Report: A VA telehealth initiative in vision rehab.
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The Veteran Health Administration (VHA) Blind Rehabilitation Service has been committed to ensure a Continuum of Care model that extends from the Veteran’s home environment to the local Veteran Administration (VA) care site and regionally-based outpatient as well as inpatient blind rehabilitation centers that offer an array of rehabilitation services.

Uncorrectable vision loss due to various ocular conditions restricts travel (especially by automobile) and is one of the barriers to receiving low vision rehabilitation. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Veterans (VA) Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) began pursuing innovative care delivery strategies to help Veterans with visual impairment, especially those residing in rural or highly rural areas. The intent was to improve access to low vision/blind rehabilitation care and increase patient satisfaction.

Beginning in November 2012, Low Vision/Blind TeleRehabilitation services were first being offered at the Vision Impairment Services for Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) clinic, Buffalo VA Medical Center, which services several rural sights in western New York. Our goal was to increase access as early as possible after visual impairment diagnosis to help prevent potential decline in functional ability over time. Veterans with Low Vision can be scheduled for face-to-face Low Vision/Blind rehabilitation services at the Buffalo VA, but those Veterans who cannot travel to the Buffalo VA have the option to schedule LV TeleRehabilitation at 3 other VA’s and 10 Community Based Outpatient Centers in Western NY. At the end of Fiscal Year 2017, when compared to our face-to-face clinics, 24% more Veterans who would have gone without receiving services, received access to Low Vision/Blind Rehabilitation due to our LV Telehealth clinics. The Veteran’s travel distance, time and cost was also reduced.

A few months ago, Matt Hogel, Chief Blind Rehab Services at the VA Caribbean Healthcare System had the foresight to see the potential for adding Low Vision/Blind TeleRehabilitation services at the Puerto Rico VA. I’m enjoying working with Matt to help him apply and receive funding for his Telehealth and Vision Rehab project. Increasing access to Low Vision/Blind Rehabilitation services by offering Low Vision TeleRehabilitation is a direct result of Matt Hogel’s hard work and dedicated commitment to our Veterans.
I am concurrently working with the Vision Center of Excellence, the Washington DC VISOR clinic and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. I’m helping the DC VA VISOR clinic set up Low Vision TeleRehabilitation services to share VA Low vision rehabilitation with VA eligible Service Members at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. This will be the first VA shared Low Vision/Blind Rehabilitation services to Service Members at a military treatment facility.

The provision of Healthcare is currently changing to include Telehealth services. I am humbled and honored to be working with a growing team that’s committed to increasing Low Vision/Blind Rehabilitation access to our partially sighted and legally blind Veterans.