

Department of Veterans Affairs



VA Accomplishments

2001 to Present

Office of the Assistant Secretary for
Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
September 17, 2004

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2001 to Present
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VA Accomplishments

2001 to Present

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has changed dramatically in the past several years. VA treats more veterans in more places than ever before. The department has begun the largest and most extensive restructuring of its health care system in history. The claims backlog has been significantly reduced; claims processing has nearly doubled; waiting times for appointments have decreased and research has yielded some promising new finds. The following is a look at how far we have come in just a short period of time.

Health Care

VA health care means more than operating the largest integrated health care system in the world. The department is involved in every facet of medical care delivery, research, and development.

Medical Innovations

Since 2001, VA medical research and health care management have:

- Discovered a potential new therapy for chronic pain.
- Identified a previously unknown nerve-cell dysfunction that may revolutionize treatment of multiple sclerosis.
- Found dramatically higher levels of the hormone ghrelin in obese patients who dieted in comparison to those who underwent gastric-bypass surgery. The findings may explain why keeping off weight through diet and exercise is difficult for many people.
- Helped to develop an oral drug that halts the deadly action of the smallpox virus in mice. The drug is now being tested in humans.
- Pioneered, and continued to advance, the use of functional electrical stimulation to restore motor function to patients with paralysis and other disorders.
- Identified a synthetic hormone that reverses bone loss in mice without affecting the reproductive system. The finding may lead to new ways to prevent and treat osteoporosis.
- Showed that a new, expensive schizophrenia drug offered little advantage over an older, pennies-a-day medication.
- Found that exercise and cognitive behavioral therapy provide modest but significant improvement of physical and mental functioning, cognitive symptoms, fatigue and distress in Gulf War veterans reporting serious health problems.
- Determined that proper intake of vitamin D and cereal fiber are among the best ways to prevent colon polyps that may lead to cancer.
- Found that colonoscopy is superior to more widely used screening methods for colon cancer.
- Found that patients with osteoarthritis of the knee who underwent mock arthroscopic surgery were just as likely to report pain relief as those who underwent the real procedure.

- Showed that elderly patients who receive flu shots are less likely to die or be hospitalized for flu complications, such as pneumonia, cardiac disease and stroke than those who do not.
- Established the federal government's first mandatory external accreditation program for protection of human research participants.

Access

As more veterans turn to VA for care, access to the system becomes critical. Over the past four years:

- VA has established 130 new community-based health care sites and under the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) initiative, another 156 will be added, bringing the total to 1010.
- The number of veterans who live within 30 minutes of a VA medical facility has increased to 87 percent.
- Enrollment has increased to 7.6 million, up from 4.8 million.
- The number of patients treated increased by 967,000 to 5 million, enabled by a 35 percent increase in the health care budget.
- The number of outpatient visits increased from 40 million to 51 million.
- The number of prescriptions filled per year increased from 86 million to 108 million.
- The department developed a 20-year plan to modernize facilities and improve access (Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services, CARES). CARES is the delivery of 21st Century medicine in 21st Century facilities.

Waiting times

A primary complaint among VA patients four years ago was unacceptably long waiting times for access to VA health care. VA today has:

- Reduced the number of veterans waiting to schedule an appointment for primary care and specialty clinics from more than 300,000 to less than 5,000.
- Reduced the time before the next available appointment from an average of 60 days to 24 days for primary care and from 62 days to 30 days for specialty care.
- Begun filling non-VA prescriptions for some veterans not scheduled for care within 30 days.
- Required priority scheduling of care for severely disabled service-connected veterans.

Quality

VA has quietly become a leader in the provision of safe, quality health care. The VA health care system today:

- Is implementing VistA-Office Electronic Health Record, one of the world's most sophisticated systems for keeping electronic health records. This valuable tool will soon be easily available to doctors, hospitals and clinics around the country.
- Launched MyHealtheVet, a web-based application that allows veterans and their families to come together on-line with physicians to optimize health. A pilot program allows participating veterans access to their medical records and other health information from their homes.
- Established a telehealth initiative, using electronic information and communication technology to provide access to care for veterans living in areas far from VA facilities.
- Implemented a Bar Code Medication Administration system to increase efficiency and safety of medication administration. The system uses bar coding on the patient and the medications to ensure proper medicines go to the right patient every time. VA was awarded the 2002 Pinnacle Award by the American Pharmaceutical Association Foundation and the Health Care Quality Alliance for this initiative.
- Leads the nation for all eighteen health care quality indicators for managed health care organizations. VA had the best scores in the health care industry in 18 of 18 measurements, including administration of medications known as beta-blockers for heart attack patients, breast and cervical cancer screening, cholesterol screening, immunizations, tobacco screening and counseling and multiple aspects of diabetes care.
- Sets the benchmark for patient satisfaction in the American Customer Satisfaction Index for Inpatient, Outpatient and Pharmacy care. VHA inpatient and outpatient pharmacy services led all segments of the health industry in patient satisfaction, according to the American Customer Satisfaction index developed by the University of Michigan Business School.
- Is recognized as one of the best in the nation by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) for its integrated health information system. The system ties together patient information in the health care environment so that every provider can access any data needed for a single patient. The framework of the system also allows for using performance measures to improve quality.
- Maintains Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) quality survey scores exceeding the national average (93 to 91).

Health Care and Special Needs Programs for Homeless Veterans

VA operates an extensive program to provide health care services to homeless veterans providing direct health care services to 100,000 homeless veterans annually. Since 2001, VA has increased homeless veteran specific spending by nearly double, to \$69.4 million. In addition, in FY 2003, VA, HUD and HHS developed a collaborative program that provides permanent housing with supportive services to chronically homeless people totaling another \$35 million annually. VA community service provider grants have now been expanded to all 50 states.

National Rehabilitation Special Events

Each year VA sponsors four national events for U.S. military veterans served by VA medical facilities nationwide. Each program enhances the physical, social, and emotional well-being of veterans who participate. This year VA signed an agreement with the National Senior Games that automatically qualifies veterans who compete in the VA National Veterans Wheelchair Games for the National Senior Games, thus expanding therapeutic experiences for these veterans.

Benefits

Compensation and Pension

Another critical complaint of VA in the past was the length of time it took to resolve claims for veterans benefits. This issue has been addressed aggressively since 2001, with the following results:

- In FY 2003, more than 1.6 million veterans and dependents received decisions on their disability claims and on claims not requiring a rating decision. VA added approximately 256,000 beneficiaries to its compensation and pension rolls, bringing the total number of beneficiaries of VA compensation and pension to 3.38 million. Compensation and pension payments last year totaled nearly \$26.4 billion.
- VA's inventory of rating-related claims was substantially cut from a high of 432,000 in 2002 to 253,000 at the end of FY 2003.
- The average processing time for disability claims was reduced by 33 percent, from 233 days in 2002 to 156 days in September 2003.
- The percentage of claims in VA inventory pending more than six months was reduced from 48 percent in 2002 to 18 percent at the end of FY 2003.
- The average age of the claims in VA's pending inventory was reduced by 45 percent, from 203 days in January 2002 to 111 days in September 2003.
- Output of claims decisions increased from an average of 40,000 per month in 2001 to an average of 69,000 in 2003, and increase of nearly 73 percent.
- The quality of rating decisions significantly improved. Today 86 percent of VA's ratings are completed accurately.

Military Services Program/OEF-OIF

VA is addressing the needs of our newest veterans even before they leave military service with a program we call "Seamless Transition." The following services highlight recent VA efforts:

- Since October 2002, VA military services coordinators have conducted nearly 10,000 briefings that were attended by 280,000 active duty personnel and their families residing in the United States. VA also conducted about 800 briefings attended by over 20,000 servicemembers based overseas.
- This fiscal year (October 2003 – May 2004), VA representatives conducted more than 900 pre and post deployment briefings attended by more than 70,000 Reserve/Guard

members. Returning Reserve/Guard members can also elect to attend the formal three-day Transition Assistance Program workshops.

- VA provided Transition Assistance Program briefings aboard the USS Constellation, the USS Enterprise, and the USS George Washington on their return from the Persian Gulf to the United States.
- Outreach visits are made to the family members and the application process for dependency and indemnity compensation benefits has been streamlined. Claims processing is centralized to the VA Regional Office and Insurance Center in Philadelphia, which processes in-service death claims within 48 hours of receipt of all required documents.
- VA staff members are assigned full-time to work bedside with the severely wounded patients at both the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC and the Bethesda Naval Medical Center in Maryland. Similar teams work with seriously injured patients and family members at Eisenhower, Brooke, and Madigan Army Medical Centers. As of July 22, 2004, 3,041 hospitalized returning servicemembers have been provided information and assistance at these facilities.
- Identified 166,334 separated or retired servicemembers (including Reserve/Guard) with service in Operations Iraqi Freedom and/or Enduring Freedom, of which 26,633 have filed disability compensation claims.
- Any soldier returning stateside may go to any VA medical center to report physical ailments he or she believes are related to their service in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. They will receive medical treatment for two years without cost or for all time for service-connected medical conditions.

Benefits Outreach for Homeless Veterans

VA is the lead department in helping the homeless. Through the first nine months of this fiscal year, VA Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinators contacted 2,700 shelters and 3,250 other agencies dealing with homeless individuals. More than 6,000 homeless veterans were referred to VA and/or the Department of Labor for assistance. More than 23,000 homeless veterans sought assistance from VA regional offices and more than 40,000 formerly homeless veterans are now receiving benefits.

Direct Services

Direct communication is the key to ensuring quality service to veterans. Recent efforts include:

- In the first three quarters of FY 2004, Veterans Services Representatives answered more than 4.4 million telephone inquiries, conducted 700,000 personal interviews, and responded to almost 364,000 letters.
- VA's Fiduciary Program appoints payees for incompetent beneficiaries and conducts follow up field examinations to check on the welfare and continued suitability of the beneficiary arrangement. Field examiners met with 36,000 beneficiaries and 16,000 reports were subsequently analyzed by auditors for both appropriate expenditures and protection of the remaining funds.

Education

VA education benefits have always been one of the most popular and rewarding veterans benefits. Delivery of these benefits has improved greatly. In the past four years:

- VA added 111,000 new veterans, dependents and survivors to the education beneficiary rolls last year, bringing the total currently receiving education benefits to 473,000. Annual payments totaled \$2.1 billion. VA served 16 percent more trainees in FY 2003 than in FY 2001. Through the first two quarters of FY 2004, the number of active trainees is up an additional 4.7 percent from FY 2003 levels.
- Education claims decisions increased 23 percent, from a monthly average of 84,000 in FY 2001 to an average of 103,000 in FY 2003. The average monthly output in FY 2004 through May was 101,000. For the same period in FY 2003, it was 99,000.
- Over the last two fiscal years (2002 & 2003), the average processing time for education benefits was reduced from 43 days to 23 days (first enrollment) and 24 days to 12 days (reenrollment).
- VA celebrated the 60th Anniversary of the GI Bill of Rights. Since the inception of this program, 21.5 million veterans have received education and training benefits.

Insurance

VA is one of the largest providers of life insurance in the nation. Recent achievements include:

- Last year an additional 621,000 individuals obtained new insurance coverage totaling \$103 billion. At the end of FY 2003, more than 7.7 million individuals were insured for a total of \$745 billion.
- All Servicemembers Group Life Insurance claims arising from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom are paid within two days of receipt of necessary documents.
- A special program of telephone and mail outreach to recently separated severely disabled veterans resulted in \$83.5 million in life insurance coverage that would not otherwise have been granted.

Loan Guaranty

The VA Home Loan Guaranty program provides veterans with options for buying a home that would not otherwise be available to them. A popular program that helped build middle America, the latest activities include:

- Last year VA guaranteed approximately 490,000 home loans that amounted to more than \$63 billion. From the beginning of this fiscal year through May 2004, 253,467 loans totaling \$32.9 billion have been guaranteed.
- Specially Adapted Housing Grants totaling \$20 million were provided to about 500 severely disabled veterans in FY 2003.

- In response to Hurricanes Charley and Frances in Florida, VA is working with lenders to establish a moratorium on foreclosures in the affected areas for veterans with VA home loan guarantees; making VA home loan representatives available to provide financial counseling to veterans affected by the hurricane; and offering foreclosed properties in Florida to the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to temporarily house hurricane victims.

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program was designed to ensure that disabled veterans could find meaningful work to help them support their families and live dignified lives. Last year:

- Nearly 65,000 disabled veterans applied for vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits last year, of which almost 37,000 were found to be entitled.
- More than 55,000 disabled veterans participated in a VA rehabilitation program during the year and another 15,000 were in the evaluation and planning stages of their program at year's end.
- Approximately 9,600 disabled veterans were successfully rehabilitated in FY 2003.

National Cemeteries

Dignified burial in an honored place with perpetual care is one of the most treasured of veterans benefits. Since 2001, VA has initiated the largest expansion since the Civil War. Among recent activity:

- In 2001, VA dedicated a new cemetery at Ft. Sill, OK. Five more will be completed in 2005.
- VA's new budget includes funds for advance planning for six additional national cemeteries, bringing the total to 11 by 2009.
- With dedication of a new state veterans cemetery in Boise, ID, every state now has an official national or state veterans cemetery.
- Remain on course to complete "National Shrine" commitment to improve appearance of National Cemeteries in five years.
- Implemented a Nationwide Grave Locator on the Internet making it easier and faster for the public to get answers about veterans interred in cemeteries across the country.
- Put on the web 3.2 million records of veterans buried in 120 National Cemeteries, Arlington and numerous State Veterans Cemeteries.
- All future National Cemetery interments will be accessible on the Internet.

VA Native American Outreach

Always among the most patriotic of veterans, Native American veterans are also some of those most in need, and most difficult to locate. New VA efforts include:

- Established Native American Tribal governments as a targeted priority for funding under the Homeless Veterans Grant and Per Diem programs.
- Established a model Indian Health Service (IHS) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Memorandum of Understanding to enhance collaboration between VA, IHS and Native American Tribal governments.
- Supported enactment of HR 2983 - a bill to permit Native American Tribal Governments to apply for veterans cemetery grants.

Outreach to Former Prisoners of War

Of the 45,000 former POWs alive today, most in their 80s and 90s, some 11,000 have never come to VA for benefits. While former POWs have always received priority for VA health care and benefits, a renewed effort is being made to identify these veterans and encourage them to apply for VA benefits. Veterans service organizations, state veterans homes directors and VA staff have been asked to screen veterans with whom they make contact to determine if they might fall into this group. A new brochure has been developed and widely distributed, camera ready NAPS articles have been made available to publications nationwide, the former POW web site has been upgraded, the study of former prisoners of war updated and PSAs provided for POW/MIA observance opportunities.