

VA Blind Rehabilitation Service Provides Personal Touch to Blinded Veterans during COVID-19 Pandemic

Everyone in our country has been through challenging and adverse times as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact may be greater for veterans who are blind or visually impaired, especially for those with limited transportation options and/or caregiver support.

In response, the Veterans Health Administration's Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) launched a national initiative for Blind Rehabilitation Specialists to begin contacting veterans with visual impairment. The purpose was to conduct wellness checks on veterans who have previously been served by BRS.

VA Secretary Robert Wilke once stated: "Listening to our veteran patients plays an important role in providing world class customer service." The purpose of the BRS Wellness Check Initiative was –and is -- to ensure that veteran's immediate safety concerns are addressed. Blind Rehabilitation Service provided a touchpoint to more than 9,115 veterans to ask about their well-being and confirm that they had access to food, medication, and self-care items.

VA's personal touch has been greatly valued by Donald Overton, Acting Executive Director and Director of Government Relations for the Blinded Veterans Association.

"Serving as a veterans advocate during the COVID-19 pandemic has been both challenging and rewarding," Overton said. "Challenges such as maintaining organizational operations, member services, and stakeholder engagement has required significant adaptation and effort in providing support for an ever-increasing remote work force."

"On a particularly lonely and difficult day in the office, my cell phone rang. I was pleasantly surprised to hear the voice of a member from the VA Eastern Blind Rehabilitation Service team in West Haven Connecticut on the line," he recalled.

"She was calling to check on 'my' wellbeing – and genuinely cared about 'my' responses," Overton said. "The conversation was comforting and reassuring, covering everything from accessing VA care and services, to sharing resources for assistance with obtaining supplies and maintaining overall health.

BRS Continuum of Care programs are continuing to provide access to vision rehabilitation during these challenging times in alternative formats, including VA Video Connect and third-party alternatives, such as FaceTime, Skype and Facebook Messenger video chat. BRS Continuum of Care providers have provided more than **6,220** clinical video-connect encounters this fiscal year through May.

BRS staff have implemented innovative virtual care practices that include: Healthy at Home sessions for veterans to reconnect and reinforce healthy habits, relaxation support groups,

adaptive chair yoga, traumatic brain injury and low vision support groups, and Living Well with Low Vision support groups focusing on wellness and adjustment to vision loss.

Our deepest appreciation to BRS staff for being dedicated, compassionate, and pro-active as many of our veterans are scared and overwhelmed. A reassuring voice goes a long way to mitigate those fears.

Ella Hart, COMS, CLVT
Blind Rehabilitation Service
National Program Consultant