY20                 | 153,508  | 87,042                                 |
| FY21 (as of 7/13/21) | 122,909  | 75,921                                 |

(1) Scheduled and completed consults

(2) Number of unique enrolled Veterans who receive community care at VA expense

## Office of **CONNECTED CARE**

Wherever you are,  
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Join the **millions of Veterans** who use My HealthVet to view their health records, schedule their appointments, refill their prescriptions, and send secure messages to their providers.

### Take Charge of Your Health and Wellness

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### Connect With Your VA Care Team From Anywhere

Use VA telehealth technologies to meet with your VA care team, no matter the distance. In 2019, Veterans participated in more than **2.6 million telehealth episodes**, many from their own homes.



Get Started Today!  
***connectedcare.va.gov***



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*I CARE represents the core values that define the basic elements of how we go about our work—“who we are”—and form the underlying principles we use every day in our service to Veterans.*

*VISN 4 established a new, quarterly I CARE award to recognize employees who not only demonstrate our I CARE values, but who go the extra mile to live by our I CARE ideals. There are many wonderful examples of employees demonstrating these values in their day-to-day work.*

## Integrity • Commitment • Advocacy • Respect • Excellence

### FY20 3rd Quarter Awardees

#### **Sussex County Outpatient Clinic**

Wilmington VA Medical Center

As the city of Georgetown and Sussex County in Delaware were identified as a hot-spot of infection during the pandemic, local health care organizations raised concerns about the vulnerable populations. VHA partnered with the State of Delaware and Beebe Healthcare in support of VA's Fourth Mission. More than two times the number of tests per 10,000 capita were performed in Sussex County as compared to the rest of Delaware, and 90% of those tests were completed by the Beebe & VHA team.

The VHA team was led by Dr. Romina Thomas, the lead primary care physician in the Delaware CBOCs. The team performed antibody and PCR testing for the community outside of the Sussex County CBOC in Georgetown, even working through inclement weather. Through their collaborating efforts, more than 2,600 tests were completed in just five days.

Each test was also followed with a discussion of education and mapping out personalized plans for safe quarantine.



The Sussex County CBOC staff worked as registration volunteers, lab screeners, traffic directors and clinical counselors. They developed a process and instructed all VA patients to contact their PACT team so their results could be entered and patients could be added to the Home Telehealth Program.



Dr. Thomas did not stop there. A major source of the infection in Sussex County was coming from the chicken processing plants. She led a smaller Sussex County CBOC Team into the plants where almost 1,800 workers were tested and educated over the first day's 14 hours. Every one of them were educated on COVID and were offered resources for proper isolation and available social and mental health services. On a second day in another plant, they tested nearly 1,000 additional workers.

We are extremely proud of Dr. Thomas and the Sussex County CBOC Team. They truly exemplified all of the I CARE values while serving not only Veterans but the community of Sussex County, Delaware as well.

## FY20 4th Quarter Awardee

### **Lisa Dylewski, RN Case Manager**

Erie VA Medical Center



Lisa Dylewski, RN

Ms. Dylewski was at the right place at the right time, and her actions assisted in saving the life of a civilian who was badly wounded.

Over Labor Day weekend while she was enjoying time at her family's camp in rural Warren County with a relaxing atmosphere, it quickly transitioned to one of terror and urgency at the realization that a recreational vehicle had overturned, ejecting its passengers. Lisa heard the crash and rushed to the scene to find a man and woman on the road, conscious but severely injured. The UTV was part of a large group of others and a frantic, chaotic scene followed.

Lisa immediately took control of the situation and her leadership provided guidance for those on the scene to cooperate in a calm and reasonable manner. An off-duty Pennsylvania State Trooper was part of the group and between Lisa's direction from a medical responsiveness standpoint, and the trooper's emergency response resources, a plan was devised to transport the woman,

who was in critical condition and shock, to a local fire department where EMS and Medevac support would be waiting. Lisa was calm yet assertive in instructing the men in the group on how to lift the woman into a waiting motor vehicle in a manner that would prevent further trauma. She also provided ice to help with the pain until they could reach the local destination where EMS and a helicopter were waiting.

The trooper followed up the next week by sending a letter of commendation to the Erie VA for Lisa's heroic and courageous actions. It contained an update on the injured woman who suffered many injuries and underwent hours of surgery to repair many broken bones and several lacerations to her face requiring staples and stitches. The letter also contained a heartfelt thank you on behalf of all the woman's friends and colleagues who respect and love her. Their friend's recovery will be long, but they are grateful that Lisa was in the right place at the right time.

Lisa demonstrates each day while on duty every I CARE value in her interactions with Veterans and colleagues. This event while she was off duty illustrates the exceptional and humble nurse that the Veterans of the Erie VAMC are so fortunate to have.

## FY21 1st Quarter Awardee

### **Officer James Gestwicki**

Wilmington VA Medical Center

Ofc. Gestwicki fielded a telephone call from a Veteran in San Diego, California who initially wanted to express his frustration with VA. Ofc. Gestwicki's experience told him that something seemed off about the nature of the call. He remained on the telephone with the Veteran for an extended amount of time, eventually getting the Veteran to open up and express the reasoning behind the telephone call. After about 10 minutes, Ofc. Gestwicki was able to get the Veteran to tell him that he had planned on making an example out of the VA in San Diego by driving there and shooting himself in the parking lot.

While Ofc. Gestwicki was gathering information, Sgt. Mahana, Ofc. Francis and Ofc. Hicks immediately began working behind the scenes. They were able to identify the Veteran with limited information, locate an address on file,

and notify the San Diego Police Department and the San Diego VA Police Service. This team's contribution led the SDPD to the Veteran's location where he was found to be safe.



## FY21 2nd Quarter Awardee

### **Carla Carradin, RN (Emergency Room)** Wilmington VA Medical Center

VA police were called to the ER for a Veteran who was attempting to leave the facility after he was involuntarily committed under an emergency detention order. Upon arrival the police were able to determine the Veteran was agitated but not aggressive and in obvious crisis/duress.

Police were quickly able to de-escalate the situation and returned the Veteran to his treatment room through voluntary compliance. The Veteran explained to the police supervisor that no one was listening to him and he simply wanted to go home. After approximately 15 minutes of active listening, the police supervisor articulated and advocated to medical staff his concerns and issues.

After speaking with staff, Carla conversed with the doctor and came up with an immediate treatment plan. Carla entered the room and literally sat on the floor next to Veteran who was in extreme mental duress. She spoke softly, LISTENED and provided comfort, and his sobbing subsided. The emergency room was full and it was busy, and Carla relayed

to staff what was going on. The ER team made sure no lapses in other Veterans' care was affected.

Through her display of compassion, kindness and empathy, she may have provided some relief to this Veteran who could have been a statistic.



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[www.va.gov/health-care/  
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# — 1-800-MyVA411 —

(1-800-698-2411)

## The number to call when you don't know who to call.

You only need to remember **one number** for information on **VA care, benefits, and services** or to speak to a **live agent** for assistance!



1-800-MyVA411 serves all members of the Veteran and service member community seeking information or assistance.



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### We'd Like to Hear from You

Vision for Excellence is published for the employees, volunteers, patients and friends of VA Healthcare-VISN 4. For more information about this publication, contact David Cowgill at 412-822-3318 or [david.cowgill@va.gov](mailto:david.cowgill@va.gov).