

***VA Programs designed specifically to encourage medical professionals to work at rural VA's.***

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) is committed to the recruitment, education, training and retention of the rural healthcare workforce to ensure timely access and quality care for rural Veterans. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, ORH invested more than 5 million dollars to support rural provider education and training initiatives.

Additionally, VA has several training programs designed and tailored specifically to encourage medical professionals to work at rural VA's. These training programs are unique in that they span a variety of professions including physicians, dentists, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, optometrists, and others.

**Rural Health Training Initiative (RHTI):** The Rural Health Training Initiative is a joint program between the VHA Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA) and the VHA Office of Rural Health (ORH). RHTI is a pilot program to recruit and place health professions trainees in rural VA facilities and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). Phase I of the pilot assigned Graduate Medical Education (GME), and Associated Health Education trainees, including Nursing, Optometry, Pharmacy and Social Work, at four rural VA facilities and/or their associated rural outpatient clinic. The pilot led to the launching of the Phase II RHTI in FY 2013 that included seven sites. Specific projects vary by site, but all involve assignment of trainees to rural sites to learn to care for rural veterans under appropriate supervision. In FY 2013, ORH enrolled approximately 265 trainees in the program. A further increase in number of trainees is expected over the final two years of the project. While it is still early to assess success, there is already anecdotal evidence that several trainees, upon completing their training programs, were recruited to begin their careers in rural settings.

The Geri Scholars Program trains clinicians based in rural VA facilities in the most current practices in geriatric care, quality improvement and implementation science. In FY 2013, ORH served 185 facilities in all 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN). Nearly 1,400 rural providers participated in this program in FY 2013

The Specialty Care Access Network – Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes (SCAN-ECHO) program leverages telehealth technology to provide specialty care consultation, clinical training, and clinical support from specialty care teams to rural providers so that they can manage patients with chronic conditions closer to home. In all, 40 rural VA facilities with over 100 rural VA providers including primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and social workers are participating in the rural expansion of the SCAN-ECHO pilot program.

The Rural Provider and Staff Training Initiative (RPSTI), launched in the fall of 2013 as an ORH training and education initiative. Twenty-one VHA clinical sites serving rural Veterans throughout the U.S. are implementing locally based, innovative training and educational programs for their existing health care providers and clinic staff in topics ranging from palliative care and dementia to polypharmacy and substance use disorders.

**Centers of Excellence in Primary Care Education:** As part of VA's New Models of Care initiative, five sites were selected in January 2011 as VA Centers of Excellence in Primary Care Education. This is a five-year pilot project, currently in year 3, to develop and test innovative approaches to better prepare physician residents and students, advanced practice nurse and undergraduate nursing students, and associated health trainees for primary care practice. The inclusion of the Boise VA Medical Center (in partnership with Gonzaga School of Nursing and the University of Washington School of Medicine) in this initiative was due in large part to their emphasis on training in rural environments. As the only academic VA medical center in the rural state of Idaho, the Boise VAMC is fully engaged in statewide efforts to improve healthcare delivery and health professions education, and aid recruitment of rural practitioners.

**Nursing Partnership Education Pilot Programs:** The VA is testing other educational mechanisms to meet the needs of rural nursing professionals in particular. The Veterans Affairs Nursing Academic Partnership (VANAP) is built on the success of the five-year VA Nursing Academy (VANA) pilot. Rural VANA pilot sites included Saginaw MI, Hawaii (including other Pacific Islands); and Gainesville FL. At these particular sites, access to nursing education has been based on electronic educational methods as well as traditional methodologies. The model for enhancing VA nursing partnerships was based on the historic partnership between VA and the nation's medical schools, and has been highly successful and widely acclaimed.

**VHA National Recruiters.** Commissioned in 2009 by the VHA Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health, the National Recruitment Program (NRP) provides VHA with an in-house team of professional health care recruiters. These headhunters employ advanced, private industry recruitment practices to fill the agency's most mission critical clinical vacancies, many of which are in rural areas. The team is comprised of 21 professional health care recruiters, one geographically based in each VISN. Since 2011, VHA national recruiters have doubled the private industry average, which validates the program's demonstrated success. The NRP has recruited a total of 608 clinical providers in FY 2013, and 235 in FY 2014 year to date. In VISN 19, 32 clinical providers were recruited in FY 2013, with another 13 selected in FY 2014.

**VA Travel Nurse Corps Program.** The VA Travel Nurse Corps Program (TNC) is a VA operated internal pool of Registered Nurses (RNs) available for temporary short term assignments at VA Medical Centers throughout the country.

The goals of the program are to maintain high standards of patient care quality and safety; reduce the use of outside supplemental staffing, improve recruitment of new nurses into the VA system; improve retention by decreasing turnover of newly recruited nurses, support the delivery of VA health care in rural or underserved areas, provide alternatives for experienced nurses considering leaving the VA system; and to establish a potential pool of RNs for national emergency preparedness efforts. The VA Travel Nurse Corps Program serves as a model for an expanded multidisciplinary VA travel corps.

Assignment lengths are flexible to meet facilities' varying needs. RNs selected for the program will be appointed as intermittent nurses. These intermittent nurses will be paid for the time they work and receive travel, lodging, meals and incidental expenses competitive with the private sector and in accordance with VA regulations.

Additionally, VA offers scholarship and loan repayment programs to employees currently in or seeking to enter health care occupations. These programs assist in the recruitment and retention of health care professionals at rural VA facilities.

### ***Scholarship Programs***

There are a several programs available to encourage medical professionals to work in rural areas, including scholarship and loan repayment programs:

**Scholarship Programs.** The Employee Incentive Scholarship Program (EISP) authorizes VA to award scholarships to employees pursuing degrees or training in health care disciplines for which recruitment and retention of qualified personnel is difficult. The National Nursing Education Initiative (NNEI) and VA National Education for Employees Program (VANEED) are policy-derived programs that stem from the legislative authority of EISP. EISP awards cover tuition and related expenses such as registration, fees, and books. NNEI is limited to funding Registered Nurses (RNs) pursuing associate, baccalaureate, and advanced nursing degrees. VANEED provides replacement salary dollars to VA facilities for scholarship participants to accelerate their degree completion by attending school full-time. Participants incur a one to three-year service obligation following completion of their program. Since its inception in 1999, over 1,945 employees in rural areas have received scholarships.

**Loan Repayment Program.** The Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP) is specific to the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and authorizes VHA to reimburse educational loan debt for hard to recruit and retain health care professionals in VHA. VHA uses EDRP as a recruitment and retention incentive to assist health care employees pay down their qualifying education loans. This program targets individuals who would likely decline an opportunity to work for VHA, or who would otherwise leave VHA employment without this incentive. The

EDRP incentive is designed to assist individuals in reducing their qualifying loan balances and to aid in retaining employees by reimbursing loan payments over a 5-year service period. Local facilities have the flexibility to prioritize hard to recruit occupations based on facility needs. Rather than a service obligation period, employees continue to receive reimbursements while they remain employed by VHA in the position that was approved for EDRP for up to 5 years, thereby acting as a significant retention incentive.

EDRP is restricted to covering only school loans incurred for the specific educational requirements of the health care position. EDRP payments are made to the employee, to reimburse them the amount they pay their lender annually, tax-free. Since EDRP's inception on July 1, 2002 over 9,000 employees have received this incentive, and 861 of those have been in rural facilities.

VA programs are aimed to meet the specific needs of the Nation's Veteran population while ensuring that VHA continues to promote, enhance and provide quality clinical training opportunities to the next generation of health care providers.

VA, along with three other agencies - the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Department of Defense and the Department of Education – participated in a Government Accountability Office (GAO) study to better understand the scope of the Federal government's role in health care workforce training. GAO the issued a Health Care Workforce Report titled “Federally Funded Training Programs in FY 2012.” GAO found that four Federal departments administered 91 programs that supported postsecondary training or education specifically for direct care health professionals. Several of these programs directly target hard to fill, critical vacancies, including those vacancies in rural areas.

Similar to the scholarship programs administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), VA offers scholarship awards that pay tuition, required fees, and other education costs. Additionally, the scholarship programs are similar in that they help alleviate the health care workforce shortages by obligating scholarship recipients to complete a service obligation after graduation and/or licensure/certification. VA Scholarship recipients are limited to completing a service obligation period at a VA facility.

EDRP is unique in that it is a tax-exempt reimbursement to the employee of the amount they pay their lender annually, and rather than a service agreement, reimbursements are distributed over a 5-year service period, creating an incentive to stay in VHA in order to receive the maximum benefit. Other loan repayment programs pay the lender directly and require service agreements of two to three years duration, typically.

NHSC loan repayment funds are exempt from Federal income and employment taxes and are not included as wages when determining benefits under the Social Security Act. HHS's Nurse Corps Loan Repayment Program is available to RNs at critical shortage facilities, and they may receive up to 60% of their total qualifying nurse education loan balance in return for a 2-year service agreement and can also receive an additional 25% of their original loan balance for an optional 3<sup>rd</sup> year of service. Nurse Corps loan payments are subject to Federal taxes, which are withheld from a participant's award to pay those taxes directly to the IRS on the participant's behalf. They may also be subject to State and local income taxes. Another example is the HRSA Office of Rural Health Policy's (OHRP) Rural Training Track (RTT) residency program designed to "provide graduate medical education to prepare resident physicians broadly for rural family medicine".