



**Testimony submitted to the  
Senate Committee on Veteran's and Emergency Preparedness**

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**Passage of SB 832  
Rural Telehealth and Technology Based Care to Veterans and Non Veterans**

With over 2.7 million deployments, our nation has struggled to ensure Veterans particularly rural Veterans, have equitable access to a mounting inventory of valuable services, benefits, and entitlements earned through their sacrifice to our country, including quality health care. Today, we possess the means to reverse this disparity.

Demonstrating impacts like the early miracle drug penicillin, technology based rural telehealth care networks improve the access, experience and health care outcomes for

*"It's not enough to just provide quality health care for veterans. We must also ensure that all veterans have access to it — no matter where they choose to live," ODVA Director Cameron Smith*

Veterans while reducing costs for all stakeholders. These same networks can offer a venue to introduce a holistic rural care model, serving the whole Veteran including their socioeconomic and family needs.

Oregon has 10 counties that are considered "highly rural" by the U.S. Census Bureau: Grant, Baker, Gilliam, Lake, Harney, Malheur, Morrow, Sherman, Wallowa and Wheeler. More than one-fifth of Oregon's veteran population lives in one of these highly rural areas.

Oregon Census reports that 250,000 of Oregon's Veterans are over 45 years of age. Half of Oregon's Veteran population is comprised of Vietnam era Veterans who are now experiencing the chronic health and socio economic challenges associated with aging with many turning to the VA for health care, but they have difficulty accessing the care.

A growing number of Veterans are experiencing the challenges associated with chronic health conditions and aging. Between fiscal years 2006-2014, there was a seven percent increase in VA-enrolled rural veterans. Of these, 56% were 65 years old or older, 6% were women and 41% had service-related disabilities.

Multiple barriers exist often concurrently to accessing health care and services in rural communities including provider and specialist shortages, hospital closings due to financial instability, geographic barriers, and distance, poverty, weather, unreliable transportation and a patients' emotional and physical challenges.

### Telehealth and Health Navigators

The capabilities of technology based health care and wellness coupled with boots-on-the ground Veteran navigators, who are credentialed service officers, can better assist Veterans living in rural Oregon in accessing healthcare, transportation, housing, and V.A. benefits. Working in collaboration with local Veteran Service Officers, and building on the now more accessible VA Choice Program that allows eligible rural Veterans to contact local private health providers for services, the pool of rural telehealth services and providers should be expanded to reach Veterans who do not have the wherewithal to access care and transportation. The patient and health care provider partnership established under rural telehealth has demonstrated measurable positive benefits for all stakeholders comprising a patient's rural healthcare and wellness network.

The proposed legislation under SB 832 lists a variety of services that could be provided including: Healthcare, Transportation, Housing Assistance, and Justice Involved Veterans (criminal and civil justice systems). Since 2015 the West Care Foundation under a VA Rural Demonstration Project has employed a rural service model with "Boots on the Ground" local Navigators, credentialed as Service Officers and Social Security Specialists supported by experienced teams in Tillamook and Umatilla Counties.

Passage of SB 832 will provide the opportunity to expand access to health care for Veterans, apply lessons learned and reverse a harmful rural disparity.

Lines for Life and WestCare strongly support the passage of SB 832 and recommend eligible nonprofit organizations be allowed to compete for the provision of direct support to Veterans, including telehealth services in identified rural areas of Oregon.