

WELLNESS
PTSD Screening

OUTREACH
Women Veterans

COMMUNITY
New Pantry

INNOVATION
Tele-Emergency Care

New England **Veteran**

**FEEDING THE
COMMUNITY**

New Pantry Opens
for Veterans

PREPAREDNESS

New Secure
Sign-in Changes

**IMPROVING
LIVES**

Screening &
Treatment for
PTSD



Summer 2024



New England Veteran

VA New England Network Director
Ryan Lilly

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VISN 1 Communications Department

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Our Vision:

To be the premier, integrated
academic healthcare system in
New England with a highly
engaged team, providing
exceptional care to the VETERANS
WE SERVE.

Website

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Message from the Network Director

Dear Veterans,

Before we get into the content of this edition of the New England Veteran, I have some exciting news to share. In fiscal year 2023, VA set an all-time record in achievements for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors, including the following:

- **Encouraging more Veterans to apply for earned benefits:** Thanks to the largest outreach campaign in VA history, Veterans submitted a record-breaking 2,433,729 claims applications in 2023, marking a 39% increase from 2022. Additionally, Veterans submitted a record 2,299,815 intents-to-file, a 62% rise since 2022.
- **Supporting more Veterans in crisis:** The Veterans Crisis Line received 1,065,680 calls, texts, and chats over the previous year – up 12.1%. VA also provided no-cost emergency health care to 67,975 Veterans in acute suicidal crises through a new program launched in January.
- **Providing more dental care to Veterans:** VA dental clinics set a new record after providing 5.5 million procedures to more than 560,000 patients. This is an increase of 4.8% from the previous number of Veterans provided dental care in fiscal year 2019.
- **Providing more life insurance coverage for Veterans:** VA set a new record of delivering \$1.5 trillion in life insurance coverage to 5.6 million Veterans, service members and their family members. This includes new coverage awarded through VALife, a program that extended life insurance access to millions of service-connected Veterans.

As you can see, VA is doing great things for our nation's heroes. I hope you are taking full advantage of your VA benefits; you've earned them. In this issue, we have news for you on transitioning from service member to Veteran, how Elk's members are helping homeless Veterans, new tele-emergency care options through the VISN 1 Clinical Contact Center, and much more! I hope you enjoy this issue.

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA
Network Director, VA New England Health Care System

Westerly Elks Opens Homeless Veterans Pantry

On a hot, humid day, Westerly Elks Lodge 678 proudly opened its new Homeless Veterans Pantry on July 7, 2024, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. The purpose of the pantry is to provide food, toiletries, and other essential items to homeless Veterans.

Bruce Kenyon, Westerly Elks Lodge Exalted Ruler, and Veterans Committee team members spent three months and more than 300 hours renovating the space to get the pantry up and running.

“This project has been a labor of love, and its creation and success have come from a great deal of teamwork,” said Kenyon. “None of us could have done this alone. We had to work together as a group and overcome a few obstacles along the way. As a result, I think we’ve learned to work together even better than we did before.”

The idea for the pantry was first conceived by Elks members Holly Rome and John Babin while watching a program about homeless Veterans.

“Our pantry will be here to assist those who were willing to give it all, and now we are here to support you. We have your six,” said Peter Mercurio, Westerly Elks Lodge Loyal Knight and Veteran Affairs Committee Chairman, during a speech following the ribbon-cutting ceremony.



John Babin, of the Westerly Veterans Committee, helps Holly Rome, Elks Lecturing Knight, cut the ribbon officially opening the Elks Lodge food pantry for homeless Veterans as Bruce Kenyon (left), Westerly Elks Lodge Exalted Ruler, and Peter Mercurio (right), Westerly Elks Lodge Loyal Knight, look on at the Westerly Elks Lodge July 7, 2024 in Westerly, Rhode Island.

How you can help

If members of the community would like to support the Veterans Pantry, they can contribute in two ways. First, by making direct donations of goods or money to the lodge. The Westerly Elks can be reached at 401-596-9132. You can also find out more about the Westerly Elks through their webpage at: www.elks.org/lodges/home.cfm?LodgeNumber=678.

Second, by spreading the word that this service is available. Veterans can reach the Westerly Elks directly by calling the lodge or by contacting the Westerly VFW. All contacts will be confidential, and no personal information will be shared.

“I hope that what we’ve done here can serve as an example for other lodges and for society in general. If people realize that by working together, we can help each other,” said Kenyon. Our focus is threefold: conducting coordinated outreach to proactively seek out Veterans in need, connecting homeless and at-risk Veterans with housing solutions and other services, and collaborating with federal, state, and local agencies to expand employment and affordable housing options for Veterans.

Are you a Veteran in need of help? Contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at (877) 4AID-VET (877-424-3838) for assistance today.

Introducing Tele-Emergency Care – VISN 1 Clinical Contact Center

By Robert Dalton, MSN, RN, CEN, CNML, Nurse Manager, Medical Emergency Department, VA Connecticut Healthcare System

The “fifth pillar” of the VISN 1 Clinical Contact Center is now standing!

On June 6, 2024, the VA New England Healthcare System launched the Tele-Emergency Care (Tele-EC) program within the VISN 1 Clinical Contact Center. This brand-new program aims to connect Veterans to the Soonest and Best Care. But what is Tele-EC, and how can patients be seen in virtual settings?

Veterans often choose to go to an ED or UC for non-emergent conditions due to open, on-demand access when experiencing an acute healthcare concern or exacerbation of a chronic condition. However, this comes at a significant financial cost and may risk care fragmentation, unnecessary testing, and, ultimately, low-value care. Data shows that when Veterans seek care in non-VA EDs or UCs, satisfaction decreases and mortality rates increase.



Tele-EC provides an alternative pathway for Veterans who need immediate care but do not require an in-person ED visit. Tele-EC optimizes resource utilization by implementing virtual medical evaluations and treatments conducted by VHA emergency medicine providers and nurses. This approach enhances care coordination and helps Veterans receive the right care at the right time and place from the convenience of their homes.

Aligned with VHA’s Strategic Priority to connect Veterans to the Soonest and Best Care, the implementation of Tele-EC services within VISN 1 will serve as a fifth pillar of the VISN 1 Clinical Contact Center. This service will support all facilities within VISN 1, providing equitable access to telehealth evaluation and management for Veterans triaged as 911-now refusals and those needing care within 0-2 hours.

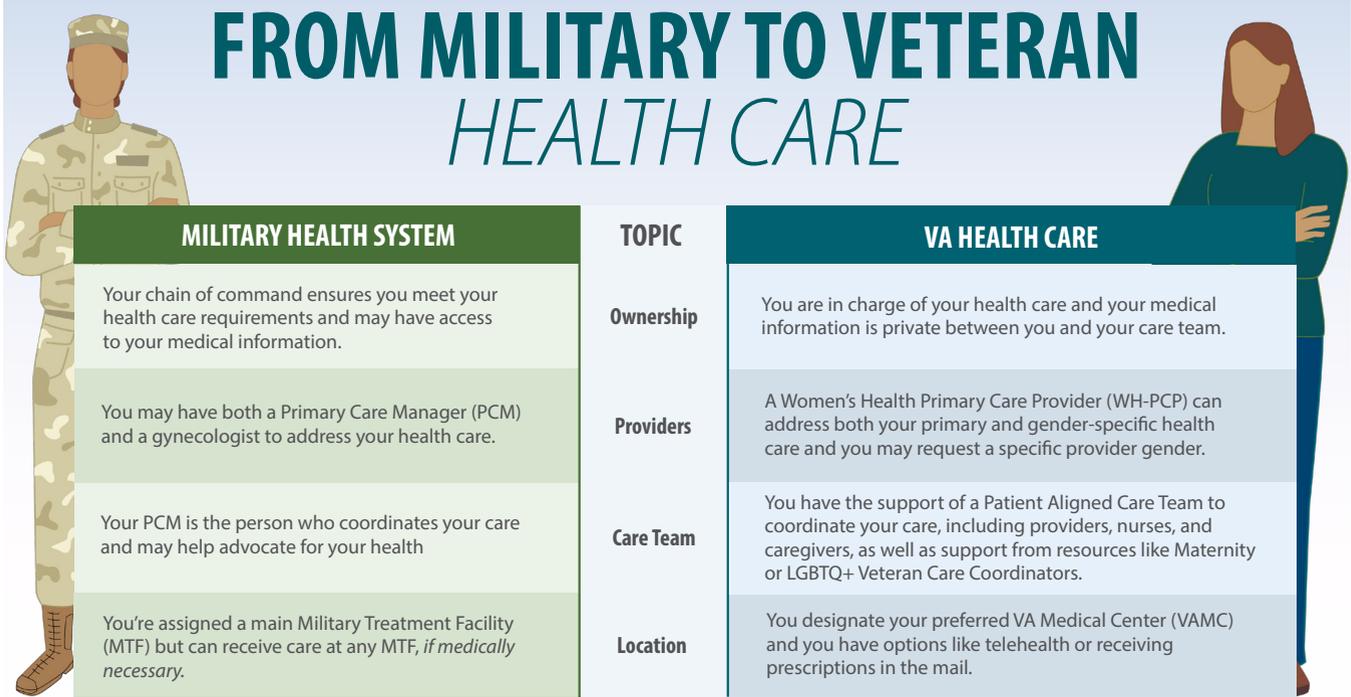
Are You Transitioning From Service Member to Veteran?

Women often experience a notable health care culture change after leaving active duty, but VA is here to help make your transition as smooth as possible.

VA health care can seem like a giant puzzle! Rest assured that we are readily available to assist in piecing together your health care options, such as understanding changes in how you receive your care and the type of care you can receive as a Veteran.

VA Women’s Health offers a wide range of personalized, quality health care services, including primary care, vaccines, maternity care, reproductive health and gynecology, mental health and wellness, family planning, specialty care, cancer screenings, and more. Your VA women’s health team is your one-stop shop for helping you take charge of your health and well-being.

Visit the **VA Office of Women’s Health** or call 1-855-VA-WOMEN to speak with a real person and get connected to care. You can also take the **VA’s Women’s Health Transition Training** to learn about women’s health services, benefits, eligibility, and enrollment. You belong at VA.



FROM MILITARY TO VETERAN HEALTH CARE

MILITARY HEALTH SYSTEM	TOPIC	VA HEALTH CARE
Your chain of command ensures you meet your health care requirements and may have access to your medical information.	Ownership	You are in charge of your health care and your medical information is private between you and your care team.
You may have both a Primary Care Manager (PCM) and a gynecologist to address your health care.	Providers	A Women’s Health Primary Care Provider (WH-PCP) can address both your primary and gender-specific health care and you may request a specific provider gender.
Your PCM is the person who coordinates your care and may help advocate for your health	Care Team	You have the support of a Patient Aligned Care Team to coordinate your care, including providers, nurses, and caregivers, as well as support from resources like Maternity or LGBTQ+ Veteran Care Coordinators.
You’re assigned a main Military Treatment Facility (MTF) but can receive care at any MTF, <i>if medically necessary</i> .	Location	You designate your preferred VA Medical Center (VAMC) and you have options like telehealth or receiving prescriptions in the mail.

Prepare for VA's Secure Sign-in Changes



VA is committed to making it as easy as possible for Veterans to manage their benefits and health care online while protecting their identities and personal data.

To simplify sign-in options, VA will introduce two modern and secure methods in 2025: Login.gov and ID.me accounts.

After this transition, Veterans, beneficiaries and caregivers looking to access VA's online services (VA.gov, the VA: Health and Benefits mobile app, and other VA online services) will need to sign in with either a Login.gov or ID.me account.

Veterans and other beneficiaries will no longer be able to use usernames and passwords for My HealthVet after Jan. 31, 2025, or DS Logon after Sept. 30, 2025.

Veterans can begin this transition now by visiting www.va.gov/sign-in-changes to learn how to create a verified Login.gov or ID.me account. The process takes about 10 minutes. Importantly, Veterans who do not transition before these deadlines will be able to resume accessing their data, benefits and services once they create a Login.gov or ID.me account.

This transition only impacts account-based online services. Many VA webpages are accessible without signing in—such as finding information about VA locations, VA forms, the PACT Act, filing claims, and much more.

ID.me

 **LOGIN.GOV**

Why is VA transitioning to Login.gov or ID.me accounts?

- This transition is our response to Veterans' feedback, aiming to simplify sign-in by reducing the number of account options and minimizing confusion.
- VA will continue to protect the security of Veterans' identities and personal data by making sure that all Veterans are using modern, secure accounts and have the added protection of multifactor authentication.
- Identity theft and related medical identity theft are serious issues that can cause severe financial hardship and disruption in medical care for Veterans and their families.
- In 2023, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) received more than 1 million reports of identity theft. That same year, Veterans and military retirees also reported \$350 million in losses to the FTC due to fraud.
- Federal policy requires VA to help all Veterans begin using a sign-in account that meets modern security standards, and that Veterans' sign-in experience is as simple as possible. Login.gov and ID.me meet both these requirements.



Actions to take and who's affected

If you use an account to access any VA online services—including through VA's mobile app—and are not yet using Login.gov or ID.me, this change will impact you. Don't worry—there's still time to transition!

If you:

- Are already using a Login.gov or ID.me account to access VA's online services or mobile app, you are all set.
- Are currently using a DS Logon or My HealtheVet username and password, we encourage you to create a Login.gov or ID.me account sooner rather than later.
- Are creating a sign-in account for the first time this year to access VA's online services or mobile app, please use a Login.gov or ID.me account.

If you prefer to manage your VA benefits and services offline, that's not a problem. VA will continue to offer convenient options for managing your benefits and health care through phone or in-person services.

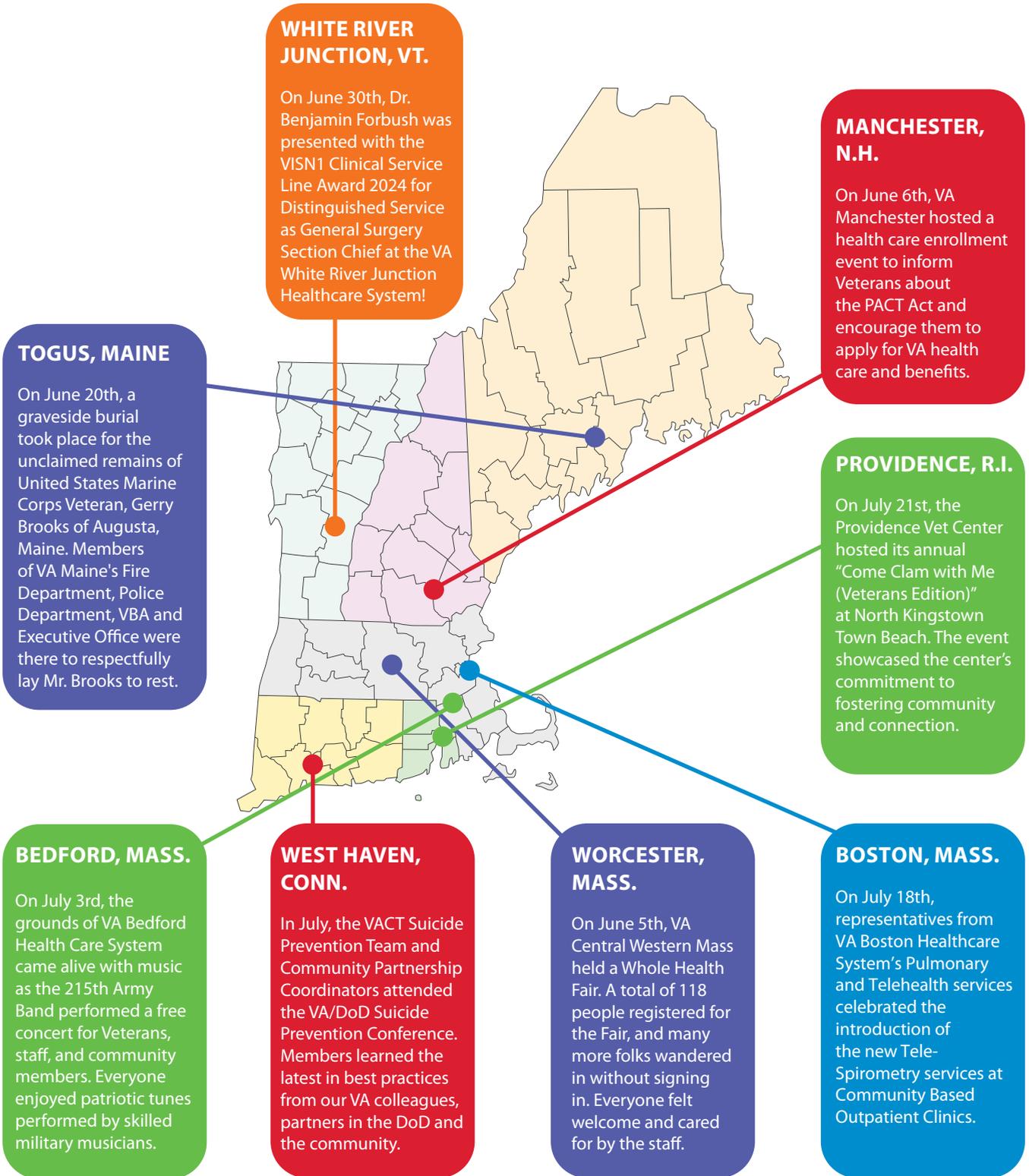
Learn more and get support

VA is dedicated to making sure you succeed in transitioning to a modern, secure account. We're here to support you and help you prepare.

[Learn how to create a Login.gov or ID.me account to manage VA benefits online.](#)

[Keep up to date with the latest information on the upcoming sign-in changes.](#)

To read about each of these headline stories, visit the VA New England "News" page at www.newengland.va.gov/news



New MVP Study Leads to New Genetic Discoveries

By: Sumitra Muralidhar, Director, VA Million Veteran Program

Study of 635,969 Veterans participating in the Million Veteran Program paves the way for improved, individualized health care for Veterans

A study recently published in "Science" highlights the significance of VA's Million Veteran Program (MVP). Led by VA Drs. Scott Damrauer and Katherine Liao, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), this study included 635,969 Veterans. It is one of the largest of its kind, examining genetic associations with health traits and diseases among a diverse population, paving the way for significant advances in personalized Veteran health care.

Goal of the Study

The primary goal of this study was to assess the relationship between genetic variations and various health traits and diseases, such as diabetes and blood cell counts. Researchers hope VA medical providers will use these key findings to enhance Veteran health care across the country.



Participant Diversity in Clinical Research

A persistent issue is the lack of diversity among study participants, leading to findings that may not apply to all populations. When participants are demographically similar, important differences go unrecognized. However, diverse studies can identify unique differences. Nearly one-third of the Veteran participants in this study were of non-European ancestry. Of MVP's more than a million participants, over a quarter represent racial or ethnic minorities, making it one of the most diverse genetic databases in the world.

Genetic Research and Personalized Medicine

Key findings identified in this study may connect to certain health conditions and explain why one Veteran might respond differently to the same treatment as another. With this information, VA health care providers can practice personalized medicine, tailoring disease prevention and treatments to an individual Veteran's clinical, lifestyle, and genetic information.

Examples of where VA is leading the way in personalized medicine include an initiative on mental health and the National Precision Oncology Program, which offers pharmacogenomics and the Clinical Cancer Genetics Service.

Learn How to Participate

Learn more about how to join MVP by visiting mvp.va.gov or calling 866-441-6075.

Screening, Treatment Can Improve the Lives of Veterans With PTSD



VA LEADING THE WAY

By Dr. Shereef Elnahal, VA Under Secretary for Health

Since 2014, VA has sponsored PTSD Awareness Month to educate the public about a condition affecting an estimated 6 out of 100 Americans and 7 out of 100 Veterans.

PTSD is a mental health condition that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening or traumatic event. It can cause distress and interfere with daily functioning, making everyday routines—such as going to the grocery store, pumping gas, watching fireworks, or even hugging a friend—seem impossible. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance, and anxiety.

If you find yourself struggling with thoughts about suicide, the 988 (press 1) call line is available to help. You can also text 838255 or chat online with the Veterans Crisis Line. This free, confidential resource offers support from trained professionals when you need it.

Having PTSD can lead to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. However, there is hope for Veterans—PTSD is a treatable disorder, and VA providers can help. VA offers a variety of evidence-based therapeutic treatment options that have proven to be effective.

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

Focuses on teaching individuals to reframe negative thoughts about trauma. People may believe they are to blame for what happened or that the world is a dangerous place. These thoughts can keep individuals stuck in their PTSD and cause them to miss out on activities they once enjoyed. CPT teaches people more helpful ways to think about their trauma. The therapy takes place once a week over approximately 12 weeks but can also be completed daily.

Prolonged Exposure (PE)

Teaches individuals how to gain control by facing their fears and discussing the trauma. People with PTSD often avoid memories and activities that remind them of the trauma. While this avoidance may provide temporary relief, it can prevent long-term recovery. By discussing the trauma, individuals can reduce their PTSD symptoms and regain control over their lives. The therapy occurs once a week over 8-15 weeks but can also be done daily.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

Helps individuals process their trauma to begin healing. In EMDR, people focus on a back-and-forth movement or sound while recalling the trauma and related thoughts or physical sensations. This movement helps them stay in the present while allowing their brain to process past information and develop new ways of feeling about the traumatic event.

The therapy takes place once a week over 12-18 weeks but can also be done daily. These therapies have been proven successful in reducing PTSD symptoms in Veterans, allowing them to regain control over their daily lives. These treatments are available at VA locations across the country.



Additional Studies

VA is committed to high-quality research that promotes the health of our nation's Veterans. In line with this goal, as announced in January, VA plans to conduct additional studies under stringent protocols at various facilities to evaluate the effectiveness of psychotherapy—combined with compounds such as MDMA and psilocybin—for treating Veterans with PTSD and other mental health conditions. VA may provide research funding for larger studies investigating these novel therapies, including those exploring new administration methods to maximize benefits while minimizing risks.

Get Screened

Screening is available year-round. If you or someone you love may have PTSD, use the online PTSD self-screen tool available on the VA website.

You can also access help and resources from the National Center for PTSD.

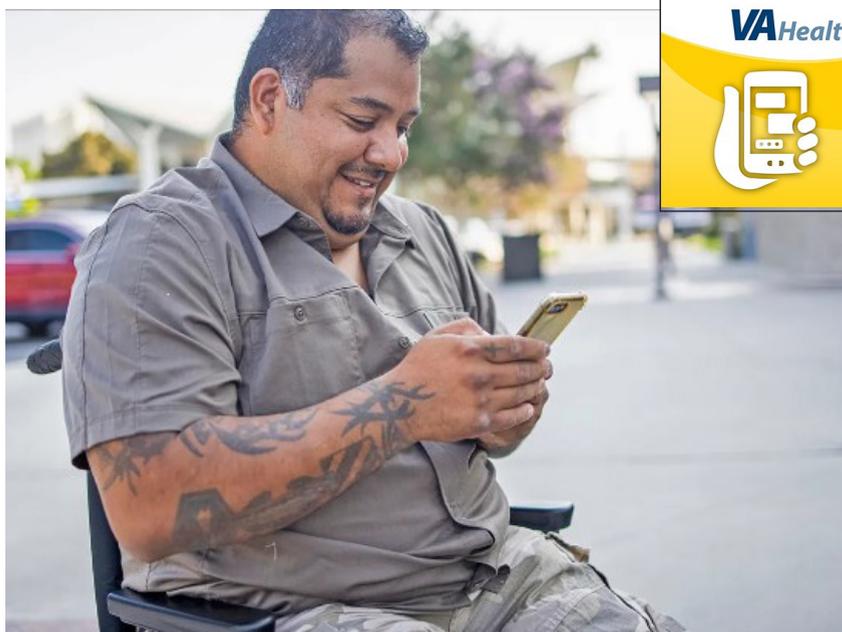
I encourage Veterans to visit their local VA Medical Center or VA clinic to seek treatment for PTSD. VA health care providers are experts in PTSD and understand how the condition's symptoms impact Veterans.

New England Veteran

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New England **VETERAN**

VA Health Chat Now Available in All 18 VISNs



A Health Chat is now available to Veterans in all 18 VISNs. Veterans can use the app to easily connect with VA staff to ask questions about their health. Veterans can send messages to VA staff from anywhere with a smartphone, tablet or computer. They can use the app to receive medical advice for non-life-threatening injuries or illnesses, schedule VA appointments, refill VA prescriptions and more.

Try it out today

VA Health Chat is convenient and easy to use. When Veterans sign into the app, they are asked to choose a channel based on their health care needs. Veterans can then message a VA staff member trained in that area of health care.

Channels include:

- Clinical Triage – Talk to a nurse about health care concerns.
- Pharmacy Support – Refill, renew or ask questions about VA prescriptions.
- Scheduling and Administration – Schedule VA appointments or ask questions.
- Virtual Clinic Visit (Urgent Care) – Receive medical advice for injuries or illnesses that need immediate care but aren't severe enough for an emergency room visit.
- Whole Health – Ask questions about your whole health and overall well-being.
- Women's Health – Receive quality health care tailored to women Veterans.

Veterans can chat with VA staff in most locations Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. local time, excluding federal holidays. In some locations, staff are available 24/7. The app can be launched through the VA App Store and downloaded on the Apple App Store and Google Play.