

Telemedicine Program for Veterans Opens in Jackson County *First in Nation!!!*

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Local veterans, Local, State and Federal officials, along with friends and members of our community gathered at the Jackson County Public Library on Wednesday (October 11th, 2017) to officially launch a program to help local veterans get the care they need in one of the most rural areas of the state.

“Today we want to celebrate that this Virtual Living Room is ready for operation,” PRTC Chief Executive Officer Keith Gabbard said, addressing the crowd of about 40 people, which included several veterans. “The concept is to provide a comfortable living room environment for the veterans so they won’t have to drive three hours for care.”

The Virtual Living Room program is a pilot project that allows veterans to connect with health care providers at the Lexington Veterans Administration Medical Center. The Jackson County Public Library has agreed to provide a **secure/private space** at their facility. PRTC will provide its technology infrastructure in support of the VLR project. The PRTC Broadband/High Speed Internet technology Infrastructure will be used to connect the Department of Veterans Affairs Lexington Kentucky Telehealth Providers to the patients utilizing the VLR at the library. Veterans in Jackson and surrounding counties will use the allocated space and VLR for the sole purpose of conducting Telehealth Visits.

Earlier this year in June officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs Lexington Kentucky VA Medical Center made the trip to the Jackson County Public Library in McKee to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) forming a partnership between the VA, the Jackson County Public Library and Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative (PRTC). As a result of this partnership, veterans from Jackson County and surrounding counties will now be able to consult with their doctors without the expense, time-consuming inconvenience or need to arrange for the lengthy drive to Lexington, KY. Veterans will have available to them a Virtual Living Room (VLR) where they can talk privately with their doctors.

“PRTC is excited to be part of this program,” Gabbard said. “Veterans are the backbone of this country, and we want to do what we can to help them. We want to make our community a better place. We are honored to be part of a community that made veterans and veteran health care a top priority.”

The VLR program is the first of its kind in the country. It was initiated by Gabbard, who partnered with the Lexington Veterans Administration Medical Center, NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association and the Jackson County Public Library.

“What I see is a better future for our veterans,” said Dr. Tuyen Tran of the Lexington VA Medical Center, who attended Wednesday’s ribbon-cutting. “If we do this well, we can mimic this model in other places.”

Initially, the VLR program will allow vets to speak with mental health care providers, Gabbard said. But it could be used for other doctor visits at some point in the future. The program is expected to be especially helpful for veterans who do not have access to high-speed internet connections in their homes or who lack a private space for one-on-one talks with their health care providers.

“While this pilot project targets veteran health care this approach to medicine is a much broader issue than just veterans and has great potential to benefit everyone. Perhaps one day all of our residents can have access to medical specialists located anywhere in the world as easy as a making an afternoon trip to the Jackson County Library. This is a way of the future,” said Rep. Marie Rader, R-McKee, addressing Wednesday’s crowd. “Let’s all get together and make this project work for Jackson County.”

Telemedicine programs are not new to the VA system. They were started as a way to increase patient access and reduce long waits for care.

In 2015, the VA conducted 2.1 million telehealth interactions and appointments, which includes more than 400,000 telehealth mental health care visits. As of May 2016, VA telemedicine programs have reduced bed days at the nation’s VA hospitals by 56 percent, reduced readmissions by 32 percent, and decreased total psychiatric admissions by 35 percent, according to VA Secretary David Shulkin.

Gabbard has been working on providing this telemedicine solution for our local veterans for some time now. He attended and spoke at the “White House Convening on Rural Telehealth” summit hosted on March 30th, 2016 by the White House Rural Council. Rural telehealth was the focus of the event and it highlighted the essential role of telehealth in reaching high-need rural families and communities. There was a great deal of brainstorming regarding the possibility of bringing health care and support to those that have served our country but live in remote rural areas where access to care is more of a challenge. In addition, many veterans would not be able to afford the equipment or high-speed internet capacity needed to support telemedicine services. Gabbard was already pursuing avenues to bring telehealth solutions to our community and spoke to the group regarding barriers that faced rural providers. “When we came out of that summit it was important that we had something concrete to show as a result,” Gabbard reflected.

After all the brainstorming and after the needs were identified the real work began. Gabbard sought out a community space that might work and held roundtable discussions with the local vets to gauge their interest and willingness to participate in such a program. Subsequently, the VA was invited to make a site visit with representatives from their Information Technology (IT) personnel, their physicians, their mental health specialists, and their administrators. The VA representatives were impressed with the capacity being offered by PRTC and the level of eagerness to participate from the community as well as other community leaders, including the local electric cooperative (Jackson Energy). It took several months to carefully word the MOU to ensure that the interests of all parties were protected (most importantly the veterans seeking medical care). In the meantime, Gabbard secured a \$5,000 Smart Rural Community grant to help prepare the private space and the project got underway.

Jackson County may not have a great deal of industry or job opportunities; however, the community does have pride in our country as demonstrated by a deep respect for our veterans. The county also has dedicated leaders like Keith Gabbard and businesses such as PRTC and Jackson Energy that work hard and take risks to improve the lives of our veterans and all our residents. With their vision, commitment, hard work and ongoing excellence Jackson County is

becoming known as a place of pioneers leading the way into a new future for all of rural America.