



VFW Brings VA Services to Remote Locations

A Montana VFW Post is the first non-VA site to house a telehealth facility, and VA wants to establish 10 similar sites by the end of 2019

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VFW Post 6786 sits seven miles from the Canadian border, more than 60 miles from the nearest VA clinic and more than 250 miles from the nearest VA hospital. Because of its remote location, VA approached the Eureka, Mont., Post in July about becoming the first non-VA location to house a telehealth facility.

Telehealth uses technology, such as video conferencing, to remotely connect patients with doctors.

Kedron Burnett, VA's Project Advancing Telehealth through Local Access Stations (ATLAS) National Team Consultant, said VA has looked at telehealth access points for some time, but the concept of partnering with veterans service organizations began about two years ago.

VFW initially reached out to VA with the idea, according to Dr. Leonie Heyworth, director of Synchronous Telehealth.

"They said we have so many VFWs across the country, and we know that not all veterans necessarily live proximal to a VA facility," Heyworth said.

VFW Post 6786 Quartermaster Melody Weldon said that because the Post is in a "very" remote location, its use as a telehealth facility provides veterans a "safer" option for their health care needs.

"And it gives the VFW a boost more in the positive light," said Weldon, who earned her VFW eligibility in Panama in 1989 with the 42nd Field Hospital out of Fort Knox as a registered nurse. "So many people think the VFW is just a bar. So it helps improve that image to wholeheartedly support the needs of the veterans."

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Expanding Telehealth

Heyworth said Post 6786 was selected after looking at regions that are:

- Far from VA facilities.
- Do not have “good broadband.”
- Have a “larger” veteran population.

Montana was at the top of that list, so VA contacted VFW and American Legion representatives locally, narrowing the options by looking at which sites would be “most prepared” to support a telehealth facility.

Heyworth said VA has “done a great deal” of telehealth since its initial 2011 expansion initiative, which was focused on clinic-to-clinic services. In June 2018, current VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, who was then serving as undersecretary of health, issued a directive to expand telehealth care into homes and non-VA sites.

The VA telehealth facility at Post 6786 is located in its meeting room area. To meet VA’s criteria, the Post had to:

- Ensure there was a separate entrance to the meeting room.
- Have bathroom facilities in or near the meeting room.
- Make sure the office had privacy.
- Upgrade the internet connection.

Having VFW and other VSO sites house telehealth facilities optimizes access, Heyworth said.

Multiple Posts, according to Heyworth, have expressed interest in being non-VA telehealth sites. She said the initial goal is to have 10 locations nationwide between VFW and American Legion Posts. As of February, Heyworth said, the start date for programs will depend on a finalized memorandum of understanding. At press time, that was expected to occur in the spring.

Weldon said VFW National Headquarters provided a “generous” grant to assist with the updates. Equipment for the facility was expected to arrive mid-February, according to Weldon.

Weldon said VA personnel contacted the Post in July 2018 about their site being the first non-VA telehealth facility. As of January, the facility was not yet usable, but Weldon said the community eagerly anticipated its opening.

“This community really supports the veterans wholeheartedly,” Weldon said, “and there’s a lot of beloved veterans [who are] well-known here, and so they’re very happy that our

veterans don't have to have the wear and tear on themselves, their vehicles [or] put themselves in dangerous situations due to weather.”

Heyworth said VA is rolling out similar initiatives with Walmart, universities, colleges and “other federal agencies.”

Carlos Fuentes, VFW's director of National Legislative Service, said VFW is “proud” to participate in Project ATLAS.

“Our VFW Posts are pillars of every community, a place for camaraderie and community service, and now, an access point to the VA care our veterans have earned and deserve,” Fuentes said.

This article is featured in the April 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.