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SDDVA Secretary Whitlock's March Column – Transportation Options for Veterans

Getting to and from medical appointments can be a great challenge for veterans in South Dakota. No one knew that better than Royce Loesch, past commander of American Legion Post 20 in Fort Pierre.

Loesch was aware of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Highly Rural Transportation grants and in 2015 decided to make application for, and was awarded, a grant for veterans transportation in Stanley County. Loesch's "leave no veteran behind" attitude kept him focused and before he knew it, he and his team had applied for grants for 35 counties in South Dakota.

The VA awards Highly Rural Transportation Grants (HRT) to states and service organizations to assist veterans who live in highly rural areas, with their transportation needs to and from the VA medical centers, community-based outpatient clinics, VA Community Care facilities, and/or other approved medical appointments. The VA defines highly rural as less than seven people per square mile.

Free transportation is available to veterans living in the following counties Aurora, Bennett, Buffalo, Butte, Campbell, Clark, Corson, Custer, Day, Dewey, Edmunds, Fall River, Faulk, Gregory, Haakon, Hand, Harding, Hyde, Jackson, Jerauld, Jones, Kingsbury, Lyman, Marshall, McPherson, Mellette, Miner, Perkins, Potter, Sanborn, Spink, Stanley, Sully, Tripp, and Ziebach. Partners are currently working to get Todd and Oglala Lakota included in this program.

Veterans in the highly rural counties in eastern South Dakota can contact River Cities Public Transit (605.945.2360) to schedule their transportation to medical appointments. Veterans in highly rural counties in western South Dakota should contact Prairie Hills Transit (605.642.6668).

What is unique about this transportation program is that veterans travel free, vehicles are wheelchair accessible, family members can travel with veteran to medical appointments for free, and the program is locally supported.

Although, the HRT Grants don't benefit all our veterans, there are other resources available to assist veterans. Additional resources for veteran transportation to

medical appointments can be found on our website at:
<https://vetaffairs.sd.gov/resources/Transportation.pdf>

Wars, conflicts, and battles have been fought throughout the years and continue today. It is important that we complete our promise to take care of the men and women who served, including assisting with transportation to and from medical appointments.

Greg Whitlock, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs