VA's Mental Health Services Push in 2021

2020 initiatives and stated plans from Biden suggest an ongoing dedicated to crisis outreach, suicide prevention and mental health counseling.

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The Department of Veterans Affairs continued expanding the availability of its mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic and will likely build upon this foundation in the coming year.
The COVID-19 pandemic imposed an emergency response process across the federal government as a whole, with agencies having to dedicate their resources to maintaining continuity of operations despite the challenges of a public health crisis. This was a particularly demanding process for departments that provide in-person services, with VA standing as the agency with arguably the greatest breadth of direct care responsibilities.

As with the VA’s physical health care network, the expansion in telehealth services allowed caregivers to continue seeing their patients remotely and monitor symptoms of chronic conditions. Similarly, the development of apps like the COVID-19 screening tool helped veterans remain safe in the case they needed to access in-person care as well.

However, the expansion in telehealth services also allowed VA to continue its mental health outreach — especially when veterans are able to more consistently access counseling services from their own homes. As both VA caregivers and advocates for veteran mental health outreach have discussed, it can be especially challenging for veterans contending with post-service trauma to make in-person appointments if their symptoms are especially severe.

Providing veterans the convenience of speaking to a counselor directly from their place of residence removes this barrier, a convenience that VA caregivers are increasingly recognizing as a necessary component for ensuring a greater breadth of veterans are able to obtain the counseling they need. Not only did the VA report an over tenfold increase in weekly telehealth visits between February and May 2020, but access to telehealth group therapy as well as mental health care and consultation by phone more than tripled between February and March of this year.

The VA’s generalized expansion in its telehealth infrastructure was met with the deployment of mobile applications that allow veterans to directly access crisis support services. Launched in August 2020, the VA’s partnership with OnStar allowed veterans to immediately reach a crisis support center through their smartphone — a mobile partnership that was combined with the hiring of additional crisis support at VA care centers and specialized training for OnStar staff in how to address the specific needs of veterans.
The agency also put considerable effort into expediting the passage of the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act, a bill designed to support the VA’s PREVENTS initiative. This focus on rallying bipartisan support for helping veterans most in need of care and crisis support will likely bear fruit in 2021 and beyond, fostering a continuity of development between presidential administrations.

President-elect Biden’s tradition team has already pledged to make suicide prevention and mental health outreach a key priority of its VA policy. This is set to include extensive research into the best methods for preventing suicide and aiding veterans in crisis, hiring additional support staff and counselors at VA centers, establishing a standardized training program for psychiatric care, and expanding crisis line capacity with the goal of completely eliminating wait times for veterans experiencing suicidal ideation by the close of 2021.

Beyond the funding and development of these reforms across VA care centers, the Biden administration is also looking to establish new institutions dedicated solely to veteran mental health and suicide prevention. Notably, this has included a pledge to establish a national center of excellence for preventing veteran suicide, ensuring that research and funding continue to be allocated through an organization whose founding mission is dedicating to these fundamental priorities.