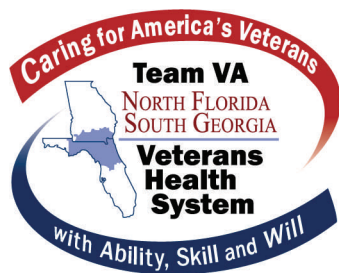




News Release

North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System Reaching Out to Rural Veterans



GAINESVILLE/LAKE CITY – Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) doctors, nurses, and researchers are joining forces to reach the more than 3 million Veterans enrolled in the VA Health Care System who live in rural areas. These Veterans might not live near a VA hospital or VA clinic, and sometimes they cannot find a way to travel to see a doctor or other health care professional. Under the leadership of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki, the VA has embraced a national strategy of outreach to ensure that Veterans, regardless of where they live, can access the expertise and

experience of one of the best health care systems in the country. “It is essential that we work together to build rural programs that reach out to our nation's Veterans,” Secretary Shinseki said at a recent rural health community forum.

To address the unique issues facing rural Veterans, the Department created an Office of Rural Health in February 2007. In May of 2009, Secretary Shinseki announced that the Department would provide \$250 million in competitive funding to improve services specifically designed for Veterans in rural and highly rural areas. “This funding signals a substantial expansion of services addressing the health care needs of our rural Veterans,” Shinseki said. “These funds will allow VA to establish new outpatient clinics, expand collaborations with federal and community partners, accelerate the use of telemedicine deployment, explore innovative uses of technology, and fund pilot programs.”

The North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System (NF/SGVHS), which serves over 87,000 enrolled rural Veterans in 52 counties, has been a leader in working to improve the accessibility and quality of healthcare for Veterans in rural areas. In September 2008, the NF/SGVHS was selected as a satellite of the Veterans Rural Health Resource Center, Eastern Region (VRHRC-ER), and has received more than \$6 million for expansion of rural health care. Among the newly funded projects are Rural Health Extension Clinics to serve veterans in and around Perry, FL (Taylor County) and Waycross, GA. “The Gainesville and Lake City VA Medical Centers serve the largest number of rural Veterans in our region, so this is a great opportunity to better understand the health issues of our Veterans living in remote areas,” said Paul M. Hoffman, MD, who leads the rural health program at NF/SGVHS.


Local VA physicians, nurses, and research investigators have formed multi-disciplinary teams to develop and implement innovations such as tele-health technology, home based comprehensive care (including rehabilitation services), and improved transportation services that will increase access to care for Veterans living in rural areas of northern Florida and southern Georgia. “This program is a great chance for us to evaluate extending VA care into the home for those who may have had difficulty in accessing our services,” said Thomas Cappello, NF/SGVHS Director.



News Release

The primary areas of interest to be studied by teams based at the Gainesville and Lake City VA Medical Centers include improving access to and delivery of comprehensive care to disabled patients living in rural areas, and providing rehabilitation services to Veterans with motor, cognitive, and visual disabilities.

Dr. Charles Levy, Chief of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the Gainesville VA Medical Center, is one of the first investigators to receive funding to implement a rural health project at NF/SGVHS. Dr. Levy received \$2 million to study the use of tele-health technology to provide physical therapy and other rehabilitation services to rural Veterans in their home. Additional funding was awarded to the NF/SGVHS to establish a Rural Health Training Program. Under the direction of Drs. Hoffman and William Mann, Chairman of the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Florida College of Public Health and Health Professions. Through this program interns from the Departments of Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Speech Pathology, nurse practitioner trainees from the College of Nursing, and medical students from the Colleges of Medicine at the University of Florida and the Florida State University, will learn best practices for providing primary and rehabilitative care services to rural Veterans. They will also be learning the value of multi-disciplinary teamwork in treating patients. Future projects will evaluate the video transmission of specialty care and rehabilitation training for caregivers of rural Veterans. Hoffman notes that “by working closely with our academic affiliates and providing an opportunity for students in the health professions to participate in rural health care early in their training, we hope to attract practitioners to rural settings both within the VA system and in rural communities in Florida and South Georgia.”

Some other rural health initiatives, already underway at the Lake City VA Medical Center, include the Visual Impairment Center to Optimize Remaining Sight (VICTORS) program, which provides low vision rehabilitation to help Veterans maximize their functional vision and increase their independence; and the Comprehensive Care Clinic for Veterans with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) or Spinal Cord Injury (SCI). The MS/SCI Clinic in Lake City is evaluating exercise and pulmonary rehabilitation for Veterans with MS utilizing video transmission to rural sites and home tele-health monitoring and prevention of skin breakdown and pressure ulcers. 



Rehabilitation Outcomes Research Center
Research Enhancement Award Program (RORC REAP)
NF/SG Veterans Health System
1601 SW Archer Road (151B)
Gainesville, FL 32608

For information contact:
Kristen Wing, *Public Affairs Specialist*
Kristen.Wing@va.gov
Phone: 352-376-1611, x. 4937
www.rorc.research.va.gov

