

Veterans in Valley City and greater Barnes County are not getting the mental health care they need because of gaps in the care that is available locally and barriers to access specific to veterans. To address these gaps and barriers, we believe that telehealth could be the answer to both.

Background of the Issue

Since 2001, more than [2 million soldiers](#) have been deployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many for more than one tour. Many of those soldiers came home from their deployments with significant physical injuries and PTSD from combat or near-combat experiences (such as soldiers who weren't designated for combat but were injured by improvised explosive devices or IEDs).

The Department of Defense [estimates](#) that as many as 11 percent of Afghanistan veterans, and 21 percent second Gulf War veterans, are afflicted by PTSD. The number of veterans with significant injuries from these wars probably overlaps with those with PTSD. More than 50,000 soldiers were [wounded](#) in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars between 2001 and 2015, and in the same time period, 138,000 have been [diagnosed with PTSD](#) at least 30 days after being deployed.

In 2013, there were more than 50,000 veterans in North Dakota according to the U.S. Census, and nearly 1,000 in Barnes County alone.

Because the noise, crowding, and stress of metropolitan areas often trigger PTSD symptoms, many veterans have chosen to relocate to more rural areas, such as Barnes County. But while doing so sometimes eases their symptoms, it also increases their isolation and puts them at greater distance from care providers who could help them manage their symptoms and the medications they use to manage pain from war injuries.

At present, there are no telehealth facilities in Barnes County. A successful clinic in Devils Lake has been delivering services from locations as distant as Minneapolis to veterans in the area, demonstrating telehealth's effectiveness, but options for using telehealth locally are nonexistent.

Proposed Solution

At present, the providers in the Barnes County area – the vast majority of whom are in Valley City – are not sufficient to the problems veterans face. Valley City Regional Hospital is the biggest health provider in the area, but its Psychiatric Services department is equipped for 24-hour holds and longer inpatient stays only. In other words, it is equipped for emergency response to crisis and life-threatening situations, not for the ongoing treatment that would help prevent those situations.

Other mental health providers in Valley City offer services that are not tailored for trauma-related mental health issues. These providers are primarily social workers, child psychiatrists, and family or marriage therapists, and they provide mental health counseling with crisis response as needed. However, a survey of providers showed that none of these providers specialized in trauma or PTSD, though all of them indicated familiarity with the issues. None of the providers specialized in pain or medication management.

Some providers operate on contract with the North Dakota Department of Human Services' Regional Human Service Center for Region VI, which includes Barnes County. But these providers, like most of the ones in Valley City, have not specialized in PTSD, pain management, or other behavioral health services that this population needs.

Clearly, veterans with PTSD need to be connected with mental health resources that actually address their needs. But in a sparsely populated county like Barnes County, those resources simply aren't available – and even if they were, the need to travel significant distances to reach them creates the risk of a PTSD episode in unfamiliar circumstances.

The answer is telehealth options. Using telehealth, veterans in Barnes County could receive counseling, check-ins, and other mental health assistance from providers in Grand Forks, Fargo, and Bismarck. These providers, trained in pain management, medication management, PTSD, and other combat-related mental health issues, would be in a better position to provide meaningful help to a population that currently can't get it.

Justification

In 2001, there were 9 suicides and 14 attempts in Barnes County. In 2007, there were 10 suicides and 20 attempts; 2014 saw 27 suicides and 54 attempts.

The rising rate of suicide and attempts can't be solely attributed to veterans. But several of the completed suicides have been veterans, and county law enforcement statistics also show an increasing number of domestic violence calls, assaults, welfare checks, and other interactions, many of which involve veterans.

None of this is to suggest that veterans are a problem population, as the statistics on murder, assault with injury, and other violent crimes have not changed significantly. But these statistics suggest that this population – and the county as a whole – would benefit from mental health services that target the source of problems that are resulting in individual crises and law enforcement interactions.

Advocacy

The Barnes County Telehealth Alliance is the ideal group to advocate for telehealth in Barnes County. Members include representatives from Valley City Regional Hospital, the City-County Health District, the North Dakota VFW, Mental Health North Dakota, and the North Dakota VA.

Telehealth options would not only give veterans a better avenue to receive the care they need in a form that best suits their needs. The better treatment it would help to deliver would affect the families, friends, health care providers, and law enforcement communities surrounding these veterans.

To advocate for telehealth, we suggest a media campaign that includes talk radio, TV messaging, and social media.

Using a variety of communications media, we will reach all parts of our audience, some of whom may or may not be on social media, for example, but who are more likely to listen to talk radio or to see a TV ad.