

Spotlight on the Safety Net

*A Community Collaboration
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The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) provides health care to servicemen and women honorably discharged from the military. Health care is provided on a priority system. Veterans with injuries related to the current conflicts receive first priority. Priority is next given to veterans based on the magnitude of their disabilities. The Veterans Health Administration also provides health care services for nonservice-related health issues based on availability and it offers a safety net program for low-income veterans. The safety net services are provided based on the available capacity of needed health services and on the patient's income. The VHA offers 5 specific safety net programs for low-income veterans: Home Based Primary Care, Care Coordination Home Telehealth, Contract Nursing Home, Compensated Work Therapy, and Health Care for Homeless Veterans. These programs are provided through the 4 Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMCs) in North Carolina located in Asheville, Durham, Fayetteville, and Salisbury.

The Home Based Primary Care program provides a safety net for veterans between hospital discharge and Medicare coverage. A multidisciplinary team including the primary care physician, psychologist, social worker, nutritionist, dietician, and pharmacist provides care in the patient's home. The average patient is 77 years old and has some cognitive deficit. Many of the program's patients would be in nursing homes without the availability of the program. The length of stay in the program may be a few months, many years, or the remainder of a veteran's life. The program simply requires that the veteran be in need of home care and have a referral from a primary care provider in the VA system. The Durham VAMC provides this program to veterans within a 35-mile radius of the center. Other programs operate in Asheville and Salisbury with plans to expand to Fayetteville, Greenville, Morehead City, and Raleigh.

The Care Coordination Home Telehealth program provides distance care management for veterans with chronic progressive health problems including diabetes, hypertension, heart failure, and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD). The program connects patients with a care coordinator to help them avoid emergency rooms visits and serves as the eyes and ears of the patient's physician. Monitors are placed in patients' homes that allow them to measure and input health data including heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar, and oxygen saturation. The patients and their caregivers receive training on the monitors which ask a series of customized symptom questions. Patients may be connected directly to the measuring devices or patients or caregivers can input the data. The data are transmitted through telephone lines to the care coordinator and are then stratified by patient risk so that those with abnormal values are helped first.

Patients in the program are referred by their providers and must have a targeted condition, take 10 or more medications, have been hospitalized or visited an emergency room in the past 2 years, and be able to operate the monitor or have a caregiver who can operate the monitor. Patients range in age from 20 to 90 years in age. Since the program's inception in the Durham VAMC in August 2005, 550 veterans have been served. There are currently 356 active program participants. On a sample of program participants during a 7-month period, the program achieved a 65% reduction in days in a hospital bed, a 59% reduction in patient admissions, and a 54% reduction in patient visits. Future plans include expanding the program to include posttraumatic stress and substance abuse disorders.

The Contract Nursing Home program provides long-term care for veterans on the basis of need without regard to their priority status. Those with 70% to 100% disability receive paid nursing home care, long-term care, or home care programs. These home care programs include home health aids, adult day health care,

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and noninstitutional respite care. The Veterans Health Administration pays North Carolina's veterans' homes, located in Salisbury and Fayetteville, a stipend for each enrolled veteran. Veterans themselves may also receive payment in the form of compensation for military service-related conditions, pensions for conditions not related to military service, or Aid in Attendance funds for homebound veterans to receive care for daily living activities. Most of these veterans can receive care for free in a VAMC or satellite clinic. The program provides access to primary care, allied health, and other health care practitioners. The program has served more than 450 veterans since fiscal year 2006.

The Compensated Work Therapy program attempts to successfully reintegrate disabled veterans into the community through access to meaningful vocational opportunities aligned with the veteran's highest functional level. The program supports the idea that all veterans have potential for rehabilitation and focuses on recovery of a quality of life with which each veteran is comfortable. The program works with clinics and organizations across the Triangle including Duke University, the Employment Security Commission, the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, North Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation, state agencies, and various private sector companies. It offers supported employment which specializes in working with veterans with severe mental illnesses, transitional work experience open to all veterans with any level of disability, and incentive therapy which caters to lower functioning veterans. A recently implemented program, Compensated Work Therapy served 45 veterans between August and November of 2007.

Health Care for Homeless Veterans provides health care (medical, mental, and dental), transitional housing, and special events for homeless veterans. The program helps homeless veterans establish a primary care home in a VAMC or satellite clinic. The program has a grant-in-per-diem program for transitional housing that will pay the community for transitional housing for up to 2 years. Currently, there is a partnership with Volunteers of America to build 24 housing units in Durham. Other facilities include Healing with Care, a 9-bed facility in Durham that will accept HIV-positive veterans; Servant Center in Greensboro for medically disabled and terminally ill homeless veterans; and Hospice. The UNC School of Dentistry is contracted to provide dental services for the program. In 1994 the Durham VAMC began community wide one-day events to connect homeless veterans with many services including employment, food, clothing, haircuts, financial counseling, and legal assistance in addition to mental health, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse services.

These 5 safety net programs administered by VHA provide significant services and opportunities that help bridge the gaps in care for low-income veterans across North Carolina.

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