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CONTINUUM OF CARE FOR VETERANS AND SERVICEMEMBERS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

In FY 2008, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) became the first national health care system to integrate rehabilitation services for patients with visual impairment seamlessly and completely into its health benefits, providing rehabilitation care to Veterans and Servicemembers with visual impairments ranging from mild visual impairment to total blindness. This seamless service integration ensures that patients receive the finest medical and rehabilitation care, as well as cutting-edge assistive technology. The goal is to provide early intervention and to maximize adjustment, independence, and quality of life.

CONTINUUM OF CARE

The Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) continuum of services ensures early intervention for patients whose vision loss results from progressive diseases like age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma, as well as those Veterans and Servicemembers whose vision loss results from the wounds and trauma of war.



IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS AND SERVICEMEMBERS

The continuum of care expands capacity to care for a growing number of Veterans and Servicemembers returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan

who have developed visual impairment and blindness.

In order to assure that younger Veterans and Servicemembers who are transitioning from active duty receive seamless care, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists (BROS) are assigned to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and to all VA Polytrauma Centers and facilities.

BLIND REHABILITATION SERVICE (BRS) CARE SYSTEM

BRS is a tiered system of care that aligns closely with VA optometry, ophthalmology, and the Department of Defense Vision Center of Excellence.

When basic low vision care provided in VA optometry and ophthalmology clinics is no longer sufficient, Veterans and Servicemembers may receive clinical rehabilitation care in BRS low vision clinics, outpatient blind rehabilitation clinics, and intensive inpatient blind rehabilitation centers.

Severely disabled blind Veterans receive life-long case management by Visual Impairment Service Team (VIST) Coordinators. They may also receive in-home and community services by Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists (BROS) in many areas.

The treatment setting depends upon on the severity of vision loss, and the intensity of Veterans' and Servicemembers' needs.

VIST COORDINATOR

The VIST Coordinator is often the first BRS contact. The VIST Coordinator is a case manager who:

- Coordinates services and assurance of VA benefits for severely disabled Veterans and Servicemembers who are visually impaired.
- Teams with military medical treatment facility case managers to identify and to provide seamless transition for Servicemembers with visual impairment.



- Provides case management for visually impaired Servicemembers at VA Polytrauma Centers.
- Refers Veterans and Servicemembers for vision and blind rehabilitation according to their needs and goals.
- Educates family members and assures their inclusion.

Veterans and Servicemembers can receive follow-up care in the BRS program best suited for their needs.



(Photo courtesy of Bruce Bowens)

BLIND REHABILITATION OUTPATIENT SPECIALIST (BROS)

BROS are multi-skilled blindness professionals who provide a wide array of rehabilitation services for Veterans and Servicemembers.

Services include functional assessments, visual skills training, daily living training, and orientation and mobility training. BROS work in the most appropriate setting, including home, VA site, college, work site,

long-term care or assisted living environments.

INPATIENT BLIND REHABILITATION

The inpatient blind rehabilitation centers provide comprehensive, individualized inpatient rehabilitation for severely disabled Veterans and Servicemembers at VA Medical Centers.

A multidisciplinary team of rehabilitation specialists works with nurses, psychologists, social workers and eye care specialists. The rehabilitation programs help patients to achieve independence, adjust to blindness, and develop a healthy and realistic outlook.

VISUAL IMPAIRMENT SERVICES OUTPATIENT REHABILITATION PROGRAM (VISOR)

The VISOR programs are multi-day outpatient, blind rehabilitation services for local Veterans and Servicemembers, and for those who require outpatient lodging to attend. VISOR staff provides blindness and low vision rehabilitation for patients who are able to self-medicate and are independent in basic activities of daily living, or who have a caregiver with them.

LOW VISION CLINICS

Low vision clinic staff includes optometrists, ophthalmologists, and Blind Rehabilitation

Specialists. They provide care for patients with vision loss, and who have remaining vision that is useful for daily tasks. Patients receive low vision clinical examinations, assistive technology to enhance remaining vision, and visual skills training.

Advanced low vision clinics also provide instruction in orientation to the environment and safe travel.

In 2011:

•BRS VIST Coordinators' rosters included 50,812 Veterans who receive life-long case management to assure they receive all entitled benefits and care.

•BRS inpatient blind rehabilitation centers provided care for 2,085 severely disabled blind Veterans and Servicemembers.

•BRS Outpatient blind rehabilitation clinics provided care for 5,059 Veterans and Servicemembers.

•BRS BROS provided rehabilitation to 20,325 patients in their homes, communities, and medical facilities.

