



DID YOU KNOW?

The VHA's Fourth Mission Saves Lives in National Emergencies

Most Americans assume the veterans' healthcare system serves only veterans. But that is not the case. In addition to providing high quality healthcare to more than nine million veterans, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) serves us all.

In fact, the VHA's [Fourth Mission](#) is to serve as backup to the civilian healthcare system in times of war, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and other emergencies—from pandemics and mass shootings to hurricanes, tornados, and wildfires. The VHA's medical center in Puerto Rico, for instance, was the only functioning hospital on the island during and after Hurricane Maria. And it was open to non-veterans.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, [VHA staff were embedded with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Agency officials also ran the country's 65 emergency coordinating centers, while medical staff were deployed to support and supplement private sector hospitals in pandemic hot spots like New York and New Jersey. (A state-by-state breakdown of this assistance is available [here](#).) The VHA also took over state veterans' homes in North Carolina and elsewhere when poor, for-profit management compromised care.

The VHA more frequently [opened new units](#) to care specifically for COVID patients than private sector facilities. Unlike the private sector, the VHA also did not furlough staff during the pandemic. Because the system has no profit motive, it could therefore best protect patients and staff—as well as the wider community—during this public health emergency.

Unlike private sector hospitals and physician practices, the VHA had no hesitation when canceling elective (and lucrative) surgeries and non-emergency appointments during the pandemic. "I was immediately able to cancel total knee replacements or other elective surgeries," a VHA hospital chief of [staff reported](#) at the height of the pandemic. "When I talked to colleagues in the for-profit sector, they were much more reluctant to do this because they would lose money. So, they continued to perform treatments even when it wasn't safe. I feel very lucky to be working in the VA today."

