A Learning Health System Approach to Long COVID Care

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Fed Pract. 2022;39(7). Published online July 11. doi:10.12788/fp.0288

BACKGROUND

Multiple terms describe the lingering, multisystem sequelae of COVID-19 that last longer than 4 weeks: long COVID, postacute COVID-19 syndrome, post-COVID condition, postacute sequelae of COVID-19, and COVID long hauler. Common symptoms include fatigue, shortness of breath, cough, sleep disorders, brain fog or cognitive dysfunction, depression, anxiety, pain, and changes in taste or smell that impact a person’s functioning. The multisystem nature of the postacute course of COVID-19 necessitates an interdisciplinary approach to devise comprehensive and individualized care plans. Research is needed to better understand this postacute state (eg, prevalence, underlying effects, characteristics of those who experience long COVID) to establish and evaluate cost-effective treatment approaches.

Many patients who are experiencing symptoms beyond the acute course of COVID-19 have been referred to general outpatient clinics or home health, which may lack the capacity and knowledge of this novel disease to effectively manage complex long COVID cases. To address this growing need, clinicians and leadership across a variety of disciplines and settings in the VHA created a community of practice (CoP) to create a mechanism for cross-facility communication, identify gaps in care and research, and cocreate knowledge on best practices for long COVID care delivery.

In this spirit, we are embracing a learning health system (LHS) approach that uses rapid-cycle methods to integrate data and real-world experience to iteratively evaluate and adapt models of long COVID care. The learning health system approach will be critical in reimagining health care service delivery after the COVID-19 pandemic.
members to inform ongoing needs of the community and identify early successful outcomes from participation.

Learning Health System Approach
The VHA is one of the largest integrated health care systems in the United States serving more than 9 million veterans. Since 2017, the VHA has articulated a vision to become an LHS that informs and improves patient-centered care through practice-based and data-driven research (eAppendix available at doi:10.12788/fp.0288). During the early COVID-19 pandemic, an LHS approach in the VHA was critical to rapidly establishing a data infrastructure for disease surveillance, coordinating data-driven solutions, leveraging use of technology, collaborating across the globe to identify best practices, and implementing systematic responses (eg, policies, workforce adjustments).

Our long COVID CoP was developed as clinical observations and ongoing conversations with stakeholders (eg, veterans, health care practitioners [HCPs], leadership) identified a need to effectively identify and treat the growing number of veterans with long COVID. This clinical issue is compounded by the limited but emerging evidence on the clinical presentation of prolonged COVID-19 symptoms, treatment, and subsequent care pathways. The VHAs efforts and lessons learned within the lens of an LHS are applicable to other systems confronting the complex identification and management of patients with persistent and encumbering long COVID symptoms. The VHA is building upon the LHS approach to proactively prepare for and address future clinical or public health challenges that require cross-system and sector collaborations, expediency, inclusivity, and patient/family centeredness.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE
As of January 25, 2022, our workgroup consisted of 128 VHA employees representing 29 VHA medical centers. Members of the multidisciplinary workgroup have diverse backgrounds with HCPs from primary care (eg, physicians, nurse practitioners), rehabilitation (eg, physical therapists), specialty care (eg, pulmonologists, physiatrists), mental health (eg, psychologists), and complementary and integrated health/Whole Health services (eg, practitioners of services such as yoga, tai chi, mindfulness, acupuncture). Members also include clinical, operations, and research leadership at local, regional, and national VHA levels. Our first objective as a large, diverse group was to establish shared goals, which included: (1) determining efficient communication pathways; (2) identifying gaps in care or research; and (3) cocreating knowledge to provide solutions to identified gaps.

Communication Mechanisms
Our first goal was to create an efficient mechanism for cross-facility communication. The initial CoP was formed in April 2021 and the first virtual meeting focused on reaching a consensus regarding the best way to communicate and proceed. We agreed to convene weekly at a consistent time, created a standard agenda template, and elected a lead facilitator of meeting proceedings. In addition, a member of the CoP recorded and took extensive meeting notes, which were later distributed to the entire CoP to accommodate varying schedules and ability to attend live meetings. Approximately 20 to 30 participants attend the meetings in real-time.

To consolidate working documents, information, and resources in one location, we created a platform to communicate via a Microsoft Teams channel. All CoP members are given access to the folders and allowed to add to the growing library of resources. Resources include clinical assessment and note templates for electronic documentation of care, site-specific process maps, relevant literature on screening and interventions identified by practice members, and meeting notes along with the recordings. A chat feature alerts CoP members to questions posed by other members. Any resources or information shared on the chat discussion are curated by CoP leaders to disseminate to all members. Importantly, this platform allowed us to communicate efficiently within the VHA organization by creating a centralized space for documents and the ability to correspond with all or select members of the CoP. Additional VHA employees can easily be referred and request access.

To increase awareness of the CoP, expand reach, and diversify perspectives, every participant was encouraged to invite colleagues
and stakeholders with interest or experience in long COVID care to join. While patients are not included in this CoP, we are working closely with the VHA user experience workgroup (many members overlap) that is gathering patient and caregiver perspectives on their COVID-19 experience and long COVID care. Concurrently, CoP members and leadership facilitate communication and set up formal collaborations with other non-VHA health care systems to create an intersystem network of collaboration for long COVID care. This approach further enhances the speed at which we can work together to share lessons learned and stay up-to-date on emerging evidence surrounding long COVID care.

Identifying Gaps in Care and Research
Our second goal was to identify gaps in care or knowledge to inform future research and quality improvement initiatives, while also creating a foundation to cocreate knowledge about safe, effective care management of the novel long COVID sequelae. To translate knowledge, we must first identify and understand the gaps between the current, best available evidence and current care practices or policies impacting that delivery. As such, the structured meeting agenda and facilitated meeting discussions focused on understanding current clinical decision making and the evidence base. We shared VHA evidence synthesis reports and living rapid reviews on complications following COVID-19 illness (ie, major organ damage and posthospitalization health care use) that provided an objective evidence base on common long COVID complications.

Since long COVID is a novel condition, we drew from literature in similar patient populations and translated that information in the context of our current knowledge of this unique syndrome. For example, we discussed the predominant and persistent symptom of fatigue post-COVID. In particular, the CoP discussed challenges in identifying and treating post-COVID fatigue, which is often a vague symptom with multiple or interacting etiologies that require a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach. As such, we reviewed, adapted, and translated identification and treatment strategies from the literature on chronic fatigue syndrome to patients with post-COVID syndrome. We continue to work collaboratively and engage the appropriate stakeholders to provide input on the gaps to prioritize targeting.

Cocreate Knowledge
Our third goal was to cocreate knowledge regarding the care of patients with long COVID. To accomplish this, our structured meetings and communication pathways invited members to share experiences on the who (delivers and receives care), what (type of care or HCPs), when (identification of post-COVID and access), and how (eg, telehealth) of care to patients post-COVID. As part of the workgroup, we identified and shared resources on standardized, facility-level practices to reduce variability across the VHA system. These resources included intake/assessment forms, care processes, and batteries of tests/ measures used for screening and assessment. The knowledge obtained from outside the CoP and cocreated within is being used to inform data-driven tools to support and evaluate care for patients with long COVID. As such, members of the workgroup are in the formative stages of participating in quality improvement innovation pilots to test technologies and processes designed to improve and validate long COVID care pathways. These technologies include screening tools, clinical decision support tools, and population health management technologies. In addition, we are developing a formal collaboration with the VHA Office of Research and Development to create standardized intake forms across VHA long COVID clinics to facilitate both clinical monitoring and research.

SURVEYS
The US Department of Veterans Affairs Central Office collaborated with our workgroup to draft an initial set of survey questions designed to understand how each VHA facility defines, identifies, and provides care to veterans experiencing post-COVID sequelae. The 41-question survey was distributed through regional directors and chief medical officers at 139 VHA facilities in August 2021. One hundred nineteen responses (86%) were received. Sixteen facilities indicated they had established programs and 26 facilities were considering a program. Our CoP had
representing from the 16 facilities with established programs indicating the deep and well-connected nature of our grassroots efforts to bring together stakeholders to learn as part of a CoP.

A separate, follow-up survey generated responses from 18 facilities and identified the need to capture evolving innovations and to develop smaller workstreams (eg, best practices, electronic documentation templates, pathway for referrals, veteran engagement, outcome measures). The survey not only exposed ongoing challenges to providing long COVID care, but importantly, outlined the ways in which CoP members were leveraging community knowledge and resources to inform innovations and processes of care changes at their specific sites. Fourteen of 18 facilities with long COVID programs in place explicitly identified the CoP as a resource they have found most beneficial when employing such innovations. Specific innovations reported included changes in care delivery, engagement in active outreach with veterans and local facility, and infrastructure development to sustain local long COVID clinics (Table).

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Our CoP strives to contribute to an evidence base for long COVID care. At the system level, the CoP has the potential to impact access and continuity of care by identifying appropriate processes and ensuring that VHA patients receive outreach and an opportunity for post-COVID care. Comprehensive care requires input from HCP, clinical leadership, and operations levels. In this sense, our CoP provides an opportunity for diverse stakeholders to come together, discuss barriers to screening and delivering post-COVID care, and create an action plan to remove or lessen such barriers. Part of the process to remove barriers is to identify and support efficient resource allocation. Our CoP has worked to address issues in resource allocation (eg, space, personnel) for post-COVID care. For example, one facility is currently implementing interdisciplinary virtual post-COVID care. Another facility identified and restructured working assignments for psychologists who served in different capacities throughout the system to fill the need within the long COVID team.

At the HCP level, the CoP is currently developing workshops, media campaigns, written clinical resources, skills training, publications, and webinars/seminars with continuing medical education credits. The CoP may also provide learning and growth opportunities, such as clinical or VHA operational fellowships and research grants.

We are still in the formative stages of post-COVID care and future efforts will explore patient-centered outcomes. We are drawing on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s guidance for evaluating patients with long COVID symptoms and examining the feasibility within VHA, as well as patient perspectives on post-COVID sequelae, to

### TABLE Innovations to VHA Long COVID Care at the Local Site Level Influenced by Community of Practice Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Innovation types</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changes in care delivery</td>
<td>Dedicate one discipline as program contact person</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop specialized care pathways</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offer various visit delivery modes to patients (eg, video or phone visit)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Add clinical assessment measures (eg, headache screening)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change flow of clinic visit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engage in active outreach with veterans</td>
<td>Employ long COVID education throughout local VHA network to increase awareness of patient needs and advertise availability of long COVID program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop mechanisms for screening potential patients with long COVID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide infrastructure to sustain long COVID clinics</td>
<td>Recognize need for multidisciplinary approach to long COVID program</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop formal long COVID program consult</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attach long COVID program to a service line</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Streamline patient consults and triage</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institute weekly multidisciplinary teams meeting at local long COVID clinic sites</td>
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</tbody>
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Abbreviation: VHA, Veterans Health Administration.
ensure we are selecting assessments that measure patient-centered constructs.16

CONCLUSIONS
A VHA-wide LHS approach is identifying issues related to the identification, delivery, and evaluation of long COVID care. This long COVID CoP has developed an infrastructure for communication, identified gaps in care, and cocreated knowledge related to best current practices for post-COVID care. This work is contributing to systemwide LHS efforts dedicated to creating a culture of quality care and innovation and is a process that is transferrable to other areas of care in the VHA, as well as other health care systems. The LHS approach continues to be highly relevant as we persist through the COVID-19 pandemic and reimagine a postpandemic world.

Acknowledgments
We thank all the members of the Veterans Health Administration long COVID Community of Practice who participate in the meetings and contribute to the sharing and spread of knowledge.

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Author disclosures
This work is funded in part by the Veterans Health Administration Office of Academic Affiliations Advanced Fellowship in Clinical and Health Services Research (TPH 67-000) [AMG]; the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), grant K12HS026379 and the National Institutes of Health National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, grant KL2TR002492; the Minneapolis Center of Innovation, Center for Care Delivery and Outcomes Research (CIN 13-406) [AMG].

Disclaimer
The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Federal Practitioner, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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eAPPENDIX Conceptual Model of VHA Learning Health System Approach to Post-COVID Care

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-facility workgroup goals</th>
<th>Learning health system process</th>
<th>Potential outcomes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create a mechanism for communication</strong>&lt;br&gt;Invite stakeholders at multiple levels&lt;br&gt;Establish meeting frequency&lt;br&gt;Provide a platform to communicate&lt;br&gt;Raise awareness of the workgroup</td>
<td><strong>Practice to data</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Data to knowledge</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Knowledge to practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>SYSTEM</strong>&lt;br&gt;Equitable access to care&lt;br&gt;Continuity of care&lt;br&gt;Efficient resource allocation&lt;br&gt;Generate evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identify gaps in care</strong>&lt;br&gt;Inform research and QI initiatives&lt;br&gt;Adapt and translate evidence from similar patient populations</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PRACTITIONERS</strong>&lt;br&gt;Training opportunities&lt;br&gt;Employee satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cocreate knowledge</strong>&lt;br&gt;Share experiences&lt;br&gt;Standardize best practices&lt;br&gt;Develop/identify training resources&lt;br&gt;Inform data-driven tools to support care</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PATIENTS</strong>&lt;br&gt;Quality of life&lt;br&gt;Function&lt;br&gt;Return to work</td>
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Abbreviations: QI, quality improvement; VHA, Veterans Health Administration.