



# Mobile health centers deliver medical care to rural veterans

By Bob Brewin

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*Veterans Affairs*

About 41 percent, or 3.3 million, veterans enrolled in the Veterans Affairs Department health system live far from a VA hospital, so last week the department added another 20 vehicles to its fleet of 50 mobile vet centers packed with sophisticated communications gear to bring medical care and other services to rural veterans.

VA Undersecretary for Health Robert Petzel, speaking at the Columbus, Ohio, plant of Farber Specialty Vehicles, which builds the mobile centers, said, "VA is committed to expanding access to VA health care and benefits for veterans and their families, and these 20 new vehicles demonstrate that continued commitment."

Alfonso Batres, chief of VA's Readjustment Counseling Service, which has oversight of the 300 fixed and 70 mobile vet centers, said the Very Small Aperture Satellite system installed in every mobile unit allows remote access to a range of the department's medical and benefit systems, including medical records stored in the Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture.

Craig Davis, chief technology officer of IT Broadcasting, who also serves as the VSAT technical program manager, said while the communications systems installed in the mobile vet centers are sophisticated, using them is simple. Because they were designed for use by the nontechnical personnel who staff the mobile units, operation requires the push of just one button inside the van.

That button raises the VSAT antenna. Within five to 10 minutes, the antenna locks on to a dedicated VA satellite transponder, which provides 36 megabits of throughput for the mobile vet center fleet. The Ku-band satellite, which Davis did not identify, has a wide footprint that covers the United States, including Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

Signals from the satellite are downlinked to a VA teleport in Salt Lake City and a backup in Laurel, Md., and from there into the VA backbone network, Davis said.

Each mobile vet center typically downlinks data at the rate of 2 megabits per second and uplinks data at the rate of between 4 and 5 megabits per second. The satellite signal feeds into a 16-port router as well as a secure Wi-Fi system, which can support up to 256 users. The vans also are stuffed with videoconferencing equipment to support remote consultations, Davis said.

The mobile vet centers have enough bandwidth to support downloads of medical imagery data such as X-Rays from the VistA imaging system, Davis said. This month, VA started to deploy mammography systems in the centers, which will transmit breast X-rays into health records.

Batres said VA also uses the mobile centers for on-site counseling, with each featuring an enclosed space for privacy.

VA uses the vans to support demobilization of National Guard units, and recently dispatched a unit to Joint Base Lewis-McChord near Tacoma, Wash., to support the return of more than 1,000 personnel from an Idaho National Guard unit, Batres said. The mobile unit allowed VA to kick-start the benefits process for the Guard members before they returned home.

The mobile centers also can be used to respond to emergencies and natural disasters such as hurricanes; two can be airlifted on an Air Force C-5 cargo plane he said. Most states, except very small states such as Rhode Island, have at least one mobile vet center with additional vehicles deployed to states with the highest veteran populations.

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