

## The Path to VA Telemedicine

### Veterans Bureau

After World War I, most Veteran medical care was provided in armed services hospitals, but the number of injured Veterans prevented facilities from keeping patients through to recovery. President Herbert Hoover signed the bill establishing the Veterans Bureau in 1930 and making it responsible for medical services for war veterans. Between 1931 and 1941, the number of VA hospitals grew to 91. In 1940, prior to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, there were 458,000 active members of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps with more than 4,286,000 living veterans. Former members of the military had served in World War I, the Civil War, and the Spanish American War. At that time, the Veterans Affairs budget amounted to \$561.1 million. The benefits<sup>1</sup> paid to Veterans came in the form of military pensions determined by a medical screening system for rating and compensating disabilities. About 16 million people<sup>2</sup> – 12% of the U.S. population and more than half the men eligible at the time – were brought into the armed forces during World War II. Some 617,000 men and women were wounded during the war. The VA's experience in assisting thousands of Veterans led it to become a world leader in the development of prosthetic limbs. Only after World War II did the VA form a separate department of medicine to provide outpatient treatment for Veterans with disabilities not related to military service.

The Korean War added to the VA's workload and brought about the reorganization of the agency into three areas: medical care, financial assistance to Veterans, and insurance. Returning Vietnam War-era Veterans had the distinction of providing the largest percentage of disabled than any previous conflict; in 1972, more than 300,000 had disabilities connected to their military service. Meanwhile, World War II Veterans were rapidly reaching the age of 65, increasing disability pension payments. The VA began setting up a network of Vet Centers across the country in 1979 that were separate from other VA facilities. In the 1980s, Congress mandated VA health care for Veterans so that by 2005, more than 200 Vet Centers were providing counseling services and post-traumatic stress disorder treatment. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan elevated the VA to Cabinet status, changing the name to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

*The history of benefits<sup>1</sup> paid to U.S. Military Veterans is actually as old as the Declaration of Independence. The Continental Congress approved the nation's first pension law in 1776, granting half-pay for life to Revolutionary War Veterans in cases of loss of limb or other serious disability. The first national effort to provide disabled Veterans with medical care began with the opening of the Naval Home in Philadelphia in 1812, followed by the Soldiers' Home in 1853 and St. Elizabeth's Hospital in 1855 – both in Washington, D.C.*

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<sup>1</sup> VA History in Brief", Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007.

<sup>1</sup> Blanck, Peter and Song, Chen. "Never Forget What They Did Here: Civil War Pensions for Gettysburg Union Army Veterans and Disability in Nineteenth-Century America", William & Mary Law Review, Vol.44, Issue 3, Article 5, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Segal, David R. and Segal, Mady Wechsler. "America's Military Population", Population Bulletin, Vol.59, No.4, P.4, December 2004. Population Reference Bureau

Throughout its history, the VA has evolved to meet the needs of Veterans. Despite expansion to more than 1,300 sites of care, the VA was finding it difficult to serve the millions of Veterans while keeping costs under control.

VA officials decided to research telemedicine as a way to trim transportation and accommodation expenses for which the department reimbursed its beneficiaries. VISN 19, known as the Rocky Mountain Network, became the research laboratory for the VA.

## VA Telehealth Success

Telemedicine has shown to reduce utilization, decrease lengths of stay, and increase patient satisfaction while resulting in avoiding approximately \$1,900 in costs per patient. The VA has implemented national quality, implementation, and development resources to ensure local services from more than 900 VA locations. Telehealth is available for over 50 specialty areas of care.

## VA Telehealth by the Numbers<sup>3</sup>

- The number of Veterans receiving care via VA's telehealth services grew approximately 4%
- VA provided care to more than 702,000 patients via the three telehealth modalities. This amounted to over 2.17 million telehealth episodes of care.
- 45% of these Veterans lived in rural areas, and may otherwise have had limited access to VA healthcare.
- More than 307,000 Veterans used Clinical Video Telehealth
- More than 150,000 Veterans used Home Telehealth
- More than 304,000 Veterans used Store-and-Forward Telehealth

## VA Telehealth Outcomes

Improved patient outcomes resulting in reduced utilization of inpatient care in FY16:

- Veterans enrolled in Home Telehealth for non-institutional care needs and chronic care management had a 59% decrease in VA bed days of care and a 31% decrease in VA hospital admissions.
- Mental health services provided to Veterans via Clinical Video Telehealth (TeleMental Health) reduced Acute Psychiatric VA bed days of care by 39% and a 32% decrease in VA hospital admissions

## GlobalMed® and the VA

The first contact GlobalMed had with the VA was in 2008, shortly after the company announced the release of its first TotalExam® examination camera. Officials of VISN 19 purchased five of the cameras, initially for testing in their mobile platforms. Less than a year later in 2009, GlobalMed received the first order from the VA for five mobile telemedicine stations. Upon delivery, the i8500™ stations were placed in VISN 19 CBOCs in Colorado and Utah. VISN 19 Staff came to GlobalMed in October 2009 for training.

That successful deployment led to the largest rollout of telemedicine technology in VA history when the VA made its first major purchase of GlobalMed solutions in 2010. At around the same time, the VA validated GlobalMed's image automation software, CapSure®, for use with its VistA Imaging electronic medical record system, a major achievement for the small company.

<sup>3</sup> Ogrysko, N. "VA's telehealth program is already the largest in the nation. It's about to get bigger, Federal News Network, December 6, 2018, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/veterans-affairs/2018/12/vas-telehealth-program-is-already-the-largest-in-the-nation-its-about-to-get-bigger/>

The software has enabled the VA to use the “store-and-forward” method to save patient medical images for transmission and review by doctors and specialists at a later time. The results of the pilot program showed that telemedicine worked, and then the VA took it to scale. In the years since, the VA has invested in hundreds of GlobalMed solutions for thousands of installations.

GlobalMed continues to be committed to U.S. veterans. In 2018, GlobalMed partnered with Microsoft to offer eNcounter®, GlobalMed’s health data-capturing and workflow management telemedicine software that will store important information in Microsoft’s highly secure Azure cloud. This will enable providers worldwide to not compromise evidence-based decision making when offering a virtual health platform to their patients.

## Going Forward

As of December 2018, the VA has the largest telehealth program in the United States<sup>4</sup> with plans to address the VA’s access challenges and create even more telehealth opportunities for veterans to see their doctors and healthcare professionals. The VA sees its telehealth program as an opportunity to reach the one-third of the veteran population that lives in rural areas, reach those who aren’t currently active participants in the VA systems, with a particular focus on helping more veterans access mental health services.



“Mental health is still the last, great uncharted frontier in medicine,” Former VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said. “Telehealth, to me, is the first step in finally breaking those last barriers. It allows our veterans who may have those issues to talk to our professionals [and] talk to our doctors without the pressure that they would encounter in a public setting, without the pressures that they would encounter in traditional medical service facilities.”



GlobalMed® powers the world’s most advanced virtual health technology platform and wellness applications that support a patient at any point in the continuum of care.

Providers are enabled with integrated software and data capturing tools to deliver a complete and accurate patient encounter for evidence-based treatment and improved patient outcomes. Payors and providers looking to manage capacity, reduce costs, expand patient care, and deliver responsible medicine, will get all they need from one platform.

With over 50 million consults delivered in nearly 100 countries, GlobalMed is honored to be the telehealth provider to the Department of Veterans Affairs, Defense Health Agency. Its virtual healthcare platform has the Authority to Operate (ATO) on U.S. Department of Defense networks with the highest level of security. Learn more at [www.globalmed.com](http://www.globalmed.com).

<sup>4</sup> “Department of Veterans Affairs. VA Telehealth Services Fact Sheet.” 2017. [https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/news/VA\\_Telehealth\\_Services.pdf](https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/docs/news/VA_Telehealth_Services.pdf)