

**VETERANS RURAL HEALTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

April 26 - 27

April 26: 8:15 am – 4:30 pm AKDT

April 27: 8:00 am – 5:30 pm AKDT

NOTES**Attendees:****Committee Members Present:**

Marcus Cox, Chair
Andrew Behrman
Lonnie Wangen
Keith Mueller
Joe Parsetich
Pavithra Ellison
Vanessa Meade
David Albright
Thomas Driskill
Juanita Mullen
Angela Renae Mund
Bryant Howren

John Boze
Christie Prairie Chicken (virtual)
Thomas Steinbrunner
Nancy Daily (virtual)
David Clay Ward
Ric Epperson
Phil Hokenson

Virtual Attendees:

Kayla Lopez
Jon Monteleone
Sidath Panangala

Ex-Officio Members Present:

Ben Smith
Kristi Martinsen
Kellie Kubena

Consultants Present:

Jasmine Williams
Natalie Gaynor
Robert Derby
Stephen Miles (virtual)
Mary Elder (virtual)

Department of Veterans Affairs Staff Present:

Sheila R. Robinson, DFO
Judy Bowie, Committee Manager
Peter Kaboli
Phil Welch
LaTonya Small
Travis Lovejoy
Sarah Ono
Sergio Romeo
Keith Myers
Carolyn Turvey
Samatha Solimeo
Vince Watts
Byron Bair
Verdie Bowen

Public Attendees:

Jeff Kowchee
Irene Washington
Jeremiah Galloway
Alberta Unok
Amy Hatcher
Melissa Caswell
Bryen Bartgis
Jo Cappeto
William Fecke
David Parker
Wanda Solomon-Parsons
Flossie Davenport
Erin Alaivanu



Valerie Nurr'araaluk Davidson
Vivian Echavarria
Ashley Schaber
Keith Shumway
Viola Samson

Meeting Objectives

1. VRHAC will gain increased understanding of local Veteran care system and services.
2. VRHAC will gain increased understanding of VA's health care programs.
3. VRHAC will gain increased understanding of the Office of Rural Health's ongoing and future initiatives.
4. Identify topics of focus for the Fall 2023 meeting.

**Wednesday, April 26, 2023****Committee Member Welcome**

Judy Bowie, VRHAC Committee Manager, Office of Rural Health, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Dr. Peter Kaboli, Acting Executive Director, Office of Rural Health, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Committee Manager introduced new Office of Rural Health (ORH) Acting Executive Director.
- Committee Manager and ORH Acting Executive Director welcomed Committee members to Anchorage for Spring 2023 Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) meeting.
- ORH Acting Executive Director reviewed meeting goals and acknowledged Committee member subject matter expertise.

Welcome, Introductions and Meeting Overview

Marcus Cox, Chair, Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

Robert Derby, Strategic Planner/Facilitator, DCG Communications

- Facilitator acknowledged Marcus Cox as the new Chair; acknowledged all new members.
- Chair provided introductory remarks and convened the meeting.
- Chair noted presentations will help Committee members better understand the Veterans' care system and help shape future meeting topics.
- Facilitator reviewed meeting protocol including protocol for asking questions and using microphones.

Presentation: Advisory Committee Management Office Update

LaTonya Small, Program Specialist, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Reviewed Federal Advisory Committee requirements .
- Identified VRHAC Designated Federal Official (DFO).
- Noted differences between in-person, closed, and private meetings.
- Reviewed U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Federal Advisory Committee and member best practices.

Presentation: State of Alaska Office of Veterans Affairs Update

Verdie Bowen, Director, State of Alaska Office of Veterans Affairs

- Provided background information on rural health care challenges in Alaska including transportation and road access.
- Highlighted the importance of VA outreach teams and major partnerships with community health organizations in bridging the care gap for Veterans living in highly rural and remote communities.

- Outlined the structure of the Alaska VA Native Health Care Sharing Agreement which allows Veterans with service-connected disabilities to access care near where they live through a hub-and-spoke model of care.
- Answered questions about provider shortages and recruitment and retention incentives.

Video: A Message from Secretary Denis McDonough to VA Federal Advisory Committees

Denis McDonough, Secretary, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Watched video address from Secretary Denis McDonough.
- Reviewed the roles of VA Federal Advisory Committees in shaping VA policy and care for Veterans.

Presentation: VISN 20 Northwest Network Update

John Boze, Strategic Planner, VISN 20 Northwest Network, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Provided overview of the ways Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 20 supports nearly 1 million Veterans across Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and parts of Montana.
- Highlighted VA partnership with U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER) Hospital including continued work to designate JBER as a VA hospital.
- Outlined provisions within the PACT Act that provide hiring authority to address provider and frontline medical staff shortages.
- Discussed utilizing rural health initiatives to increase access to care for Veterans living in rural areas, including initiatives on suicide prevention, agricultural training, behavioral health, and transportation.
- Answered questions about:
 - Mental health services available to Veterans in VISN 20 including ongoing projects in home-based primary care and telehealth.
- Opioid overdose statistics in Alaska, highlighting a project in the state that leverages telehealth pharmacy specialist providers to address opiate management.

Virtual Presentation: Office of Tribal Health Update

Christie Prairie Chicken, Deputy Director, Office of Tribal Health, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Highlighted the role of the Office of Tribal Health (OTH) as a liaison between Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and American Indian & Alaska Native (AI/AN) Veterans.

- Reviewed OTH timeline of actions and milestones, and provided updates on office staffing.
- Outlined recent and upcoming partnerships, and their relationship to OTH strategic partnership focus areas including partnerships with the National Indian Health Board and the Tribal Advisory Committee.
- Discussed tribal health congressional and legislative support for copay exemption and Minority Veteran Coordinator placements.

Presentation: Office of Rural Engagement Update

David Clay Ward, Rural Desk Officer, Office of Rural Engagement, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Outlined the role of the Office of Rural Engagement (ORE) as an enterprise integrator for rural Veteran issues, connecting Veterans and rural communities with the VA programs available to them.
- Discussed ORE organizational goals as outlined under the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs including outreach, policy assessment, and technical assistance.
- Answered questions about how ORE recommends utilizing recommended communications channels and PSAs to bring awareness to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples.

Presentation: Office of Rural Health Update

Peter Kaboli, Acting Executive Director, Office of Rural Health, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Provided background information on rural health care challenges and ORH structure and program portfolio, with an emphasis on AI/AN Veterans.
- Discussed the VHA-Indian Health Service (IHS) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) Operational Plan that impacts 145,000 AI/AN Veterans nationwide.
- Highlighted ORH's work on the VHA-IHS MOU Operational Plan including establishing Operational Plan workgroups, and metric capture/reporting for programs included in the MOU such as Consolidated Mail Out Pharmacy program, Highly Rural Transportation Grant program, and VA Video Connect.

Panel: American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans

Jeff Kowchee

Irene Washington

Jeremiah Galloway

- Discussed experience, benefits, and challenges of utilizing VA and tribal health care services.
- Highlighted active community outreach, including work with Tribal Veteran Representative Program, to help connect other AI/AN Veterans with VA services.

- Recommended utilizing existing village safety officer, state trooper, and community health aid representative positions to assist in streamlining care coordination and delivery.
Recommended implementing a single toll-free hotline to serve as the main point of contact for Veterans with questions about VA benefits and care.
- Answered questions about managing the stigma of mental health care in rural communities, emphasizing the importance of community elders.

Virtual Presentation: Alaska VA Healthcare System

Thomas Steinbrunner, Col. USAF, Ret., Executive Director, Alaska VA Healthcare System, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Provided an overview of the Alaska VA health care market including VA sites of care, federal/tribal partnerships, and community care facilities.
- Highlighted the importance of federal partnerships to expand essential health care services, including principal partnerships with the DOD JBER joint venture hospital.
- Discussed current and future rural outreach, noting that outreach in 2022 supported more than 760 Veterans and their families.
- Provided insight into transportation and road system challenges in Alaska, noting that accessing health care throughout the state is often only accessible by air travel.

Presentation: Alaska Native Health Board

Alberta Unok, President/CEO, Alaska Native Health Board

- Provided overview of Alaska Native Health Board as the statewide voice of the tribal health system, and ongoing work on policy change and impact, health care communications efforts, and strategic planning.
- Reviewed a tribal health map of health care sites and services around the state, noting how coordination of care between VA and tribal health facilities allows for the flexibility to create culturally relevant health care programs.
- Noted the impact of tribal management of tribal health care in recognizing the importance of local decision making, while placing an emphasis on holistic care.
- Answered questions about the dependability of telehealth in rural communities in Alaska.

Presentation: Southcentral Foundation

Amy Hatcher, VP Primary Care, VNPCC and Village Clinics, Southcentral Foundation

Melissa Caswell, Administrator, VNPCC, Southcentral Foundation

Bryan Bartgis, Nurse Director, Southcentral Foundation

- Outlined the care structure of Southcentral Foundation including more than 2,600 employees that oversee care of approximately 65,000 “customer owners.”
- Discussed the importance of using the term “customer owner” to ensure Alaska Native people have agency over their health care and ownership of their care-related decisions.

- Highlighted the Tribal Veteran Representatives Program and their work connecting Veterans with VA benefits and resources, including assisting with Medicare/Medicaid applications.
- Answered questions about the availability of private care in Alaska, noting that private practices and hospitals are available along the road systems, but highly rural and remote areas only have community health centers.

Wrap Up & Close

Marcus Cox, Chair, Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

Robert Derby, Strategic Planner/Facilitator, DCG Communications

- Committee reviewed highlights, concerns, and outstanding questions regarding the day's presentations.

Thursday, April 27, 2023

Welcome, Introductions and Meeting Overview

Marcus Cox, Chair, Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

- Chair reconvened meeting and reviewed agenda.

Presentation: Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Hospital Overview

William J. Fecke, Col., Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Hospital

- Outlined the structure of JBER hospital as a centralized agency for VA and DOD health care services that provides care to more than 122,000 patients.
- Highlighted the unique health care access challenges that Veterans in rural Alaska face, including utilizing air transport to travel for health care services.
- Answered questions about mental health services available at JBER and highlighted the facilities' inpatient behavioral health unit as a resource available to all Veterans in Alaska.
- Highlighted the Simulation Lab as a means for medical staff to maintain readiness of trauma.

Site Visit: Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Hospital

William J. Fecke, Col., Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Hospital

- Committee members toured Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Hospital, led by Col. Fecke.

Presentation: Social Determinants of Health in Rural Alaska

David Parker, Professor, Div. of Population Health Sciences, University of Alaska Anchorage

- Discussed the differences between health disparity and health equity, as related to health outcomes.

- Highlighted barriers to health outcomes in rural and remote areas of Alaska including transportation, road systems, language barriers, telephone and broadband access, and food instability.
- Noted how barriers to health outcomes and factors associated with living in rural Alaska led to an increase in crude death rates of AI/AN people during the coronavirus pandemic.
- Outlined ways to address health disparities including having access to current health data and collaborating with community health organizations.

Panel: Alaska Native Women Veterans

Wanda Solomon-Parsons

Annie Sherman

Flossie Davenport

- Provided an overview of experience as Alaska Native Women Veterans, including benefits and challenges of accessing VA care in rural and remote Alaska.
- Discussed stigma related to accessing VA care; recommended implementing a military service liaison to assist AI/AN Veterans access VA benefits and care.
- Highlighted the discrepancy in availability of specialty care in small rural clinics compared to larger VAMCs and the importance of community and tribal health facilities (Alaska Native Medical Center and Southcentral Foundation) to provide care to Veterans in isolated areas.

Site Visit: Alaska Native Medical Center

Valerie Nurr'araaluk Davidson, President/CEO, Alaska Native Medical Center

- Committee members visited Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) and heard presentations on the mission of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, how ANMC supports rural pharmacies, and a demonstration of telehealth capabilities.

Introduction to Afternoon Facilitated Discussions

Marcus Cox, Chair, Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

Bob Derby, Strategic Planner/Facilitator, DCG Communications

- Provided overview of facilitated discussion process to generate themes and topics as an outcome of the spring 2023 VRHAC meeting.

Facilitated Discussion (Learnings from Spring 2023 Meeting)

Robert Derby, Strategic Planner/Facilitator, DCG Communications

- Committee members engaged in rapid idea generation around the topics of AI/AN Veteran health care challenges.
- Committee engaged in discussion about emergent themes, including allocation of resources for outreach, decreasing stigma, improving preventative care, and



streamlining collaboration and health care resources among federal agencies, expanding upon ideas and generating potential solutions to problems raised.

- Committee expressed interest in exploring how VA communicates with Veterans about their benefits, services, and care, including any specific communications campaigns and public messaging about VA services.
- Committee brainstormed strategies to alleviate travel costs and challenges for highly remote and super rural geographically isolated locations through special allocation of resources for Veterans to access transportation for health care related needs.

Wrap Up & Close

Marcus Cox, Chair, Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

- Chair thanked Committee members for their work and adjourned meeting.

Public Comment Period

Sheila Robinson, Designated Federal Official, Office of Rural Health, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

- Public comment period was closed after 15 minutes.
- No public comments.