

VA Connected Care Chief: Customers Come Before Tech

Leadership at the veterans healthcare provider prioritizes customer service amid the rush to modernize IT systems.

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Thu, 01/31/2019 - 15:48



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In the development and implementation of information technology programs like its VA Video Connect telehealth app or Store-and-Forward Telehealth, the Department of Veterans Affairs has highlighted one top priority during the modernization process: its customers.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie placed customer service right at the top of its list of four [2019 priorities](#), which also includes implementing its Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks ([MISSION](#)) Act, replacing the

department's electronic health record and transforming business systems.

The VA's emphasis on its customers — the country's veterans — must come before embracing glossy new technologies for the sake of modernization, according to Dr. Neil Evans, Chief Officer for the Office of Connected Care in the Veterans Health Administration, who gave the afternoon keynote at the Jan. 29 [AFCEA Health IT Summit](#) in Bethesda, Maryland.

Evans stressed the importance of focusing on customer service in the context of hyper-personal healthcare experiences.

“At the heart of healthcare is a relationship. It's a relationship between a patient who is entrusting their care to a collection of healthcare providers who are delivering that care,” Evans said at the summit. “I agree that algorithms, technologies, EHRs all can improve that relationship,” Evans added, “but we have to keep in mind that first order goal, and the first order goal is how do we improve the lives of the individuals who are receiving healthcare and the lives of those who are delivering that healthcare?”

Within the VA, VHA Executive in Charge Richard A. Stone articulated three priorities that closely mirror those of Secretary Wilke, including building trust, constructing a learning organization, and modernizing systems across the board from financial management and supply chain systems to expanding virtual care like telehealth, according to Evans.

Evans called building trust self-explanatory, but he elaborated on Stone's characterization of a successful learning organization.

“A learning organization is good at systematic problem solving. It's good at experimenting with new approaches. It's good at learning from past experiences and learning from the best practices of others. It's good at transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization,” Evans said.

An integral part of being a successful learning organization involves modernizing IT systems, according to Evans.

“You cannot be a learning organization where you learn best practices to transfer knowledge quickly and efficiently without a modern and strong IT infrastructure,” he said. Modernization feeds into constructing a learning organization within the VA

that grows and develops organically over time, and both priorities loop back into building trust and, ultimately, providing a higher quality of customer service.

Evans related Stone's comments that the VA must continue its "relentless march toward modernization" and called the VA's overhaul of its electronic medical records system the most important step in the long-overdue process of modernization.

Particularly in the context of new cohorts of more tech-savvy veterans, delivering IT solutions and products that meet and exceed their expectations is crucial.

Modernization efforts like the VA's telehealth programs demonstrate how the organization is engaging with these newer cohorts of veterans with 21st century healthcare services to improve the patient and provider experience alike. Telehealth programs include synchronous care like the [VA Video Connect](#) application that "connects Veterans with their healthcare team from anywhere, using encryption to ensure a secure and private session," according to a description on the VA website.

Asynchronous care telehealth like the VA's [Store-and-Forward Telehealth](#) program allow veterans to capture data in the form of pictures, video and audio to be forwarded for later evaluation by clinicians, which is similar to the third category of telehealth called remote home or patient monitoring care. Both synchronous and asynchronous telehealth programs improve the user experience of veterans and clinicians alike by expanding access and flexibility, reducing wait and travel times and doing so securely to ensure patient privacy.

Modernizing IT systems must occur to improve the specific outcome of customer service, according to Evans. "That outcome should be captured when we hear customers who are using our IT systems expressing delight," Evans said.

As Evans closed the keynote, he circled back to Secretary Wilke's top priority for 2019 of focusing on customer service.

While continuing toward a more modern VA powered by modern health IT, Evans expressed hope "that we will keep in mind who our ultimate customers are: the people who are delivering healthcare and those who are receiving it."

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