



North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System

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Daniel Henry, Public Affairs Officer, NF/SGVHS

Daniel.Henry@va.gov

352-548-6648

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FCC Chairman Visits Lecanto CBOC for Demonstration of VA Telehealth Capabilities



LECANTO, FL — To see the impact of utilizing the latest telecommunications technologies on the lives of every day Americans, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Ajit Pai joined VA officials, staff and Veterans for a demonstration of telehealth capabilities at the Lecanto community based outpatient clinic (CBOC).



The visit, part of the chairman's mission to encourage the expansion of broadband and digital communications development and implementation to underserved communities throughout the country, served as a showcase for an area that the VA is utilizing more every day to increase access to care for Veterans across the country.

The Lecanto CBOC, located in rural Citrus County Florida, sees more than 8,000 Veterans annually. The adoption and expansion of telehealth technology has served to broaden the scope of services available to many Veterans who have a challenging time traveling to

larger VA health care facilities in Gainesville, Lake City and The Villages.

According to Pai, visiting Lecanto and gaining an understanding of both the successes associated with marrying telehealth technology to broadband access as well as the challenges associated with delivery helps him more easily convey to the public, government and industry the value of commitment to invest more heavily into rural areas.

"The Lecanto Veterans Affairs clinic is using the Internet and innovative ways to improve the lives of veterans in North Florida," Pai said. "That is of course important for the communities in North Florida but it is also critical in informing the efforts of the FCC. One of the reasons why closing the digital divide is our top priority is because we recognize that communities on the wrong side of the divide, particularly rural communities, will

Images from top: Deborah Scher, executive advisor to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (center photo), reacts as she realizes she's connected to a telehealth appointment via her phone. She's joined (left to right) by Christina Jewell and Lotti Morse, telehealth technicians, and Ajit Pai, FCC Chairman. FCC Chairman Pai talks to a local reporter about his visit to the Lecanto CBOC.
Photo Credit: Dan Henry, NF/SGVHS Public Affairs



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not be able to be as healthy and strong as they should be. Lecanto shows us what is possible, and we want the possibility to become reality across the United States.”

While on the visit Pai and Deborah Scher, executive advisor to the Secretary of Veterans affairs, put themselves in the shoes of a Veteran experiencing a telehealth medical appointment and gained a sense of what an electronic encounter is in real time. Lotti Morse and Christina Jewell, telehealth clinical technicians assigned to

Lecanto, walked them through the set-up process and could point out the ease of use of the system. They also noted the technology’s shortcomings if Veterans do not have good cellular service as the screen may become pixelated or the call may be dropped.

For Scher, the ability to showcase VA’s strength in telehealth through the passionate staff at Lecanto both spoke volumes to the organizations commitment to bringing health care to Veterans ‘where they are’ as well as to the alignment with FCCs overarching goal of bridging the digital divide for underserved communities.

“The VA is leading the country in telehealth, having delivered over 800,000 telehealth visits to more than 336,000 veterans in the past year,” Scher noted. “Lecanto’s telehealth program is a stellar example of the VA providing veterans in rural areas with faster access to state of the art care by connecting veterans to specialist physicians regardless of location in a set-up that is more convenient for veterans and their families.”

Scher pointed out that Lecanto’s success is a testament to the work of the staff in developing strong relationships with their patients and eventually expanding the range of services the clinic provides – both there and throughout the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System (NF/SGVHS). Because of this hard work, the Lecanto team has been able to expand the range of services provided to Veterans - offering access to 27 medical specialties as well as physical therapy, art, dance and music therapy, all through telehealth. This commitment to expanding technology to serve Veterans goes hand in hand with the FCC’s mission she said.

“VA and the FCC share a common commitment to bridge the digital divide and plan to work together to find solutions that will accelerate the availability of internet access and innovative telehealth solutions to areas without coverage,” Scher said. “By fostering collaboration between our two agencies at all levels – from national office to field staff –and developing policies and programs that support the strategic goals of the FCC and VA, we will work together to expand telehealth resources and ensure that Veterans across the country have reliable access to internet services. We will invite other agencies, foundations and corporations who care about these issues to join us in this mission.”



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Pai, whose current travels to communities to advocate for greater broadband access – or ‘digital opportunity’ as he calls it - has included stops throughout the Gulf Coast including New Orleans, Alabama, Mississippi and Florida, said that being able to go where people are impacted by the decisions they make in Washington DC adds a unique and valuable perspective. Meeting Veterans and staff members in Lecanto – which facilitated more than 1,500 telehealth encounters in the last year - truly illustrated the value of ensuring broadband access to communities in need

“I was extremely impressed by what I saw in Lecanto,” Pai said. “The Veterans affairs clinic has done a tremendous job helping to realize the promise of telemedicine for those who have worn the uniform. Whether it is mental health consultations or arts and dance therapy for veterans, Lecanto is using the Internet and innovative ways to improve the lives of Veterans in North Florida.”

The North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System is one of the nation's leading VA healthcare systems, with more than 5800 medical professionals and support staff dedicated to providing high quality care annually through 14 sites of care to more than 140,000 Veterans residing in 50 counties throughout northern and central Florida and southern Georgia.

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