

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Connectivity as the key to building a 21st century VISN



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MAKING THE CONNECTION

Connectivity as the key to building a 21st century VISN

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has transformed itself in the past few years. Once a hospital-focused, specialist-based system in which VA facilities operated independently, today's VHA is a system with an accountable and connected management structure; one in which care is integrated and coordinated; and whose quality has been described as "the best care anywhere."

At the heart of VHA's transformation is its 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks, or VISNs. Each VISN provides a full continuum of primary to tertiary care within its geographic area of responsibility. Together, VHA's VISNs and Central Office leadership transformed the unconnected hospitals of the past into the widely respected VHA of today.

Now, the VA Capitol Health Care Network (VISN 5) is implementing a unique three-pronged effort to provide 21st century health care for 21st century Veterans. By improving **connectivity** among health care providers; between Veterans, their families and providers; and in our hospitals, clinics, and even in Veterans' own homes, we are ensuring Veterans in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and portions of Virginia, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania will continue to receive the exceptional health care they have earned through their service and sacrifices while in uniform.

- VISN 5 is **improving our partnerships with the communities we serve**, including the military communities within our area of responsibility.
- VISN 5 is **harnessing the power of today's improved health care and communications technology**.
- VISN 5 is making **adjustments to our physical plant**, by adding new services to our hospitals and clinics and relocating clinics nearer to where our patients live.

Our goal is to create the VISN of tomorrow: a regional health care provider offering exceptional quality care while extending its commitment to provide Veterans with expanded access to outstanding health care. Connectivity, in all its definitions, is our first priority in this effort, defining the way in which we provide care.

Through increased use of connectivity, VISN 5 is moving toward a system in which **health care is provided as close to real-time as possible**. Imagine, if you will, a system in which a Veteran is experiencing chest pain—and a physician makes treatment decisions as the pain occurs, not several days later when the Veteran visits the physician's office to describe what happened.

Our system will also be **defined by the integrated services we are able to provide across our network of hospitals and clinics**—and even in patients' homes. We are taking the continuum of care our network provides to the next level, bringing care closer to our Veterans and their families.

Connectivity is even enabling VISN 5 to create a unique **"Virtual Hospital" model or environment**: Literally, a hospital with the same services Veterans would find in a brick and mortar facility—available online! Our Virtual Hospital can be thought of as a fifth hospital within the network, complementing the services of our four existing hospitals.

Our decision to emphasize connectivity has led us to increase the scope of services we

provide at our Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). We are doing this by using *telehealth* (the use of telecommunications technologies to deliver health-related services and information), which is also known as *telemedicine*, and by adding new services, such as dental clinics, to our existing CBOCs. Improving our connection with the communities we serve has motivated us to relocate many of our clinics closer to where our Veterans are, collocating them with military bases such as Ft. Detrick, Ft. Meade, Ft. Belvoir, Andrews Air Force Base, and (shortly) the Patuxent River Naval Air Station.

In our hospitals, we are in the process of installing new technologies to enhance connectivity among Veterans and care providers:

- Veterans will soon be able to order and choose their own meals at their bedside using an automated system throughout our network (this service is already available at the Washington DC VA Medical Center);
- Real-Time Location Systems (RTLS) will improve our ability to track equipment and track dementia patients who wander;
- VOCERA, a new voice recognition product, which provides voice-driven, hands-free communication among providers, and between patients and providers;
- A new management system will track bed preparation times and bed availability to facilitate smoother admissions and discharge processes;
- New nurse call systems will improve communications between patients and their health care providers; and
- All our hospitals will soon have Wi-Fi for patients and families to use.

Staying better connected enables us to answer many of the questions Veterans have about VA health care in new ways. For example:

How do we keep ill and injured Veterans from “falling through the cracks” of our system? VISN 5 uses the power of advertising to enroll new Veterans for VA health care; provides iPads to caregivers to help track the health status of their loved one; will enable Veterans to request appointments using their smartphones or tablets; and is piloting a program to enable Veterans to download their personal health information in a user-friendly format.

How do we make quality care available in areas of the network where such care is not currently available: Not only for those living in rural areas, but also for women, for minorities, for the elderly, and for our newest Veterans throughout our area of responsibility? We are increasing access to our care through the increased use of telehealth technologies, including home telehealth, secure email messaging, clinical video teleconferencing, and new mobile applications for smart phones or tablets we are in the process of developing and testing.

How do we better connect with new Veterans in our area using today’s communication tools? VISN 5 has a robust and evolving web presence, and multiple social media accounts. We are developing a first of its kind social media network that will provide a new way to access VA resources and information and help Veterans and their families navigate the VA health care system. In addition, VISN 5, VISN 21, and the U.S. Air Force are creating a state-of-the-art online ‘virtual hospital’; using avatar technology with which many younger Veterans are familiar.

We are using our connectivity to provide Veterans with new ‘patient-facing technology’—technology that helps our facilities provide more efficient and effective services; enables us to bring together our different services to Veterans into a working whole; improves the availability

of health care for Veterans whether they are at home, in the hospital, at work, or wherever they are; and improves Veterans' health and their ability to recover from illnesses and injuries.

To accomplish this, we are developing and supporting communication tools and technology platforms that increase transparency, create efficiency, and integrate resources to enhance personalized, patient centered care, in which patients work in consultation with their providers to decide what approach will work best to bring about optimal health in the safest manner possible.

This paper describes many of those tools and platforms, especially those found only in VISN 5, to help others understand how our network is using connectivity and emerging technology in the service of VISN 5's Veterans and their families.

ABOUT VISN 5

The VA Capitol Health Care Network (VISN 5) serves Veterans from economically and demographically diverse areas within Maryland, the District of Columbia, and portions of Virginia, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The network includes VA Medical Centers located in Martinsburg, West Virginia; Washington, DC; and Maryland. The VA Maryland Health Care System is comprised of the Baltimore VA Medical Center, the Perry Point VA Medical Center, and the Baltimore Rehabilitation, Extended Care Center, and seven medical clinics.

In total, the network has 18 Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in Cambridge, MD; Charlotte Hall, MD; Cumberland, MD; Fort Belvoir, VA; Fort Meade, MD; Fort Howard, MD; Franklin, WV; Fort Detrick, MD; Glen Burnie, MD; Greenbelt, MD; Hagerstown, MD; Harrisonburg, VA; Loch Raven, MD; Pocomoke City, MD; Petersburg, WV; Suitland, MD; Washington, DC; and Winchester, VA.

The estimated Veteran population in VISN 5's geographic service area is 785,000 Veterans. In 2012, the network provided care to more than 130,000 individual Veterans.

Five of VISN 5's clinical programs are nationally recognized by the Veterans Health Administration as "VA Clinical Programs of Excellence." They include the Seriously Mentally Ill Program, Multiple Sclerosis, Epilepsy, the Health Care for the Homeless Program, and the Home Based Primary Care Program.

VISN 5 hosts one of two national VA centers for the study of war-related illnesses, the War-Related Illness and Injury Center, which is located at the Washington DC VA Medical Center. VISN 5 also has a Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center and a Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center, located at the VA Maryland Health Care System.

The Virtual Hospital

The Virtual Hospital, found only in VISN 5 within VA, is an integrated health care delivery system that provides the same quality of care Veterans have come to expect via face-to-face clinics by using technology. It can be considered as VISN 5's 'fifth hospital.' A committee convened in 2011 to develop and establish the Virtual Hospital's vision, structure, process, and outcomes components.

The team developed a model that created the foundation for the new care delivery system.

The model included a vision for patient-centered care, which the team defined as access to quality care anywhere in VISN 5, whether at a facility, clinic, or at home through face-to-face interactions, telephone communication, internet, or telehealth. It also included a list of invested stakeholders and structural challenges such as environmental issues, resources, and infrastructure that must be addressed for the system to be successful.

The model identified 14 areas that require review in order to create a Virtual Hospital. These included:

- Telehealth
- Scheduling
- Inpatient Services
- Telephones
- Medical Administration
- Ancillary Services
- Geriatrics and Extended Care
- Technical Issues
- Clinical Inventory
- My HealtheVet
- Data Warehouse
- Outreach
- Academics
- Medical Staff

Finally, the team discussed the outcome measurements that would determine whether the new Virtual Hospital is meeting its goals. VISN 5 will need to carefully monitor measurements relating to:

- Health Care Efficiency
- Revenues
- Patient Safety
- Quality of Care
- Patient Satisfaction
- Access to Care

Many of the features of VISN 5's 'Virtual Hospital' are already in place. Others, like those of any 'brick and mortar' hospital, are still under construction.

TELEHEALTH

Telehealth is a key building block of our unique 'Virtual Hospital.' Telehealth provides the opportunity to change the location where health care services are routinely provided: from hospitals to clinics, and from clinics to patients' homes. In VISN 5, telehealth helps ensure patients get the right care in the right place at the right time, and have the opportunity to make

their own home the preferred place at which care is provided.

VISN 5 uses telehealth as a strategy to bring health care closer to patients and to improve connectivity, efficiency, and integration. Telehealth allows the network to match existing capacity with patient demand for health care by increasing the availability of specialty services and reducing wait times while shifting the workload away from traditional brick and mortar.

Telehealth can be used by specialty clinics, such as pain management, to increase education and peer consultation. In doing so, specialty care providers are able to share a philosophy of care, and patients are assured that they receive the same standard of care excellence regardless of care location. VISN 5 is moving towards this level of integration and cooperation within all of our specialty clinics.

To further integration, VISN 5 prioritizes funding for inter-facility projects that support two or more medical centers. By doing this, the network is allocating funds strategically to encourage greater inter-facility interaction and integration.

VHA's ongoing Clinical Inventory is an intranet-based tool enabling authorized users to search all VHA providers by specialty, location, and availability. It will assist leadership at all VHA networks to identify existing capacity in clinical centers to encourage integration. It will also drive future decisions about the kinds of telehealth clinics that will be provided, and where they will be located.

VISN 5 intends to match the Clinical Inventory with an analysis reflecting patient demand for specialty care by zip code. This will help determine where, and in what specialties, our care could be augmented or redirected by leveraging network resources. In addition to favoring inter-facility projects that support multiple hospitals, our strategic funding reserve decisions will also be based on this information.

Our network is educating its practitioners on the ways telehealth is changing the face of medicine. Our overarching goal is for all practitioners to design care around the needs of their patients, blending face-to-face and virtual telehealth technologies wherever it is appropriate.

Types of Telehealth Services

VISN 5 offers several types of telehealth services, including secure messaging, electronic consultations, store and forward, clinical video teleconferencing, and home telehealth.

Secure messaging is accomplished through My HealtheVet, VA's online personal health record for Veterans, active duty Service members, their dependents, and caregivers. My HealtheVet is designed to help Veterans partner with their health care teams, and provides them with opportunities and tools to make informed decisions and manage their health care.

One of the features of My HealtheVet is a system that allows participating Veterans and health care teams to communicate, using secure email on non-urgent, health related information. The system provides patients with 24-hour access to their health care team, and enables them to receive personalized attention from their providers.

VISN 5 strongly encourages its patients and providers to use My HealtheVet's secure messaging feature, especially patients at significant risk of being hospitalized within the next year. Surveys have shown that about 80 percent of VA patients—not just younger Veterans—have access to computer equipment at home or elsewhere that will enable them to send and receive secure information about their health.

At present, more than 40 percent of VISN 5 patients have undergone the in-person identity authentication required to access this feature; and 20 percent of VISN 5 patients have opted for secure messaging (significantly ahead of VA's nationwide goal of 15 percent). A long-term goal is to sign up **every** eligible Veteran with computer access to this service.

All of VISN 5's primary care Patient-Aligned Care Teams (PACT) now use this service, including physicians, nurses, and other members of the team. Specialty PACTs with more than two providers in the specialty group will be using the system by the end of fiscal year 2013. Hospitalized Veterans learn about secure messaging by watching specially prepared videos on their bedside televisions through the "Get Well Network," a service to which our VISN subscribes.

VISN 5 believes the use of secure messaging will improve care outcomes for many Veterans and enable others to remain in their homes instead of being hospitalized. It will also make clinic and hospital appointments more productive by keeping lines of communication open with providers in between appointments. Many patients have questions immediately following their discharge from the hospital, and this system allows them to get answers from their providers quickly and easily.

Electronic consultation allows primary care providers to directly consult specialists using VA's Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS). This kind of consultation allows the specialist to review the information in CPRS and give guidance to the primary care provider. In some cases, this can result in a successful treatment or diagnostic regimen without a face-to-face patient visit with the specialist. In other cases, the specialist may still ask for the usual face-to-face consultation. This process not only increases access to specialty opinions but also is a more efficient use of specialists' services.

Clinical Video Teleconferencing (CVT) is a fast growing medium that allows Veterans to connect to a distant provider in real time by video teleconferencing. CVT is used regularly for evidenced-based mental health therapy, medication management, nutrition and diet counseling, dermatology, speech pathology, and many other treatments where a hands-on examination is not required. (Emerging technology will soon allow CVT to be used to support some kinds of physical examinations.) It is also used for pre- and post-surgical examinations and follow-up.

CVT may help to reduce the hardship Veterans face having to travel long distances (or short distances where urban density makes travel difficult) to a hospital for treatment. It may make life easier for Veterans with spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries who are challenged by travel, even short distances,—and it recognizes time spent traveling is time away from family and friends.

VISN 5 has taken CVT a step further than other networks by authorizing the purchase of 600 cameras for desktop computers able to transmit and receive secure video images. Once installed in all our examination rooms, they will permit our clinicians to conduct CVT examinations nearly everywhere throughout the VISN including into a patient's home.

Store and Forward Telehealth: Like other VA networks, VISN 5 uses technology to acquire and store clinical information such as data, images, sound, and video. This information is captured in clinics and hospitals by certified staff and is then forwarded securely to relevant specialists for review. VISN 5 uses this technique to expedite the evaluation of radiology images, for dermatology exams and to check for the effects of diabetes on the retina in the back of the eye. VistA, VA's computerized patient record, includes a component called VistA imaging, which allows clinical images to be viewed throughout VA.

Home Telehealth: For Veterans who have health problems like diabetes, congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, depression, or PTSD, getting treatment can be complex and inconvenient. New technologies make it possible to check on symptoms and measure vital signs in the home using regular telephone lines or over mobile phones. VISN 5 health professionals use the patient's information to remotely monitor their health and intervene in their care if necessary.

For example, a Veteran living with congestive heart failure can monitor his or her weight and blood pressure and have those readings automatically forwarded to a nurse at the hospital or clinic. This level of careful monitoring, used primarily for patients at high risk of being hospitalized for their illnesses, can prevent hospitalizations, reduce the length of inpatient stays, identify problems before they become serious, and help Veterans to live longer.

VISN 5 estimates that *one of every six clinic visits can be handled by some type of home-based telehealth, enabling even more Veterans to remain at home and live independently, allowing our clinicians to work with more patients than ever before.*

Ft. Meade is VISN 5's newest location, plans to offer Telemedicine services. Virtual care services planned for the facility include nutrition, pharmacy, dermatology, and retinal screenings.

The Future of Telehealth in VISN 5

VISN 5 is actively working on increasing the scope and value of VA's telehealth programs. Among the projects we are participating in are:

The 'Avatar' project: Working with VISN 21 (VHA's Sierra Pacific Network) and with the United States Air Force, VISN 5 is creating an online virtual hospital unlike any other. Visitors to the hospital will choose an avatar—a graphical representation of themselves in whatever form they would like. They will sign in at a virtual 'front desk,' and then be directed to a clinic where they will be able to teleconference with a clinician through their computer's camera—or even participate in group discussions with other patients by using their computers' microphones. Physicians will also be able to obtain information from a virtual library of documents available at the site and take part in education programs.

In late 2013, VISN 5, VISN 21, and the Air Force plan to open the first two avatar clinics—for pain management education and management of diabetes. These unique clinics will have several advantages over existing systems:

- **They protect patient privacy.** In 'real world' waiting rooms, especially mental health clinics, others can see patients as they wait for their appointments—and their anonymity could be compromised. Using an avatar allows them to maintain their privacy.
- **They move the patients' experience closer to home.** Patients' visits to the virtual facility can be done at home or at any secure computer. Eventually, VISN 5 plans to allow these virtual visits to be done on a patient's smart phone, along with procedures such as electrocardiograms and pulse readings.
- **They allow for longer clinic hours without overtime.** Since VISN 5 and VISN 21 clinicians will both be participating in the project, and will be seeing patients from both VISNs interchangeably, we can take advantage of the time difference without affecting providers' work schedules. VISN 5 clinicians who begin work at 8 a.m. Eastern Time offer

West Coast patients the opportunity to be seen beginning at 5 a.m. their time. Likewise, VISN 21 clinicians seeing patients until 5 p.m. Western time allow east coast patients the chance to be seen until 8 p.m.

- **Younger Veterans are accustomed to using this technology.** The Department of Defense already uses avatar technology to train service members to deal with improvised explosive devices, terrorists, and other unfamiliar enemies in physical environments that appear new to them. The Air Force has already created a base in the virtual world Second Life, which pioneered this technology, and with which many Veterans are familiar.

TeleICU: VISN 5 is exploring the possibility of linking its Intensive Care Units together to allow remote monitoring by a single intensivist (a physician who directs and provides medical care in a hospital's intensive care unit) to monitor. The intensivist, working from a central location, will work with on-duty nurses in emergencies and offer immediate support when a patient is in crisis.

Inter-Facility Telehealth: VISN 5 is expanding telemedicine consultations within its hospitals—eliminating or reducing patient travel from place to place for examinations such as retinal exams. This makes sense in the same way that having an internal telephone system makes sense—it saves patients both walking time and waiting time when face-to-face interactions are not required.

MOBILE APPLICATIONS

A mobile application, most commonly referred to as an *app*, is a type of application software designed to run on a mobile device, such as a smartphone or a tablet computer. Apps provide unique tools to help handle the infinite details of people's busy lives. The Washington DC VAMC, working with VA Mobile Health, is in the process of developing and pilot testing several exclusive mobile apps for its Veteran patients and staff that will significantly enhance Veterans' ability to connect with the hospital and its services—and will play an important role in maintaining and improving Veterans' health status. Once these pilot tests are successfully completed, these apps will quickly spread to other facilities within VISN 5.

Patient-centric apps that will soon be tested at the DC VAMC include:

Veteran-Driven Appointments: Later this spring, the DC VAMC will test a new system that will allow Veterans to request an appointment with their provider using their smartphone or tablet, and receive electronic confirmation of that appointment via email. In the first phase of this project, a clerk will physically review the request, match it to an alternate time suggested by the Veteran to available scheduling slots, and confirm the appointment to the Veteran. A proposed second phase will automate the entire process, giving Veterans available times to select immediately in a manner similar to restaurant reservation sites without any clerical intervention.

Mobile Blue Button Pilot: VA's award winning "Blue Button" system allows Veterans to download their personal health information from their My HealtheVet account. My HealtheVet allows Veterans to self-enter their personal health indicators (blood pressure, weight, heart rate), emergency contact information, test results, family health history, military health history, and other health-related information. My HealtheVet users enrolled with VA can refill their

prescriptions and view their appointments, allergies, and laboratory results online.

The Blue Button feature allows Veterans to access and download their information into a text file or PDF that can be read, printed, or saved on any computer. In late spring or early summer of this year, the DC VAMC will begin testing a new program that will allow patients to receive extracts from this information on their smartphones and tablets in new user-friendly and visually appealing formats.

VA Mobile Family Caregiver Pilot: The DC VAMC, along with other VA Medical Centers throughout VISN 5 and elsewhere, is taking part in a project to help participants in VA's Caregiver Support Program, such as spouses and parents, track medical care for seriously ill or injured Veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To date 1,120 iPads have been distributed to home caregivers throughout the Nation to help them keep track of a Veteran's medical conditions, medicines, and needs—and to provide needed support to those caregivers.

These iPads include 11 apps that provide caregivers with clinical information from VistA, VA's electronic health record system; disease management support and electronic coaching; assistance in managing and coordinating Veterans' care, and support for caregivers themselves such as training, coaching, and meditation. Caregivers can refill medications using the iPad; conduct secure messaging with health care providers via My HealtheVet; receive push notifications of importance from VA, integrate their appointments into the iPad personal calendar application, and keep an electronic journal.

My Capitol VA Mobile App: In October 2012, the DC VAMC conducted a survey of patients and staff and developed a system design for a comprehensive mobile app that will help patients to better understand and navigate the medical center. The vendor conducting the survey proposed a first-of-its-kind app that would provide information including:

- Information on parking and transportation at the hospital and its outpatient clinics, including dynamic information about the status of parking garages and the shuttle from the Metro;
- Up-to-the-minute information on wait times at the emergency room and at clinics;
- Available services at the hospital and at clinics;
- A hospital directory, including phone numbers, email addresses, and biographies of all clinicians;
- A list of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about the hospital and its clinics, which can reduce the workload of medical center operators;
- A Veteran Dashboard to include:
 - o An appointment manager, listing all future appointments at the hospital and its clinics (and push notifications on appointments that are soon to take place). The app will eventually offer the ability to add a new appointment, accept or decline an appointment offered by the hospital, or edit an existing appointment;
 - o Pharmacy information, including a review of Veterans prescriptions along with dose information, reminders that refills are due, and the ability to refill prescriptions by pressing a button;
 - o Information about benefits, including a digitized version of VA's benefits booklet;
- A Health and Wellness section, including:
 - o Customized health and wellness advice and links to longer articles;
 - o Suicide prevention resources and a link to VA's suicide prevention hot line;

- A help section.

The DC VAMC, working with VA Mobile Health, is now reviewing the report to determine which of these features will be included in the development phase of this exciting project, which is not yet underway.

USING THE INTERNET TO BUILD CONNECTIVITY

As a network that greatly values connectivity, VISN 5 has a clear understanding of the importance of a strong presence on the internet, Facebook, smartphones, and Twitter. We strongly believe that a robust online presence will enable us to recruit and retain more Veteran patients, improve their health status, and keep Veterans, their families, and our communities better informed about the work we are doing. As the Internet becomes more and more the center of patient interactions, the use of these tools will greatly contribute to our ability to provide patient-centered care.

VISN 5 web sites, twitter accounts, and Facebook pages need to be effective web resources, providing useful information and new ways for Veterans and family members to participate interactively with us. We have adhered to this philosophy at all of our network's social media sites. Our overall goal in this area is to bring patients, services, and clinicians closer together.

Web presence: At present, VISN 5 maintains four web sites on the Internet. Together, they average between 110,000 and 120,000 visits each month. The average visit time is 12 minutes and 43 seconds. Our sites have recently been redesigned to enhance their layout, features, functions, and ease of navigation.

The VA Maryland Health Care System (VAMHCS) uses email to reach out to Veterans through an E-News subscription service, part of VA's GovDelivery Program. VAMHCS now has the largest GovDelivery group in VA, with more than 16,300 subscribers. The service allows Veterans to receive e-mail messages about important happenings throughout the health care system; changes to their health care benefits; and information about new products and services.

In addition, VAMHCS has a 'virtual help desk' on its Internet web page, allowing patients to ask questions and have resolved problems via email. All questions submitted by Veterans through the help desk are answered by the next business day, if not sooner. The help desk provides younger Veterans with another way to ask questions and express their concerns.

Our network actively uses both Twitter and Facebook, and we also provide videos for VHA's You Tube channel. Despite our relatively small size, **we have the most Twitter followers of any VHA network, and are second in the nation in the number of Facebook friends we have.** We believe our success is due to our strong efforts to make our three Facebook pages and three Twitter accounts as interactive as possible. We often post fun items and interesting facts, and ask questions not directly related to health care to get Veterans accustomed to participating with us.

Some of the questions we have asked included: where was your favorite duty station while in service? What was the most memorable "care package" you received—and who sent it? What was the best thing about being a Veteran in the community in which you live? Responses at all our sites are monitored carefully, and, when appropriate, staff from one of our hospitals and

clinics personally contact Veterans to provide assistance.

New Social Media Network: In 2012, VISN 5 began building a next-generation social media network for area Veterans and their families. (A social media network is an online service, platform, or site that focuses on facilitating the building of social relations among people who share interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections—such as Veteran status.)

Through our social media network, we plan to provide Veterans with a new way to access VA resources and information. In three focus group sessions, Veterans told us they want a site that will help them navigate the VA health care system. Our new site will do that, and it will also enable them to:

- Ask and receive expert advice that relates to benefits or claims processing;
- Visit job boards where employers have specifically asked for Veterans;
- Locate businesses that offer discounts and specials for Veterans;
- Take advantage of medical equipment turn-ins, like wheel chairs;
- Get in touch with former comrades in arms through reunion postings;
- Create and read blogs about the experience of other Veterans;
- Conduct unfettered discussions and receive advice from their fellow Veterans;
- Have a voice in the management of their VISN by participating in polls on issues of interest;
- Post videos and photographs about their lives as Service Members and as Veterans;
- Learn more about VISN 5 and VA through a question and answer section and a glossary of health care and other important terms; and
- Follow links to My HealtheVet and other sites of importance to Veterans, their families and caregivers.

When launched, **this site will be a first for the Department of Veterans Affairs.** The platform is now being tested by a small group of VISN 5 employees. In the next 90 to 120 days, we will do a soft launch of the site by inviting select Veterans and others to test it out. Within six to nine months, the site should be available to Veterans and their families throughout the region.

Cable Television Programming: Veterans throughout Maryland receive valuable information about VA benefits and services by tuning in to Veterans' HealthWatch, a monthly cable show produced by VAMHCS. The half-hour program, which just filmed its 100th episode, is broadcast each week on public access channels throughout Maryland. It provides a viewer-friendly format for Veterans and their families to receive health and wellness information from VA health care professionals, and serves as a reliable resource for Veterans to keep abreast of new programs, monthly health tips, benefit changes, and special events.

Using Paid Media to Find and Enroll New Veterans: VISN 5 led the way nationally with a marketing campaign to connect with female and male Veterans of all service eras. We harnessed the power of advertising to reach out to and enroll new Veterans in VA health care. Many Veterans in our area did not know they might be eligible for VA health care benefits. We created a multi-media campaign, *Every Veteran Should Enroll*, to connect non-enrolled Veterans to VA. The campaign used search engine optimization, online display advertising, advertising inserts in Pennysavers, direct mail, online affinity marketing, emails, and other marketing techniques to reach Veterans of all ages both online and elsewhere. **At the conclusion of the campaign, we had enrolled nearly 30 percent more new Veterans than in the same period of time in the previous year—nearly 1,600 new enrollees—who now have access to the health**

benefits they have earned through their service to our Nation while in uniform.

VISN 5 is continuing to deploy this wildly successful marketing campaign in 2013 and on through 2014. Our goal is to ensure that Veterans take full advantage of the health care benefits they have earned through their Service.

CONCLUSION

The use of technology in health care is expanding by leaps and bounds. Emerging technologies are advancing the quality and efficiency of health care decisions, improving patient outcomes, and enabling Veterans and their families to take an increasingly informed role in decisions affecting their lives.

VISN 5 has made great strides in harnessing technology to improve health care. Some of our unique successes have been as a result of VA-wide programs; others were the result of our own initiative. We are well on our way to creating VA's first fully connected health care network; and we will continue to be on alert for new technological advances we can incorporate into our overall goal of providing all eligible Veterans in our area with access to quality care, no matter where they may be, through whatever medium they choose to utilize.

A handwritten signature in dark blue ink, appearing to read "Fernando R.", with a stylized, cursive script.

Fernando Rivera
Network Director VISN 5 VA Capitol Health Care Network
Linthicum, MD
May 2013