



2020

Out of sight, but not out of mind: Keeping connections alive during COVID-19

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Recommended Citation

Braun, Katie (2020) "Out of sight, but not out of mind: Keeping connections alive during COVID-19," *Patient Experience Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 19.
DOI: [10.35680/2372-0247.1468](https://doi.org/10.35680/2372-0247.1468)

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Cover Page Footnote

Author would like to acknowledge the original VA Pittsburgh Birthday Club team members who are dedicating their time, efforts, and voices to this program including Mrs. Paula Bibza, Mrs. Margaret Felkay, Mrs. Marilyn Tarver-Rice, and Mr. Stanley Jarzynka. Thank you to the interdisciplinary team of volunteers also working on this program from the VAPHS PM&R, Woman's Health, and Prosthetic departments. A special thanks to Ms. Nicole M Teuteberg, Ms. Rebecca J Harmon, Ms. Chrisanne O McDuffie, Dr. Kaneen Allen, and Mr. Donald Koenig for their contributions and support. This article is associated with the Patient, Family & Community Engagement lens of The Beryl Institute Experience Framework. (<http://bit.ly/ExperienceFramework>). You can access other resources related to this lens including additional PXJ articles here: http://bit.ly/PX_PtFamComm

Out of sight, but not out of mind: Keeping connections alive during COVID-19

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Abstract

The Veteran Affairs Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) completed over 750,000 outpatient appointments during fiscal year 2019. With changes occurring around COVID-19, VAPHS saw a significant decline in veterans on campus. VAPHS employees are strongly connected to the mission of serving our nation's heroes, while veterans find trust, support and comradery at the VA. The VAPHS Office of Veterans Experience (OVE) realized the impact that COVID-19 isolation may have on veterans quarantined at home and seized the opportunity to continue to build relationships, develop trust and keep connected through the VAPHS Birthday Club. Over 1,300 calls have been placed to provide a non-clinical wellness check-in and provide a warm birthday wish. The gesture of 'calling because we care and we're thinking of you' has provided employees and veterans a way to connect on a human level during a scary and unpredictable time. Hearing the stories of the men and women who borne the battle for our freedoms only reinvestigates our commitment to serving. While some calls last only a few minutes, there are veterans who have requested a follow-up call and now have a standing weekly conversation with a team member. These check-in calls have provided proactive assistance to our veterans by initiating communication between the veteran and healthcare provider, assisting with medication refills or updating demographic information in the chart. While these are all positive outcomes of the program, the most rewarding are the personalized relationships being built with veterans and the happiness and engagement of our employees.

Keywords

Patient experience, patient & family centered care, communication, COVID-19, birthday, veterans, employee engagement

Acknowledgements

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Description of the Issue

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) identifies our shared purpose as building trusted, lifelong relationships with veterans, their families, caregivers and supporters. This guiding principle should not be impacted by external forces, even a pandemic. During the response to COVID-19, VA employees across the country continued to build these veteran centric relationships through innovative ideas and the use of virtual technologies despite new barriers. For some of our nation's veterans, they have deep connections to their VA, the employees and to their brother and sister veterans. Face-to-face interactions with the VA play a significant medical and social role for those we serve.

At VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS), our face-to-face interactions with veterans declined as social distancing and measures to protect veterans and employees were implemented during the response to COVID-19. The VAPHS is the most complex and largest healthcare system, consisting of two medical centers and five outpatient clinics within the fourth Veteran Integrated Service Network.

During fiscal year 2019, VAPHS served 79,934 unique patients, a 1.6% increase from the previous fiscal year. Outpatient visits for the system totaled 758,505 for the same fiscal year. Due to COVID-19 precautions and guidance received from VA Central Office, face-to-face outpatient visits were transitioned to virtual appointments or phone calls as clinically indicated. Prior to COVID-19 response measures, VAPHS, including its outpatient clinics, conducted an average of 1,055 outpatient visits per

day. In response to safety measures, outpatient visits declined to an average of 96 per day. The VAPHS Office of Veterans Experience (OVE) realized the potential impact these significant changes and isolation may have on veterans quarantined at home and seized the opportunity to continue to build relationships, develop trust and keep connected to veterans in a new and creative way.

Practices, Processes and Programs Applied

With the drastic change in the operations at the VA and the impact it may have on the population we serve, OVE considered how we could continue to support veterans through the idea of a COVID-19 wellness check-in call program. The goal of these non-clinical calls was to offer a few moments of friendly conversation during this time of isolation, uncertainty and change. We wanted to remind the veterans they are at the center of everything we do and provide them a little distraction from what's going on in the world today.

As planning progressed for the wellness check-in call program, we needed to identify how to best focus our efforts. In a facility the size of VAPHS, we needed to take a targeted approach. Referrals were sought from service lines, providers, outpatient clinic managers and social work leaders. Those on the referred list were veterans with known limited social support at the home, a diagnosis that could be exacerbated during these stressing times or simply someone that expressed feeling alone. While obtaining referrals, we learned that our primary care providers would be contacting our clinically high-risk veterans, and so we wanted to expand the reach of VAPHS by focusing on additional cohort of veterans. This is when the idea we now call the 'VAPHS Birthday Club' was established. Due to COVID-19 precautions and social distancing, we knew there may be veterans unable to be with their families, caregivers or supporters on their birthday. We wanted to assure they knew the VA was thinking of them on their special day. OVE set out to complete COVID-19 wellness check-in calls to those who were referred but also to those with birthdays during that month.

An interdisciplinary team helped to make this endeavor possible. First, to acquire the cohort of veterans, we enlisted the assistance of the local data team. The VAPHS data team utilized a data warehouse to obtain a database of active veterans, defined as being seen within the last 24 months, assigned to a VAPHS Primary Care team and had a birthday in April or May. Records that had a date of death listed were removed from the database. The results of the data report included names of 6,778 veterans.

Next, VAPHS leadership felt it was important the COVID-19 wellness check-in and birthday calls were documented in the electronic medical record (EMR). This

assures the call contact is visible to the veteran's healthcare team, provides easier communication between service lines and expedites potential referrals from the call. The VAPHS clinical informatics team quickly built a template for use along with a unique note title for documentation. The template includes an overview of the general information discussed on each call including resources on Whole Health Basics and managing stress associated with the COVID-19 virus outbreak. The contact information for the Veterans Crisis Line and the VAPHS OVE was also provided. The template also includes documentation of any service line referrals which were indicated based on the discussion, if the veteran was amenable to hardcopy/electronic resources, if a return phone call was accepted by the veteran and the length of the call. Documenting in the EMR also provided the opportunity for the team member to provide additional information regarding the call through free text.

Measurable Outcomes

To date, the VAPHS Birthday Club has completed over 1,300 COVID-19 wellness check-in and birthday outreach calls. Results of this initiative have been hugely successful. Although some calls may only last for a few minutes, each veteran we spoke to was receptive to hearing from VAPHS. In addition to wishing veterans a happy birthday and having pleasant conversations, during these calls the team has been able to proactively assist with coordinating care between primary care, behavioral health, pharmacy, social work and the veteran. Resources on grocery delivery or food bank services have been provided. The team has also helped facilitate the transferring of a veteran's care from one VA site to another along with facilitate changes of address or phone numbers and additions of emails to veteran's EMR profile. Questions regarding how VAPHS is managing appointments, procedures, prescriptions and the actions taken in response to COVID-19 have been addressed during these conversations as well.

Veterans are extremely thankful for the wellness check-in calls, and their priceless reaction to us wishing them a happy birthday has been the most rewarding and positive outcome of these efforts. Many veterans stated that our call was the only birthday wish they had received, and their surprise, gratitude and appreciation were palpable even over the phone. Wishing a veteran a happy birthday has provided an avenue for the veteran and caller to establish open lines of conversation. During our conversations, we have heard about veteran's dogs and families, the hobbies our veterans pursue and how they've been spending their time in quarantine. Veterans have opened up and provided insight into their time in the service, where they served and when they served. Celebrations occurred for birthdays of all ages, ranging from 25 years old to 102 years old, along with a 49-year wedding anniversary.

Through this initiative, two team members have built a particularly strong connection and relationship with an 89-year-old veteran. This veteran was surprised and happy for the initial call, as he didn't think anyone would remember his birthday. He asked to be sung 'Happy Birthday,' as no one had sung to him in years. Our team member happily obliged, which ended up leaving both in tears from the touching experience. From there, our team has provided this veteran a weekly call, per his request outside of the 'Price is Right' hour, to converse about everything from birdwatching to his previous employment to family vacations. He often 'plays favorites' with the team members and jokes about making the other teammate jealous during their calls. He ended one call by stating, "I love you and everything you do for us veterans." This veteran, along with others, are now requesting to meet the team in person when feasible. It will be a sight to see when the team members meet this veteran. We look forward to expressing our gratitude for him in person one day soon.

Although some veterans may initially be cautious at the onset of the call, it has quickly turned to surprise and thanks for the personalized birthday wish. On occasion, these calls have provided a personal touch resulting in a positive outcome that influenced a VA skeptic. In response to receiving their birthday call, a veteran responded stating, "Wow, that was refreshing that someone took the time to notice my birthdate in my chart. That shows that you actually care. I want to thank you and thank everyone at the VA. You have brought back my faith in the VA system." One veteran was surprised the VA cared enough to check in on him and joked, "I was trying hard not to like you all, and then you do something like this and remember me on my birthday and check in to make sure Corona didn't get me."

Our team was excited to be a part of celebrations for a World War II veteran that had turned 100 years old. During the call, the veteran's daughter shared the local news outlets were present to provide coverage of the veteran's drive-by parade including a visit by the local Mayor. The veteran stated to our caller, "This was so much fun today. I told everyone, 'let's do this again tomorrow'." Before ending the call, the veteran then asked OVE if we would remember to call him to help him celebrate 101.

Implications, Suggestions and Open Questions

Moving into what the new normal, post-COVID experience will look like is still quite uncertain. A certainty that will remain is the VA's desire to provide consistent, exceptional experiences for our veterans, their families, caregivers and supporters. The implementation of this initiative has been an opportunity to connect, care and own the moment with those we serve on a level that we have not experienced before.

While the outcomes presented here have been anecdotal, further research could investigate the impact of simple initiatives such as this on patient perception and experience data points within a healthcare facility. From our experience, reaction to the call differs slightly on age. Additional research could investigate the impact and perception based on age and/or gender perhaps providing information for a more targeted approach.

In addition, while the initial intent of the COVID-19 wellness check-in calls and VAPHS Birthday Club was to be a service for veterans, the initiative has been a positive activity for our employees as well.

Anecdotally, it has boosted moral, increased engagement and has provided the staff with a positive outlook during this unnerving time. A team member working with the COVID-19 wellness check-in calls and birthday club stated, "[Making birthday calls] has made the VA seem a little more like working at a small private practice." Future research could further investigate the impact such initiatives have on employee engagement.

With the positivity around this initiative, we recommend facilities consider adopting similar programs to cultivate connections with the patients they serve. Leadership buy-in and assistance from local subject matters experts for data retrieval and documentation were key drivers in the building of a successful program at VAPHS. Involving interdisciplinary volunteers has also been impactful as we work to continue the VAPHS Birthday Club while resuming of hospital operations. Clear expectation, training material and having a project lead has also been helpful in facilitating the ongoing development of the COVID-19 wellness check-in calls and VAPHS Birthday Club program.

Although trusted relationships may take time to build, every interaction with our veterans has the potential to be a positive step toward that relationship. With each check-in and birthday call we make, we've taken a step in the right direction. On a call, a veteran stated, "Talking to you put a smile on my face. I thank you for that." The action of making someone smile has been a mutual one for both those making and receiving the calls. We are looking forward to continuing to build relationships with our veterans through this program. And veterans are looking forward to their next call too, with one veteran stating "You can call me this time next year to wish me happy birthday again!" We've already marked our calendars.