U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
VA Healthcare–VISN 4

VISN 4 Update

1. Leadership Update

Sharon Coyle, Nurse Executive at Butler continues to serve as the Butler Director during the recruiting process.

Denise Boehm, Nurse Executive at the Washington, DC VAMC is detailed to VA Pittsburgh as their Acting Director while Don Koenig is detailed to VA Central office leading the Integrated Veterans Care transformation implementation.

Lovetta Ford is currently serving as Acting Deputy Director at Pittsburgh. Kaneen Allen is currently Acting Associate Director.

Dave DiGiacomo, Erie Associate Director was selected as the Clarksburg Associate Director. His last day in Erie was December 18th. Eric Shaner, Chief Health Administration Services at Erie is detailed into the Erie Associate Director role.

We continue to recruit for a new chief of staff for the Butler and Altoona VA's.

Derek Coughenour, Associate Director at Altoona will be detailed to the Associate Director at Philadelphia starting January 2, 2022. Pat O'Kane is being detailed outside the VISN. Shaun Shenk will serve as the Acting Associate Director in Altoona.

2. Market Assessment Update

The Department of Veterans Affairs has completed the market assessment process as established in the VA Mission Act of 2018. The market assessment will support VA's modernization of its infrastructure to increase Veteran access to care and improve Veteran outcomes well into the future. The release of recommendations from the market assessments was to occur by January 31st. VA Secretary McDonough has postponed the release of recommendations to the AIR Commission and Federal Register until early March 2022. The postponement will allow VA staff to focus on Veteran care needs during the current Omicron variant surge. As additional information becomes available to us, we will provide that to the Council.

3. Whole Health Update

VISN 4 employees and Veterans now have access to Millennium Health and Fitness (vice Ompractice). We went live with the platform in November and currently there are 775 active accounts (154 Veterans and 621 staff)

VISN 4 received a grant to provide virtual reality headsets to the Community Living Centers. Virtual Reality will be used to address issues such as loneliness, depression, agitation, and pain as an alternative to pharmacologic intervention

FY 21 data indicates that 10.4% of the Veterans receiving care in VISN 4 were engaged in Whole Health or Complementary and Integrative Health across the network (246,033 PCMM veterans/25,757 Whole Health uniques)

The Pittsburgh Integrative Oncology clinic has embraced Whole Health concepts and will be highlighted on a national best practice forum in March

VISN 4 is in the process of creating a Tele-Whole Health Hub which will provide expanded access to Complimentary and integrative health and Whole Health coaching for Veterans across the Network (will provide targeted coaching for chronic disease management and prevention (Hypertension, diabetes, pre-diabetes, as well as coaching for women Veterans)

4. Patient Experience Update

Nationally, VA's trust score over the last 90 days was 90.0. In VISN 4, our trust score over the last 90 days was 92.9, which is again the highest of any VISN in the nation. The top compliment themes over the last 90 days were interactions with staff, quality of care, cleanliness of facility, and satisfaction with specialty care.

5. COVID-19 Vaccine – Update

The Omicron variant continues to spread rapidly in almost all regions – the country is averaging more than 600,000 new cases a day, far more than at any previous point in the pandemic. With many people testing themselves on at-home tests, and other infections going undetected, reported cases are likely an undercount of actual infections. While early data suggest Omicron infections might be less severe than those of other variants, the increases in cases and hospitalizations are expected to stress the healthcare system in the coming weeks. More than 130,000 coronavirus patients are hospitalized nationwide. VA health facilities report surges in Med/Surg and ICU unit occupancies, as well as increased employee absenteeism due to coronavirus infections.

Death rates, which are a lagging indicator of virus activity, have not yet increased as much.

If you're fully vaccinated – and especially if you're boosted – you're highly protected. Because vaccines are not 100% effective, as the number of people who have been vaccinated goes up, the number of vaccine breakthrough infections will also increase. However, the risk of infection remains much higher for unvaccinated than vaccinated people. Therefore, VA continues to recommend multi-layer prevention strategies: masks in public indoor settings, practicing physical distancing, frequent handwashing, improving ventilation, and testing to slow its transmission. Self-tests may be used if you have COVID-19 symptoms or have been exposed or potentially exposed to an individual with COVID-19. Even if you don't have symptoms and don't believe you've been exposed, using a self-test before gathering indoors with others can give you information about the risk of spreading the virus that causes COVID-19. This is especially important before gathering with unvaccinated children, older individuals, those who are immunocompromised, or at risk of severe disease

Communications about the COVID virus are changing as the virus keeps changing, variants are found to interact differently with vaccinations, and new treatments are developed. VHA is working round the clock to disseminate and apply the best available evidence and tools for fighting the pandemic, helping Veterans and their loved ones stay well, and helping those who become ill to get the best care possible. VA is continually updating VA.gov with the latest information and guidance for Veterans as it becomes available.

6. Caregiver Support Update

Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregiver (PCAFC)

VISN 4 is working with our Legacy participants (pre-expansion enrollees) to guide them through the reassessment process for the new regulations. Anyone who does not meet the eligibility criteria will continue to be enrolled in the program through late 2022 and will have an opportunity to work with their local Caregiver Support Program staff on planning and preparation for post-discharge.

We continue to see a steady influx of new applications and continue to process them in a timely and thorough manner.

Appeals

There are new appeal options available to Veterans and Caregivers. Every time a clinical decision is made in CSP the applicants are provided with information on their appeal options. Two public facing handouts regarding the new appeal options are provided in your read ahead.

Program of General Caregiver Support Services (PGCSS)

Each facility is developing a strategic plan to enhance services and education for caregivers at their facility for FY22. This includes recruiting staff throughout the facility to receive training in the Campaign for Inclusive Care. The mission of that training is to empower healthcare providers and professionals to engage Veteran caregivers as part of the Veteran care team through policy, practice, and culture change.

7. Connected Care Update

VA Video Connect

Winter weather is here, and driving can be dangerous. Veterans should not risk driving in the snow and missing their appointment when they can have a video visit from anywhere through VA Video Connect app. Using the VA Video Connect App, Veterans can interact with their health care team over a secure video connection. There is no need to drive to the medical center or clinic, and these visits are free! No hassle and no co-pay! Veterans can use the VA Video Connect app on any smartphone, tablet or computer with a reliable internet connection, and they can access their video visits through email or text messages. Rather than cancel their appointments due to weather issues, Veterans should call the medical center or contact their care team to request a video visit instead! For more information on VA Video Connect or to download the app, visit the VA mobile app store.

VISN Tele Urgent Care

The VISN 4 Tele Urgent Care Program, based out of the Emergency Department at VA Pittsburgh, is a team of experienced emergency medicine providers who offer on-demand virtual visits to Veterans across the VISN 4 network. They evaluate acute issues that would otherwise necessitate travel to a VA location or retail urgent care center. In addition, the Tele Urgent Care Program provides consult services to Clinical Contact Center Registered Nurses to identify patients with emergent symptoms and rapidly direct care. In FY21, the program served more than 7,200 Veterans.

Pay and Receive Funds through My Health*e*Vet

Veterans can now pay a bill or receive a reimbursement on My Health*e*Vet. When Veterans select the 'Personal Information' dropdown menu at the top of every page, they will see '**Pay or Receive Funds**' where they can select a link to one of the services. From the convenience of their home, Veterans can:

- Pay their VA medical copayment,
- Review their patient statements, and
- File a reimbursement claim for travel expenses.

**Veterans need a Premium My Health*e*Vet account to view these payment tools.

8. Flu Shots

Just a final reminder that Flu Shots will be available until March 31, 2022. Flu vaccines are available at no cost to eligible Veterans at more than 70,000 in-network community providers nationwide.

To be eligible, Veterans must be enrolled in the VA health care system **and** received care through VA from either a VA or community provider within the past 24 months (the second requirement is new for the 2021-2022 flu season).

To check their eligibility, Veterans can call 800-MyVA411 (800-698-2411) select option 1, then option 3, and then select option 1 again or contact their local VA medical facility. Veterans can follow these steps to find an in-network provider or call (877)-881-7618 or their local VA medical facility for help locating an in-network provider.

Visit https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/flushot.asp

VA Facility Locator

Closing

In closing, I'd like to thank you for your continued support of VISN 4. Please let me know if you have any questions.