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How Virtual Care Can Help Curb the Behavioral Health Crisis

Introduction

In mid-2022, the world learned that at least five soldiers serving on the same aircraft carrier had died by suicide within the last year, including three who died within a single week in April. The string of suicides aboard the USS George Washington was, sadly, just the tip of the iceberg — a dramatic demonstration of the mental health crisis that grips the military, the community of veterans and the nation as a whole.

With mental health providers in short supply and geographic distance making it hard for military and veteran organizations to provide in-person care, virtual treatment options such as telehealth-based behavioral healthcare are rising to the fore as a means to get care to those who need it.

"Everyone is looking for ways to do this more effectively," said Lou Giglio, head of federal government sales at Zoom who previously served as an intelligence analyst in the U.S. Army before moving to the private sector.

Chapter 01

State of Behavioral Health in America

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Nearly 20% of Americans — almost 50 million people — experienced a mental illness in 2019, according to the "2022 State of Mental Health in America" report. COVID-19 only made it worse, as support and social systems changed.

A Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) report found two out of five adults, or 40%, reported symptoms of anxiety or depression since the onset of the pandemic. "The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic recession have negatively affected the mental health of many and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness," KFF reports.

The Military View
This issue is also prevalent among veterans and members of the armed forces.

"Suicide rates among active-duty military members are currently at an all-time high since record-keeping began after 9/11, and have been increasing over the past five years at an alarmingly steady pace," according to United Service Organizations, a charitable organization in serving active-duty service members and military families.

"In 2021, research found that 30,177 active duty personnel and veterans who served in the military after 9/11 have died by suicide — compared to the 7,057 service members killed in combat in those same 20 years," USO reports. "That is, military suicide rates are four times higher than deaths that occurred during military operations."

Systemic Shortfalls
While the suicide rates are startling, they indicate a larger phenomenon. Military personnel and those in the veteran community struggle with a rising tide of behavioral health issues, and many aren't getting the care they need.

Researchers at the Uniformed Services University, for example, note that 23% of military and veteran families had symptoms of depression and anxiety, and that 25% of military families indicated their mental health needs are not being met.

Leaders in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and across military organizations are aware of the shortfall, and have been seeking out ways to make behavioral care more readily available.

Chapter 02

Current Challenges to Delivering Effective Mental Healthcare

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For the VA, military services and other federal agencies that deliver healthcare, a number of factors can interfere with the effective delivery of behavioral health services.

Too Few Practitioners
First, there aren't enough doctors to go around. About 37% of Americans, or 122 million people, live in areas with a dearth of mental health professionals, according to the research organization USAFacts. To fill the gaps in mental healthcare and offer all Americans the help they need to stay well, the nation needs an additional nearly 6,400 mental health providers.

As a result of this and other factors, active-duty personnel may not have ready access to care. "For those who are forward deployed, there may be a medical unit, but they won't have a lot of mental health professionals there," Giglio said. "There isn't that depth of expertise available."

Geographic Challenges
Geography also plays an outsize role in determining who can access behavioral healthcare: Two-thirds of the provider shortages are in rural

areas, USAFacts reports. The uneven distribution of mental healthcare practitioners directly impacts the veteran community.

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"Populations have changed over time, and now the big VA hospitals and service centers are not aligned with where most folks live," Giglio said. "Today, prior-service folks live primarily in the coastal Carolinas, Texas, middle America. They're far from the big VA centers: Some may have to travel 200 miles or more to get to the closest facility."

For those on active-duty, geographic challenges can also make it hard for the military medical system to provide care for family members back home. "They may be in remote areas or rural areas, where there isn't a facility close by that has this kind of care available," said Paul Kennedy, director of federal healthcare at Zoom. Kennedy experienced this firsthand having worked for the U.S. Army Medical Command for twenty years, with seven of those years at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany.

He pointed to other federal agencies that have similar issues. "We can look, for example, at the Indian Health Service, which supports tribal communities," he said. "Many of them are in remote locations, in rural areas, and getting this kind of care out to them has been a real challenge."

What it Means

The military's own investigators have documented the negative impacts of the lack of behavioral health access and care for active military and veterans. During a recent study, the Defense Department "did not consistently meet outpatient mental health access to care standards for active duty service members and their families," according to DoD's Office of Inspector General, or DoDIG.

From late 2018 to mid-2019, 53% of active-duty service members and their families who needed mental healthcare did not get it, DoDIG reports. Delays in treatment involved members "not being able to: (1) see the right provider at the right time, (2) obtain mental healthcare at all, or (3) receive timely follow-up treatment. All of these types of delays in mental healthcare increase the risk of jeopardizing patient safety and affecting the readiness of the force," the watchdog reported.

Agencies like VA and the Defense Health Agency, as well as other federal healthcare-related entities like IHS, need a more effective way to deliver mental health services. They need a strategy that meets the need at a time when providers are in short supply, and when geographic constraints may make it difficult for some to access the care they require.

Chapter 03

The Role of Telehealth in Addressing the Mental Health Crisis

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For veterans, active-duty military, reservists and others, telehealth offers a means to help make behavioral healthcare more readily accessible. For those far from the centers of care, or those who for other reasons find in-person visits hard, video communications can make a world of difference.

Decades of data demonstrate that the virtual delivery of mental healthcare is "safe, effective, and comparable in outcomes to in-person services," according to the Commonwealth Fund, a nonprofit healthcare advocacy group. Experts there say telehealth "offers a critical avenue to not only sustain mental and behavioral health services, but to expand them."

The American Hospital Association has likewise endorsed the use of telehealth in support of behavioral healthcare. "Telebehavioral health offers tremendous potential to improve patient outcomes and experience by transforming care delivery, overcoming geographic distances and enhancing access to care, particularly in underserved and rural areas or both," AHA notes.

An Effective Tool
In a recent survey, researchers at the Community Mental Health Association of Michigan looked at the effectiveness of virtual care. They found the use of remote mental health consultations increased significantly during COVID-19, with two-thirds of mental health providers saying they delivered more than half of their recent services via telehealth.

The survey suggests these providers have found telehealth a useful tool, as three-quarters of respondents said they plan to continue using a mix of telehealth and face-to-face services after COVID-19. Just under three-quarters said telehealth allows them to see more clients, and reduces the number of missed appointments. Around two-thirds said telehealth increases client satisfaction, engagement and retention, and allows them to serve a larger geographic area.

"Overall, providers feel comfortable using telehealth: say they are knowledgeable about its best practices, feel they can provide quality care via it, and believe that it's to the success of their organization," the study found.

Military Uses

Those who support the military and veterans have likewise turned to remote care to close the gap in behavioral health. The VA, for example, makes several remote care options available through its Office of Connected Care.

"Remote care helps solve logistical barriers, such as distance, transportation, and travel costs, as well as barriers such as taking time off work or school, arranging child or elder care, and physical limitations, all of which limit veterans' ability to engage in in-person mental healthcare," according to VA researchers. "Remote care also helps resolve clinical barriers, such as stigma around seeking mental healthcare."

Those same researchers looked at the use of video-supported treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, emotion management and interpersonal problems. "This remotely delivered intervention provided significant benefits across a range of symptoms and functional outcomes and was viewed positively by veterans," they report.

All the evidence suggests virtual technologies can help deliver behavioral healthcare more effectively. Video communications offer practitioners the means to interface with their clients, even when geography makes an in-person meeting difficult. This approach can make mental healthcare more readily available and accessible at a time when there's a growing need for such services across the military and veteran communities.

Chapter 04

How Zoom
Can Help

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How Zoom Can Help

For telehealth to be effective in behavioral care and conform with the latest Future of Work guidance from the Office of Personnel Management, a video communications solution must deliver certain essential capabilities. It has to be easy to use, requiring no particular expertise on the part of either the practitioner or the patient, as well as secure and compliant. And it must be robust and deliver a seamless connection even in low-bandwidth situations.

Ease of Use
Anyone who logs into Zoom for Government is immediately aware of the ease of use that accompanies the platform. Zoom for Government's intuitive design encourages easy adoption and applies throughout the solution stack, making it simple for users to incorporate into their daily operations, no matter the mission.

"Zoom is a 100% cloud-based solution authorized at FedRAMP Moderate Level with DISA IL4 Provisional Authorization," Kennedy said. "That means when you set up a Zoom Meeting, anybody can join from a device of their choosing. You click on a link and you can be connected. It's that easy."

Moreover, Zoom for Government helps support HIPAA compliance, simplifying the road to data security and privacy requirements for both providers and constituents.

Low-bandwidth Solution
Key to telehealth is delivering that connection in low-bandwidth environments, whether it's in support of rural veterans, or in delivering care to active-duty soldiers in austere environments. No one wants to experience telehealth sessions that stutter or freeze.

"Zoom performs exceptionally well in low-bandwidth conditions," Kennedy said. "When you host or join a meeting, the Zoom client dynamically checks available bandwidth and quality-of-service telemetry to enable a stable, consistent connection."

Wide Acceptance
Many military entities already use Zoom for Government to support their needs for remote connectivity and collaboration. They use the Zoom for Government platform for a secure video communications solution that is easy to deploy, manage and scale. Zoom for Government has been authorized at the FedRAMP

Moderate Level and achieved a Provisional Authorization (PA) from Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) for the Department of Defense (DoD) at Impact Level 4 (IL4) and an Authorization to Operate (ATO) for DoD IL4 for Zoom Meetings with the Department of the Air Force. Zoom for Government also helps to support HIPAA and CJIS compliance.

While these authorizations are specific to Zoom for Government, commercial

Zoom has also attained other relevant attestations, all of which you can learn about on our Trust Center.

Zoom also has been widely accepted by the healthcare profession: Nine of the top 10 U.S. hospitals use Zoom, as do eight of the 10 largest U.S. health systems. They have seen firsthand how Zoom's comprehensive platform helps practitioners connect with patients, to provide more accessible, personalized healthcare experiences.

Key Features Help Providers Tap into Simplified Tools

A number of specific features and capabilities make Zoom for Government especially well-suited as a telehealth platform:

- Easy-to-configure passcode protections help providers keep telehealth sessions confidential in support of patient privacy.
- Administrators can also disable and lock recording capability for groups of users so that no practitioners inadvertently record telehealth sessions.
- Simultaneous translation and captioning tools help make Zoom sessions accessible to a wide range of users.
- U.S.-based staff and data centers add an extra layer to security to help to keep data within the bounds of U.S. borders and management.

- Standard 256-bit AES GCM encryption helps protect communication between authenticated meeting participants on the Zoom for Government client.
- Users can also tap into the optional end-to-end encryption (E2EE) feature available for Zoom Meetings and one-on-one intra-account Zoom Phone calls which provides encryption using cryptographic keys known only to the devices of the call or meeting participants.
- For authenticated login, users can utilize a single sign-on (SSO) feature that creates a safe and quick login process.

Zoom also supports healthcare and public sector users with a detailed list of systems settings that help support privacy and security while expanding capability.

Conclusion

Next Steps

Government agencies can begin today to shift in the direction of remote support for behavioral health. They can initiate conversations with caregivers about their communications strategies, helping them prepare for virtual delivery of care.

They also can begin to evaluate the available platforms, with an eye toward the key factors that will enable a successful virtual-health effort: Ease of use and the ability to deliver a seamless experience even in a low-bandwidth environment. With Zoom for Government, agencies and providers don't have to sacrifice speed for security, meaning they can deliver the quality healthcare experiences veterans and active duty military need in a secure digital environment — allowing them to focus their energy not on technology, but on the people they serve.

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