WASHINGTON VETERANS AFFAIRS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

February 24 | 11:30 a.m. to 1:45 p.m.

VIRTUAL SESSION FOLLOW-UP (TRASCRIPT SUMMARY)

**COVID-19 Vaccine**

VA Puget Sound was thrilled when the vaccine arrived at VA Puget Sound on December 15, 2020 and were honored to be one of the first VA sites to administer a vaccine, which we did on December 16.

Puget Sound is now providing Pfizer and Moderna vaccines depending on the site, which include: Seattle, American Lake, Silverdale, Mount Vernon, and limited in-home and homeless shelter-based vaccination.

We are making great progress providing vaccines on top of the continued care we provide each and every day to our Veterans—our nation’s heroes. As of February 24, 2021, we had administered 12,404 initial dose vaccines and 5,271 completed vaccines to our Veterans. The number of doses administered to veterans at each facility is updated daily on the VA COVID-19 National Summary website [(https://www.accesstocare.va.gov/Healthcare/COVID19NationalSummary)](file:///C:\Users\VHAPUGBegasT\Desktop\(https:\www.accesstocare.va.gov\Healthcare\COVID19NationalSummary))

We see hope in each vaccine we administer.

We continue to proactively contact Veterans to make vaccine appointments when it is their turn. No walk-in vaccines, by appointment only. Eligible Veterans can call 206-716-5716 to schedule, or contact their primary care team. We also now have a local Veteran COVID Vaccine Hotline that we update daily with current vaccine scheduling eligibility! So please help us direct Veterans to call 206-277-4040 for up-to-date information!

Any healthcare-eligible Veteran is eligible for vaccination, regardless of disability status, service connection status, or housing status. Eligibility for VA healthcare, itself, is determined by our eligibility office in accordance with national VHA criteria.

Regarding homeless Veterans, we have offered vaccination to our congregate-living homeless Veterans. This includes onsite vaccination through site visits by our homeless primary care team.

While we understand there is vaccine hesitancy among our communities across the nation, getting a COVID-19 vaccine adds a crucial layer of protection against infection.

It is important for Veterans and the broader community to understand that the counties encompassed by our healthcare network remain in phase 2 based on Washington State guidelines, so our robust safety measures and our [policy of no walk-in patients outside of emergent care needs](https://www.pugetsound.va.gov/emergency/index.asp) remain in place.

The vaccines VA Puget Sound is distributing mark crucial steps in getting COVID-19 under control. Vaccines help train the body’s natural immune system to recognize and fight a specific disease. When a virus is introduced to your body for the first time, your immune system mounts a defense. This includes making antibodies that help kill or neutralize the virus. If you’re exposed to the same virus again, these antibodies will help your immune system recognize and fight the virus quickly.

We have treatments that help reduce the effects of COVID-19 infection but a vaccine that helps prevent people from becoming infected is the best way to slow or stop the spread of the virus.

Vaccines protect you and the people around you. Protecting whole communities from diseases like COVID-19 is an important reason for everyone to get vaccines. We call this “community immunity.”

When enough people are vaccinated, a virus can’t spread as easily from person to person. This means that everyone in the community is less likely to get infected. Even if some people do still get infected, there’s less chance of an outbreak that causes many people in the community to get sick at the same time. This helps prevent issues like too many people needing care at once and not having enough hospital beds or health care providers.

Data shows that some communities have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. These include Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities. Members of these communities can help protect their families and friends by getting vaccinated.

VA Puget Sound administering both the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine as well as the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine.

Data from clinical trials show that the 2 authorized COVID-19 vaccines are safe in people who've been infected with the virus in the past. If you're currently sick from COVID-19, you should wait until you've recovered, and you're finished with isolation to get a vaccine.

Both vaccines require 2 doses, given 21 days apart for Pfizer and 28 days apart for Moderna.

For each of these vaccines, Veterans need to get both shots for the vaccine to work. Get the second shot even if you have side effects after the first one, unless a health care provider tells you not to.

Vaccine experts will need to continue studying the data to determine when people will need more vaccine doses to maintain protection from COVID-19.

And Veterans can change their minds about getting a vaccine at any time. Given the limited supply of vaccines, we simply ask Veterans to contact their care team as soon as possible. This will allow us to offer the vaccine to another Veteran. For VA Puget Sound’s local rollout, we continue to follow the VA COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Plan which was released December 15, 2020 to ensure a safe, evidence-based and equity-focused vaccine rollout for VA frontline workers and Veterans.

We continue to work closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other federal partners to provide COVID-19 vaccines. The vaccine distribution plan addresses vaccinations for Veterans, staff, and other federal partners, and includes a risk stratification framework for identifying the populations at highest risk to receive the vaccine.

We to continue to follow VHA and CDC guidelines for determining who is at high risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19. Factors that may influence the risk of severe illness include the following:

* **Age. The risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19 increases with age.**
* **Existing health problems. People with certain health problems (like diabetes, heart disease, or obesity) have a higher risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19.**
* **Other factors that raise a person's risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19, such as living in a nursing home or other group living facility.**

It is important to understand that we need to vaccinate the most vulnerable Veterans first, which means that not all Veterans will be eligible to get the vaccine during this initial rollout.

Supplies of the new COVID-19 vaccines continue to be limited. Veterans being actively scheduled now for the vaccine at this time, include:

* **Veterans 55+ and older are being actively scheduled now for the vaccine. *Note, this is an update from Feb. 24, 2021 VAAC meeting.***
* **Our next priority group will be Veterans 50 years or older. Your VA health care team will contact you for scheduling when you’re eligible to get a vaccine. *Note, this is an update from Feb. 24, 2021 VAAC meeting.***
* **While there is significant debate around the possibility of delaying second dose vaccines across the nation, we continue to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations. Additionally, Veterans are encouraged to get their second vaccine dose at the same place they received their first dose.**

Washington state and VA vaccine eligibity phases may differ. We are encouraging all Veterans to get a vaccine as soon as they are eligible, including through through the Washington State Department of Health, if they are eligible sooner through that pathway.

And all Veterans and caregivers need to know that they should never be charged a dime for vaccination. It is federally prohibited to charge the patient directly. Also, insurance (private, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.) will NOT bill the patient for cost-sharing (e.g., co-pay) for a portion of the COVID vaccine administration fee. Thus the Veteran should not ever need to file for reimbursement of the vaccine administration fee from the VA because he should not ever be billed by the provider, or any other insurance (such as Medicare).

Even after eligible Veterans and caregivers receive a COVID-19 vaccine, they still need to wear a mask that covers their mouths and nose when they are in a VA facility. They’ll also need to follow other VA safety rules like practicing physical distancing.

In the meanwhile, Veterans with COVID-19 or COVID 19 vaccines questions should:

* **Call 206-716-5716 if they are eligible to schedule or contact their primary care team.**
* **Call our local Veteran COVID Vaccine Hotline—206-277-4040—to get daily updates about our current vaccine scheduling eligibility.**
* **Visit the VA Coronavirus Vaccine FAQs webpage** [**www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/**](http://www.va.gov/health-care/covid-19-vaccine/) **and visit** [**www.pugetsound.va.gov**](http://www.pugetsound.va.gov) **for our operational updates on COVID-19 and the vaccine.**

For all non-COVID-19 vaccine related health care concerns, Veterans are asked to call us at 1-800-329-8387 or reach out to your primary care team.

**SUPPORT OF HOMELESS VETERANS**

Those experiencing homelessness are some of our most vulnerable Veterans, and we’ve worked hard over this last year to protect them during the pandemic.

There was an early recognition at both the local and national level that the congregate nature of many homeless facilities and the high level of medical disability in our homeless population put them at very high risk from COVID. As a direct result of this recognition, we gained important new tools to care for our homeless Veterans. One of the most important of these was funding to move high-risk Veterans into hotel rooms. This meant that we were able to decompress our transitional housing (Grant Per Diem) programs and allowed our rapid rehousing program (Supportive Services for Veterans and Families) to get people to safety as quickly as possible. In addition to on-site case managers from our partners/grantees, our HPACT (homeless primary care) team visits the largest hotel sites each week to help ensure people are healthy and to advance their general care. We have also been able to broaden our eligibility for HUD-VASH vouchers, allowing us to more quickly move Veterans into permanent housing from these programs and hotels. Helping with all this, we’ve been able to provide smartphones to our Veterans in need, ensuring they can stay connected to housing case management and participate in virtual physical and mental health care.

VA Puget Sound has also created several other COVID-specific programs for this group of Veterans. First, we converted our American Lake domiciliary into our own isolation and quarantine facility. With meals, on-site nursing and supportive mental health care, this has allowed both homeless Veterans and any Veteran without the home support they need to isolate in a place of safety. Second, we created a COVID testing program that took testing to our transitional housing programs. Finally, we’ve taken the COVID vaccine out to our hotels, transitional housing programs, and highest risk supportive housing buildings. As we finish up our second vaccines at these places, we have transitioned into taking vaccines to our highest risk Veterans at their homes and those few in community shelters, people who would otherwise not make it to the hospital.

Partnership has been essential to all of this. This includes the incredible efforts of the Washington State Dept of Veterans Affairs, which manages to of our largest transitional housing programs. The WDVA worked hard to minimize risk, coordinate testing and vaccines at these soldiers’ homes. Our other GPD partners, like the Salvation Army and CCS for example, coordinated closely with us to carry out strong COVID mitigation strategies and have prevented outbreaks. Our SSVF partners, Catholic Community Services, Sound Mental Health and the YWCA, successfully pivoted from rapid rehousing to providing meals and shelter at hotels, and now working with HUD-VASH vouchers. Even the local housing authorities, like King County Housing Authority, tore down paperwork barriers early in the pandemic, to help streamline getting our Vets housed. Finally, working with Catholic Community Services and Pioneer Human Services means that two new supportive housing buildings are opening, bringing 76 Veterans into homes of their own. Our case managers have been working incredibly hard to get people into these apartments.

**mental health and suicide prevention services and programs**

We offer a wide array of services, including acute inpatient, residential, ambulatory care programs, addictions treatment, emergency and urgent care, and vocational rehabilitation services. Our mission is to provide an appropriate level of support and treatment to assist Veterans in recovery from mental health and addictive disorders and to maximize their overall level of function and satisfaction with life. Care is patient-focused, culturally sensitive, cost effective and supported by our clinical, education and research programs.

2020 saw a massive shift in care delivery due to the COVID19 pandemic.  Now, more than 90% of mental health visits are completed via telephone or televideo visits. Our rates of mental health appointments completed through the VA Video Connect platform increase by more than 2000% in fiscal 2020.  Telehealth equipment with Internet access can be provided to Veterans as needed at no cost.  We continue to provide in-person care to those Veterans who need it, but we are thrilled our Veterans are embracing our virtual care options from the convenience of their homes.

The COVID-19 pandemic also forced VA Puget Sound to temporarily suspend our residential care offerings for mental health, but our providers pivoted to maximize intensive virtual treatment offerings for those Veterans who could benefit.  We recognize this is not a perfect substitution for residential services and we look forward to being able to reopen these care offerings in 2021.

VA Puget Sound also remains committed to Veteran suicide prevention. We recognize that there is no single pathway into, or away from, a suicidal crisis. Because of this, VA Puget Sound remains sensitive to the stressors and risk factors facing our Nation’s veterans. We must strive to provide early and effective intervention. And we must ensure that, in the wake of any tragic death by suicide, that we are there to support that Veteran’s family and their community as they grieve.

These goals remained a constant focus over the past year, during which our Suicide Prevention Team provided local follow up to more than 2,800 calls to the Veteran’s Crisis line; the highest number we’ve encountered over the past 10 years. Nationally, VA Puget Sound is consistently in the top five VA facilities with regard to the number of referrals received from the Veterans Crisis Line.

In addition to this, we maintain regular caring mail contact with all Veterans whose high-risk flags have been removed in the last 12 months. Caring contacts is one of the few interventions shown to reduce future suicide related behavior and is both a low cost and simple intervention. In the last six months, this has resulted in more than 300 caring cards being sent to the highest risk Veterans across the Puget Sound region.

We also understand that suicide prevention can’t only happen within the walls of the VA, and that a community focused, public health approach is needed. Because of this, community outreach and education continue to be a major focus of our suicide prevention efforts. Even with the limitations necessitated by the pandemic response, the Suicide Prevention Team was able to quickly pivot to virtual outreach, completing an average of 20 community outreach events per month in FY20, reaching over 5,794 individuals across our community. This included Veterans, agencies and organizations that serve Veterans, State agencies serving Veterans, and Veteran programs within local indigenous communities.

**primary care expansion plans**

Sharing with our exciting plans to expand our primary care footprint in Western Washington to better serve our Veterans at locations that are more convenient to them.

On December 4, 2020, we announced plans to open three new Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in Edmonds, Olympia and Puyallup by late Spring this year and one in Everett before the end of 2021. We have also submitted a request for proposal to site a CBOC in the Auburn area but do not yet have a firm schedule. We are also exploring a new site in the Woodinville area and a permanent home for our CBOC in Olympia.

To support this change, VA Puget Sound did not renew its contract with Valor Healthcare and closed clinics in Lake City, Federal Way and Bellevue on January 31, 2021. During the period from February 1 through the opening of our new CBOCs, VA Puget Sound will have virtual teams with primary care, social work, pharmacy, nutrition and mental health ready to go for Veterans who receive care at one of the three Valor Healthcare-operated clinics.

We’ve been proactively contacted the approximately 11,000 Veterans who had been receiving care across the three clinics that closed to ensure a smooth transition of care. Veterans were transferred to new locations based on their zip codes and proximity to the nearest VA Puget Sound site. New primary care team assignments should have been received by January 31, 2021 (either through email address on record or mailing address). If a Veteran did not receive their letter, they should contact our call center at 800-329-8387, extension 71234, and they will let you know your new clinic location.

The new CBOCs are part of a larger system redesign to better serve Western Washington over the next four years. In addition to the new opening in late Spring, we are exploring new clinics in the Auburn/Kent, North King County areas. Together, the new clinical footprint will allow VA Puget Sound to directly serve Everett and Olympia, two major metropolitan areas in Western Washington with no VA facilities currently. Additionally, it will create new capacity for our areas of highest growth in South King and Pierce counties as well as provide better outreach to rural Veterans in North King County. Immediately, the shift from Federal Way to Puyallup and Lake City to Edmonds will largely overlap coverage. The closed Bellevue location will be served by VA Puget Sound’s Seattle Campus and future clinics in Auburn and Woodinville.

Our three new CBOCs in Edmonds, Olympia and Puyallup are all larger in capacity than the now closed Bellevue CBOC. Expansion refers to our regional ability to serve more Veterans with more services and modalities. So, the new footprint for VA Puget Sound will have more clinical sites serving more total patients, but the specific locations are shifting.

We have already hired the new staff necessary to support the smooth transition to VA care from the contracted services. Those teams are in orientation and will be ready to activate as “virtual clinics” while our new care sites in Edmonds, Olympia and Puyallup complete their final tenant improvement upgrades to meet VA standards for IT security. During the gap period all Veterans will be assigned to their new permanent Patient Aligned Care Team locations. These will include virtual access to pharmacy, primary care mental health integration, social work, and nutrition services. In addition, all Veterans will have access to same-day services for laboratory, imaging, and other clinical needs at the American Lake, Seattle, and Mount Vernon campuses. Existing orders, medications, and consults will all flow from their prior assignments to their new primary care teams.

There are many options for Veterans who were enrolled with primary care at one of the clinics that closed:

* Seattle Campus and American Lake Campuses
* Our Community Based Outpatient Clinics in Mount Vernon, Port Angeles and Silverdale
* Our new Community Based Outpatient Clinics (opening late Spring):
  + Edmonds Clinic at 21616 76th Ave. West, Suites 107 and 112
  + Puyallup Clinic at Sunrise Medical Center, 11216 Sunrise Blvd. East, Bldg. 3, Suites 204 and 209
  + Olympia Clinic at Olympia Medical Center, 500 Lilly Road. NE, Suites 201 and 204A.
* Everett Clinic at 220 Olympic Blvd. (opening by end of 2021)
* Additionally, enrolled Veterans also have extensive Community Care options available under the MISSON Act, which include urgent care at locations such as Indigo, Concentra, Immediate Clinic, SeaMar, University of Washington Neighborhood clinics, Evergreen and Supertrack Walk-In Clinic. Veterans can find a VA location or in-network community care provider at [www.va.gov/find-locations/](http://www.va.gov/find-locations/)
* We also continue to maximize personalized virtual care options. We know these services have been a valuable link to our Veterans during this challenging time, providing increased access to care regardless of where they live.
* For specialty care, referrals are sent to the specialty service to determine the best modality for care based on the needs of the Veteran. Care may be delivered via phone, telehealth or face-to-face. Veterans may also call our Community Care team at 206-277-4545 or 206-764-2876. If the first one is busy, Veterans are encouraged to use second one.

Services at our new clinics opening in late Spring will include primary care (in-clinic and home-based), laboratory services, mental health, social work, clinical pharmacy specialists, telemedicine and nutrition. And to address a few specific areas:

* There are labs at each of our new clinics. The labs can draw blood, collect urine samples and provide screening for SARS, COVID-19, flu and various others to include A1C blood work.
* While there is one clinical pharmacist on-site at each of the new CBOCs, there is no on-site pharmacy so no medications will be dispensed. Veterans can request prescription refills, order and ship medications home using My HealtheVet or Rx Refill mobile app.
* And if a Veteran currently have a Primary Care Mental Health Integration provider at one the closed clinics, that Veteran will be able to complete the episode of care with your current Primary Care Mental Health Integration provider.

For our Everett CBOC, services will include primary care, physical therapy, occupational therapy, advanced diagnostic imaging such as MRI, ultrasound, Echo and CT, social work, mental health, nutrition, pharmacy specialist, and readjustment counseling services.

Across all our care sites, VA Puget Sound provides transportation services to VA appointments for eligible Veterans living in our service area which includes Puyallup. Veterans may access the VA Transportation program through their VA provider or by calling our Travel office at 206-764-2120.

**COMMUNITY CARE**

With the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, routine care across the nation was placed on hold. This was in anticipation for treating increasing numbers of patients with COVID, and VA providers, and community providers had reduced capacity to see patients. As routine care was deferred, we were limited to treating only the very sickest patients and those in need of urgent care. Deferring routine care created a large backlog of requests for care. Our current consult backlog is greater than 36,000.

We are very aware of delays some veterans are experiencing in getting care AND how frustratinfg this can be. Our greatest challenge is responding to this large volume of backlog for care in the community. I want to assure you Community Care Teams are working tirelessly to prioritize urgent consults and reduce the time to scheduling appointments.

We recently modified our phones to expand our capacity to accommodate the increased numbers of calls. We have dedicated staff answering phones as well as reaching out to veterans to schedule their care.

Our goal is to answer the phone in seconds so that Veterans’ concerns may be promptly addressed. Currently when you call Community Care, you may eperience an extended waiting time. We know we have a significant issue that is unacceptable. Your call is important to us. Please do not hang up. We request that you remain patient as we continue working to reduce the time waiting on hold as well as time get your care scheduled.

You may always consider disscussing with your provider options for receiving care at the VA vs. in the community. Alternatively, VA services include telephone and video visits that may often be scheduled sooner than face-to-face. Please be sure to discuss these alternative options with your provider.

Community Care Customer Service lines for Veterans: 1 800 329-8387 ext. 4545 and 253 582-8440 ext. 4545.

**QUESTIONS?**

Contact VA Puget Sound Communication Director [Tammy.Begasse@va.gov](mailto:Tammy.Begasse@va.gov), [PublicAffairsPugetSound@va.gov](mailto:PublicAffairsPugetSound@va.gov) or 206.277.1711.