New VA Tool Tracks COVID-19 Epidemic

The National COVID-19 Report Summary is part of the agency’s efforts to keep the public informed about the course of the epidemic.

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Credit: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs COVID-19 National Summary

As part of its mission to serve the American public during times of national crisis, the Department of Veterans Affairs has just relaunched its National COVID-19 Report Summary to provide real-time information on the course and scale of the epidemic.
The VA has shown particular dedication to leveraging its recent advances in data integration and health information sharing toward addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19, particularly in the communication of pertinent information both between VA facilities and across the federal government as a whole.

This has encompassed an additional focus on best updating the public as to the nature of the epidemic, with the disclosure of essential information serving as a vital component of the VA’s role during emergency management.

In describing the central purpose of the National COVID-19 Report Summary, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie emphasized the importance of using the agency’s newly modernized health information and data-sharing infrastructure to guide the national epidemic response.

“The accelerating pace of VA’s response to the national emergency required VA to leverage the department’s unique national data infrastructure and informatics capabilities to create a timely, automated biosurveillance process. The public-facing report displays all known VA COVID-19 cases that are tested or treated in VA facilities,” he said.

As part of the National COVID-19 Report Summary’s expanding roster of features, the VA has debuted a tracker that records the number of active COVID-19 cases being treated across individual VA facilities, as well as the number of patients who have recovered along with those who have passed from the illness. This rolls up into a tallying of the total cumulative cases that have been reported at each care center.

The information gathered and disclosed by the National COVID-19 Report Summary tool corroborates and rounds out ongoing analysis on the course of the epidemic, particularly the intensity of regional outbreaks. Early sites of more widespread infection such as the New York metropolitan area and southeast Louisiana display higher rates of both cumulative cases and subsequent convalescence, whereas the tracker is reporting a greater proportion of cases under active treatment in emergent outbreaks regions like Jackson, Mississippi and eastern Washington state.
Beyond its purpose as a means of providing transparency and ongoing updates, the information gathered under the National COVID-19 Report Summary has considerable utility for researchers and public health experts looking to best trace the overall trajectory of the COVID-19 crisis.

While the VA’s treatment and convalescence efforts are focused primarily on aiding veterans who have contracted COVID-19, the agency is also extending available resources to both active duty military and civilian patients in areas where local non-VA hospitals become overwhelmed. The tracking system will use these statistics within its collection and disclosure process as well, allowing its reporting to be commensurate with the overall intensity of regional outbreaks.

The National COVID-19 Report Summary also shows the promise of the VA’s modernization program to bolster America’s public health response and medical care more broadly — particularly as spurred forward by the demands of a crisis. Similar to how the VA’s burgeoning 3D-printing initiatives have been applied toward addressing shortages in ventilators and vital protective equipment, the information sharing realized under the new reporting tool demonstrates in real-time the potential for data integration to help both epidemiologists and policymakers best understand and respond to a previously unknown virus.