

# The Rural WAVE (Wellness And Veteran Engagement) Initiative: Enhancing Volunteer Opportunities through Unique Collaborations



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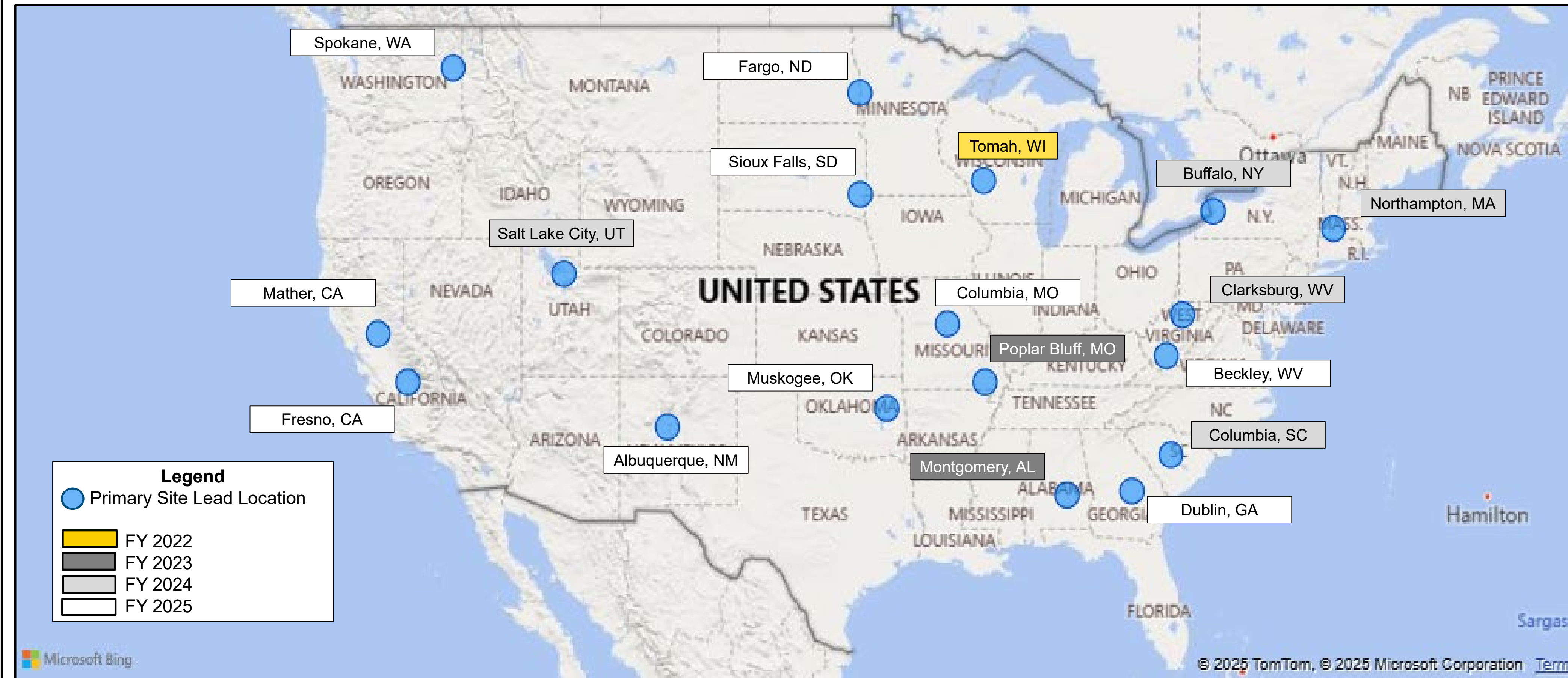
## Background

- Up to 70% of Veterans experience challenges with community reintegration.
- Volunteerism is associated with increased community connection, improved mental health, and lower suicide rates.
- Through unique collaborations, this initiative's aim is to develop and expand volunteer opportunities for Veterans in rural areas, where they may be limited.**

## Methods

- The Rural WAVE Initiative** involves collaboration between Veterans Rural Health Resource Center – Salt Lake City (**VRHRC-SLC**); Durham VA Health Systems Research, Center of Innovation to Accelerate Discovery and Practice Transformation (**ADAPT**); VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement (**CDCE**); and VHA National Center for Healthcare Advancement and Partnership (**NCHAP**).
- Sites also partner with **non-profit** and **Veteran Service Organizations** to engage rural volunteers and Veterans.
- Best practices** are rooted in team science and effective strategies for conducting partnered and community-engaged work.
- Key characteristics** of the initiative include *strengths focus* and a *peer orientation*.
- Mixed methods evaluation** of the initiative is informed by the **RE-AIM** (Reach Effectiveness Adoption Implementation Maintenance) framework and comprised of event and volunteer tracking; interviews/surveys with volunteers and VA staff; and site visits.

## Results



**Figure 1.** Primary Site Lead Locations Labeled by Fiscal Year of Inclusion (*Adapted from the Rural WAVE Power BI Report*)

Active Volunteers	Activities Events	Volunteer Hours	Total Veteran Contacts	Rural Veteran Contacts
80	142	2,022	2,539	2,466

**Table 1.** FY25 Q2 Administrative Data (*Adapted from the Rural WAVE Power BI Report*)

- 8 site leads hosted activities/events in 16 rural locations to date.
- 10 new site leads joined in FY25.
- Team-developed implementation tools, Rural Advisory team, and site mentors facilitated expansion by supporting dissemination and promoting sustainability.
- Volunteer Interviews:**
  - Sharing personal hobbies/interests, especially with Veterans, motivated participation. Volunteers felt activities are helpful for PTSD and other mental health issues.
- Staff Interviews:**
  - Appreciated the accountability fostered by regular team meetings with other sites, which encouraged making progress towards goals and sharing of ideas.
- Sites visits** reinforced these findings, provided important context, strengthened relationships, and enhanced site leadership visibility of the initiative.
- Current efforts** focus on addressing remaining barriers such as challenges related to volunteer onboarding.

## Conclusions

- Community reintegration for Veterans remains a complex challenge, involving multiple components and levels. Challenges, however, present unique opportunities for transdisciplinary teams to develop pragmatic solutions, such as rural volunteer programs.

## Implications

- The Veterans Health Administration, as a learning health system, is well positioned to enhance rural Veteran reintegration in order to strengthen interpersonal connections, renew sense of purpose and mission, and improve overall quality of life. Lessons learned may inform other rural health systems and community partners.
- CDCE will adopt Rural WAVE as part of their national programming in FY 2026, enhancing the impact of this innovative initiative.



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Rural Health



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
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