

Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made older, homebound adults with multiple chronic conditions increasingly vulnerable to contracting the virus. The United States (US) Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Foster Home (MFH) program cares for such medically complex veterans residing in the private homes of non-VA caregivers rather than institutional care settings like nursing homes. In this qualitative descriptive study, we assessed adaptations to delivering safe and effective health care during the early stages of the pandemic for veterans living in rural MFHs. From December 2020 to February 2021, we interviewed 37 VA MFH care providers by phone at 16 rural MFH programs across the US, including caregivers, program coordinators, and VA health care providers. Using both inductive and deductive approaches to thematic analysis, we identified themes reflecting adaptations to caring for rural MFH veterans, including care providers rapidly increased communication and education to MFH caregivers while prioritizing veteran safety. Telehealth visits also increased, MFH veterans were prioritized for in-home COVID-19 vaccinations, and strategies were applied to mitigate the social isolation of veterans and caregivers. The study findings illustrate the importance of clear, regular communication and intentional care coordination to ensure high-quality care for vulnerable, homebound populations during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.