

# VA Expands Care to Underserved Veterans

## The recent opening of a health care clinic in northeast Oklahoma will serve as a ‘roadmap’ for providing health care to rural veterans

Feb 15, 2024

Late last year, the VA announced that it planned to open several new facilities for veterans seeking health care. The clinics will serve veterans, service members and families in underserved areas around the world, according to the VA. One of the new clinics is located within Oklahoma’s Cherokee Nation.

### **PARTNERING WITH THE CHEROKEE NATION**

The new clinic is located at the Cherokee Nation’s Vinita, Oklahoma, Health Center, which serves members of the Cherokee Indian tribe.

Vinita is located 65 miles northeast of Tulsa. Before the opening of the new clinic, veterans in the Vinita area had to travel to Claremore, Oklahoma, for the nearest VA clinic — about 40 miles away via a toll route.

The VA stated that the Cherokee Nation partnership made the newly established clinic possible. The VA also stated that partnering with the tribe “could be a roadmap for how rural America works hand-in-hand with tribes to provide the best care possible” for veterans.

“For the first time in the Eastern Oklahoma Health Care System history, we are expanding access to health care in partnership within a tribal health care system,” said Kimberly Denning, the executive director of the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System. “As the veteran and tribal population in eastern Oklahoma continues to grow, this meaningful partnership with Cherokee Nation will enable the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System to meet its needs.”

The 1,300-square-foot clinic will serve about 4,200 veterans in northeast Oklahoma and

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have five VA staff members to provide primary health and mental health care, as well as social work and lab services, according to the VA.

### **MORE CLINICS AROUND THE WORLD**

The VA has established three new Vet Centers and six Vet Center Outstations, which the department said will be community-based counseling centers. The new facilities will provide “social and psychological services” to eligible veterans, military members and their families. No-cost professional services will be available, including counseling for people with depression, PTSD and psychological effects of military sexual assault.

The new locations are:

- **Sierra Vista, Arizona, Vet Center Outstation** (Anticipated to open in 2024.)
- **Solano County, California, Vet Center Outstation** (Anticipated to open in early 2024.)
- **St. Cloud, Minnesota, Vet Center Outstation** (Anticipated to open at the beginning of 2024.)
- **Vineland, New Jersey, Vet Center Outstation** (Anticipated opening date to be determined.)
- **Clarksville, Tennessee, Vet Center** (Anticipated opening date to be determined.)
- **Fredericksburg, Virginia, Vet Center** (Anticipated opening date to be determined.)
- **Leesburg, Virginia, Vet Center Outstation** (Anticipated opening date to be determined.)
- **U.S. Virgin Islands Vet Center** (Planned to open by early summer 2024.)
- **Saipan, Northern Mariana Islands, Vet Center Outstation** (Anticipated opening date to be determined.)

The VA stated that the new centers and outstations will “improve access to counseling” for veterans and service members.

“In 300 communities across the country, Vet Centers provide veterans, service members, and their families with quick and easy access to the mental health care they need,” VA Secretary Denis McDonough said. “We’re expanding this program to make sure [veterans] get the support they so rightly deserve — no matter where they live.”

### **VFW SUPPORTS IMPROVING VA HEALTH CARE**

During the 2023 VFW National Convention in Phoenix, VFW members approved many resolutions focused on improving VA health care, including providing sufficient health care services to veterans and suitable health care services to underserved veterans.

VFW’s Resolution 606 notes that the organization will continue to support VA’s efforts in

treating PTSD and mental health care for veterans.

Resolution 606 states that VFW urges:

- VA to provide appropriate staffing for VA mental health treatment and research programs.
- Congress to dedicate adequate resources to address the alarming rate at which veterans die by suicide, to include health treatment and research programs.
- VA to assess what specific treatments or practices are the most effective in helping veterans cope with PTSD.

At the convention, VFW members also approved Resolution 629. The purpose of the resolution is to collect data so that VA can assess and address the challenges of any underserved population. This includes not only female, LGBTQ+, racial and ethnic minority veterans, but it also includes young men, who are disproportionately at risk for suicide.

“[VFW calls on] VA to implement favorable changes to the benefit of understanding veterans based on findings of fact and not anecdotal or arbitrary statistics,” the resolution states.

*This article is featured in the February 2024 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.*