



## THE AMERICAN LEGION LEGISLATIVE POINT PAPERS

### **VA Healthcare Modernization**

#### **Background**

The future of VA healthcare is as a hybrid system consisting of inpatient and outpatient care, telehealth, and community care. Ensuring VA is equipped to meet the unique needs of an increasingly diverse veteran population requires that VA fully leverage all healthcare modalities and ensure a seamless transition between them. VA's most important mission is providing high-quality healthcare and benefits when and where veterans need it. Passage of the Legion-supported VA MISSION Act of 2018 has given VA important tools to improve access to high-quality care either in person at VA facilities, virtually through telehealth, or with increased community care options. Modernizing electronic health records, veteran-centric access standards, and a transparent online scheduling system for VA-provided care and community care alike are essential to ensuring our veterans receive the care they deserve. The means by which VA delivers care may change, but one thing cannot – VA should continue to deliver the best care anywhere to our nation's veterans.

Many veterans in rural areas struggle to make their appointments because of the great distances needed to travel to the nearest VA facility. Many rural areas are also underserved by private health providers due to a shortage of medical professionals. With congressional support, VA is making great strides to help address barriers preventing rural and veteran populations from accessing quality care. In June 2021, the Sgt. Ketchum Rural Veterans Mental Health Act was signed into law. It requires VA to establish and maintain three new Rural Access for Growth Enhancement Program (RANGE) centers in rural areas in need of additional mental health resources.

In addition to congressional action, VA has teamed up with The American Legion to bring care to veterans in a familiar setting - their local posts. Through Project ATLAS (Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations), video-communication technologies and medical devices are installed in selected American Legion posts to enable remote examinations through a secure, high-speed internet line. Veterans will be examined and advised in real-time through face-to-face video sessions with VA medical professionals, who may be located hundreds or thousands of miles away. For example, American Legion Post 176 in Springfield, VA, hosts one of the first sites. Services offered do not require hands-on exams, such as primary care, nutrition, mental health counseling and social work. Project ATLAS centers are closer to veterans' homes, allowing VA to improve care and increase access.

Another essential technological innovation is VA's move to a new electronic health records system that links VA, Department of Defense (DoD), and community healthcare providers to patient records. This ability provides veterans and clinicians with a complete picture of patients' medical histories, driving connections between military service and health outcomes. It also offers an improved and consistent patient-scheduling experience at VA medical facilities and community care partners nationwide.



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These reforms require excellent leadership and talent in the VA healthcare system. The future of VA health care is a hybrid and agile system that can fully leverage available technologies to address the needs of an increasingly diverse veteran population. The means by which VA delivers care may change, but one thing will not - VA should continue to deliver the best care anywhere to our nation's veterans. The American Legion stands ready as a true ally with Congress and VA to ensure this nation's veterans have access to the world-class, compassionate care they have earned.

### Key Points

- Modernizing the VA healthcare system and IT infrastructure is an investment in VA's future and the best path forward.
- Over the next 10 years, VA will move to a new electronic health records system that links VA, DoD, and community healthcare providers to patient records and unifies all VA facilities under one system.

### What Can Congress Do?

- Ensure VA is accountable to deadlines proposed for various IT system upgrades and installations and that they remain fully funded.
- Pass legislation requiring VA to develop a website and mobile app-enabled self-scheduling appointment system where veterans can request, schedule and confirm medical appointments with health-care providers.
- Pass legislation which requires VA to maintain a website that collects data about patient wait times, effectiveness of care and staffing/vacancy information publicly available (H.R. 2775/S.1319, *VA Quality Health Care Accountability and Transparency Act*).