

OTHER SIGNIFICANT ACHIEVEMENTS

In addition to the accomplishments associated with our key performance goals, the Department recorded many other notable achievements during FY 2000. The following summary of accomplishments, organized by VA's strategic and enabling goals, reflects our recent progress in providing accessible, timely, high-quality, and courteous service to veterans.

Strategic Goal 1: Restore the capability of disabled veterans to the greatest extent possible and improve the quality of their lives and that of their families.

- VA hosted 200 "stand downs" in 47 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, nearly doubling the number of past years. Stand downs are traditionally held before the onset of winter to provide homeless veterans with warm clothing, medical screenings, and other assistance.
- VA awarded nearly \$11.5 million in grants to 65 public and private non-profit groups to develop or expand programs to assist homeless veterans. These grants provide up to 65 percent of the cost of acquiring or renovating facilities that will be used for housing or service centers, or for procuring a van to transport veterans to needed services.
- VA is the only federal agency that provides substantial hands-on assistance directly to homeless persons. In FY 2000, VA dedicated nearly \$150 million to its specialized homeless programs, including health care, rehabilitation, outreach, and counseling programs.
- VA is the Nation's largest provider of care to individuals infected with HIV. VA treats about 18,000 HIV patients per year. As of

FY 2000, the Immunology Case Registry clinical database on HIV information housed data on nearly 50,000 patients with HIV. This registry is used as a tool to continually improve HIV care across all VA settings. In addition, VA conducted multiple HIV clinical update conferences to educate VA clinicians about advances in treatment.

- Nationally, the number of inpatients discharged with a mental illness diagnosis grew from 28,000 in FY 1998 to 47,000 in FY 2000. Despite this dramatic increase, almost all VISNs showed clear upward trends in the percent of patients provided follow-up care within 30 days of discharge. The share of 30-day follow-up after hospitalization for mental illness improved from 72 percent in FY 1998 to 83 percent in FY 2000. The 1999 national average for private sector HMOs reported by the National Committee on Quality Assurance was 70 percent.
- Through the combined efforts of VHA and VBA, the Department met its internal goal of completing medical exams associated with claims for compensation and pension benefits in an average of 35 days.

Strategic Goal 2: Ensure a smooth transition for veterans from active military service to civilian life.

- VA and DoD are providing a new facility at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to ease the transition from active duty to civilian life. At the facility, departing military personnel can apply for veterans' benefits before they actually leave the service. In the past, departing service members had to have a physical exam performed by an active-duty physician before leaving the service, then

another exam when they applied for veterans' benefits and services. They also had to apply for benefits in the state where they planned to live, a process that could take several months. At the new Camp Lejeune facility, the process has been shortened to 25 days, and everything can be done at that site.

- Approximately 70 percent of the 279,900 beneficiaries who used VA education benefits during FY 2000 qualified under the provisions of the MGIB; reservists accounted for nearly 18 percent; the program for certain eligible dependents of veterans accounted for about 11 percent.
- A study of VA's property management function has begun, and involves the joint efforts of internal program experts and contractor assistance. The study will determine the best practices in the industry and the most cost-efficient source of providing these services, such as the acquisition, inventory management, and distribution of medical and surgical supplies inside the medical center. The project, scheduled for completion in FY 2001, will include a decision regarding whether the property management work should remain in-house or be contracted out.

Strategic Goal 3: Honor and serve veterans in life and memorialize them in death for their sacrifices on behalf of the Nation.

- VA has taken the lead in National Patient Safety Partnership efforts to increase awareness of the need for appropriate measures to alleviate potential risks. In collaboration with a public-private consortium of organizations, VA developed new safety strategies and processes to improve patient safety and prevent future health care errors. About 3 of every 4 employees in VHA received 40 or more

hours of continuing education; 54 percent had 20 or more hours of education specifically on patient safety.

- Hepatitis C infection is a major concern for VA. During FY 2000, VA screened about 386,500 veterans for Hepatitis C. Of this total, about 4,500 patients tested positive and began therapy.
- In FY 2000, all 22 VISNs put in place telephone care access for veterans at least 8 hours a day, 5 days a week.
- Smoking is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States, resulting in more than 400,000 deaths a year. Research indicates that advice from a physician is one of the more effective anti-smoking interventions developed to date. In FY 1996, 33 percent of current smokers' medical charts documented a physician's advice to stop smoking (based on counseling once annually). In FY 2000, the rate rose to 59 percent (based on counseling three times a year).
- VA embarked on a new strategic planning process, the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) program, to improve access and quality of health care services to veterans by realigning capital assets.
- In FY 2000, the VA insurance program covered more than 4.5 million individuals, with coverage totaling more than \$451 billion.
- The National Defense Authorization Act of 2000, Public Law 106-65, requires DoD to provide military funeral honors for all eligible veterans, upon request. A military funeral honors ceremony consists of the

folding and presentation of the American flag and the playing of Taps. A detail to perform honors consists of two or more uniformed members of the Armed Forces, including Reserve Component members, with at least one member from the military service in which the deceased veteran served.

- VA provided over 327,000 headstones and markers for the graves of eligible persons in national, state, and other public and private cemeteries. Over 322,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates, conveying the Nation's gratitude for the veteran's service and signed by the President of the United States, were issued to veterans' next of kin and other loved ones.
- As we strive to increase efficiency through the use of modern information technology, VA encourages other federal and state veterans cemeteries to place their orders for headstones and markers directly into AMAS-R, NCA's electronic monument ordering system. In FY 2000, 88 percent of the monuments for other federal and state veterans cemeteries were ordered electronically, far exceeding our target of 75 percent.

Strategic Goal 4: Contribute to the public health, socioeconomic well being and history of the Nation.

- VA's efforts to advance knowledge about the elderly and improve care for seniors include identifying the unique characteristics of the aging process and developing strategies to treat or prevent age-related health problems. Scientists have focused on the different nutritional needs of older adults, treatment and prevention of frailty, immobility and falls, and end-of-life issues.

- Many individuals with amputations across the shin or thigh lack endurance because of the extreme effort simply to walk with today's prosthetic limbs. To combat this problem, VA researchers developed an artificial muscle and tendon to replace the lost musculature of the lower limb. The resulting powered prosthetic limb, which will enter clinical testing soon, is expected to reduce patient fatigue and produce greater propulsive forces for walking.
- A VA research initiative involving microcomputer technology will modernize the design of electric-powered upper limb prostheses. VA researchers are developing a position-sensitive controller that will improve functional performance, fitting flexibility, and ease of operation. By providing sensory feedback from the prosthesis to the amputee, the new controller gives the amputee a better feel for the position of the prosthetic limb in space. This important research by VA will help assure better prostheses and better controllers for all upper-limb amputees.
- VA researchers are working toward understanding the biological causes of sensory loss, restoring or improving lost function for affected individuals, and improving health services and rehabilitation aids.
- The Florida National Cemetery received the prestigious Hammer Award for its involvement in the Reclaimed Water Project. Together with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, the Florida Department of Corrections, Withlocooche River Basin Board, and King Engineering Associates, Inc., the Florida National Cemetery found a creative solution to the problem of providing sufficient water to irrigate the national cemetery grounds by using reclaimed water from nearby prison water treatment plants.

The cemetery gained the nutrient-rich water needed, the prison gained a solution for disposing its excess reclaimed water, the community gained protection for its natural water source, and veterans gained the assurance that their cemetery would continue to be maintained as a national shrine.

- VA Directive 0320, Emergency Preparedness Planning, and VA Handbook 0320, Emergency Preparedness Planning Procedures and Operational Requirements, were published. These documents contain the Department's Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP), which was developed within the one-year time frame mandated by Presidential Decision Directive 67. The goal of the Department's COOP is to ensure a viable continuity of VA operations under all circumstances and against a wide range of possible threats.

The Enabling Goal: Create an environment that fosters the delivery of One VA world-class service to veterans and their families through effective communication and management of people, technology, business processes, and financial resources.

- VA developed a *One VA* employee orientation package to provide employees a better understanding of VA programs, benefits, and services. This package includes a *One VA* Learning Map, which is an interactive learning tool for employees to help them better understand the history of the Department and the needs of veterans.
- VA also began development of a *One VA* Learning Map for veterans to enhance their knowledge about potential entitlement to benefits and services provided by VA. The map will be available to VA field facilities, national and local veterans service organizations, State Department of Veterans Affairs, military discharge centers, and other facilities.
- A comprehensive workforce planning initiative is essential for VA to remain as a provider of quality services to America's veterans. An anticipated upswing in retirements, rapid changes in technology, an increasingly diverse labor and beneficiary pool, and different expectations of younger workers are forces that strongly suggest the need for new recruitment and retention practices to meet program goals. VA has made great strides in establishing a workforce planning process, and is in the beginning stages of developing and implementing a workforce forecasting system.
- VA and its unions worked together to craft a major policy directive on using Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), particularly mediation, to resolve workplace conflicts at the earliest stage possible. VA encouraged the use of ADR throughout the various stages of the discrimination complaint process, up to and including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) hearing stage. By the end of the fiscal year, VA's rate of settlement of formal discrimination complaints increased from 15 percent to 25 percent.
- VA's Office of Resolution Management (ORM) partnered with the EEOC to refine the equal employment opportunity investigative process. As a result, in FY 2000, ORM reduced its investigative backlog of cases pending over 180 days by more than 50 percent, and the number of cases pending procedural reviews over 120 days by 90 percent.
- VA began implementing a new integrated financial system, known as the core Financial and Logistics System (coreFLS). This system

will provide timely, easily accessible financial and logistical information in a context meaningful to users. CoreFLS will provide information rather than data, increase knowledge sharing, and greatly reduce reconciliation efforts as well as operating, maintenance, and life cycle costs. CoreFLS will use commercial off-the-shelf software, employ best practices, and implement a Department-wide solution.

- VA's new human resources information system, HR LINK\$, is consolidating, integrating, and standardizing human resources and business processes across the Department. The first of those processes, Employee Self Service (ESS), was implemented VA-wide in February 2000. ESS allows employees to use either Web-based technology or touch-tone telephones to initiate their own personal and personnel transactions (e.g., tax and address changes, Combined Federal Campaign elections, savings bond campaign enrollment, and health insurance coverage), which are then automatically forwarded to the Shared Service Center in Topeka, Kansas, for processing.
- Implementation of ESS was followed by the phased introduction of Self-Service for Managers. HR LINK\$ will provide expert systems that allow managers to create position descriptions, classify positions, request and approve personnel actions, approve leave, and certify time cards—all from their desktop computers. The first of these expert systems, Position Classification, was implemented VA-wide in May 2000.
- VA successfully transitioned into the Year 2000 without any significant interruptions. VA remained on a "green" operational status during the January 1 date rollover period and the leap year date rollover. VA benefits were paid on time, and VA health care facilities remained open throughout the date rollovers.
- VA implemented a new Intranet-based tool, the Intranet Benefits Delivery Network/Beneficiary Identifier and Records Locator System Access, that gives staff faster, easier access to veteran information needed to determine eligibility, entitlement, and amount of benefits.
- Several activities related to Electronic Government were initiated that give veterans quick, easy, and secure access to on-line services. The 10-10 EZ and Veterans' On-line Applications allow veterans to apply for medical, compensation, pension, and vocational rehabilitation benefits through the Internet. The Net Certification system enables schools or training establishments to submit enrollment forms from veterans on-line. The Web Automated Verification of Enrollment application allows veterans to submit their Monthly Verifications of Enrollment forms on-line. The Insurance Self-Service initiative will provide VA policyholders with the capability to access their own insurance master records and make inquiries, certain account changes, and disbursement via their Web browser.
- VA processed over 2.2 million credit card transactions, representing almost \$1.3 billion in purchases. The all-electronic billing and payment process for centrally billed card accounts earned over \$13 million in credit card refunds, an increase of approximately 32 percent from FY 1999.
- Revenues in the Franchise Fund increased from \$95 million in FY 1999 to over \$137 million in FY 2000 (*see definition, page 131*).

- An OMB report on the quality and completeness of agencies' acquisition information praised VA for making the most progress in implementing both the principles and practices of performance-based acquisition management. Of the 15 major agencies reviewed by OMB for the report, VA was the first to develop an agency-wide capital planning process that allows for investment tradeoffs among categories of assets, such as medical and non-medical equipment, infrastructure, and information technology.
- VA prepared and administered contracts for pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and supplies, and subsistence for federal agencies.

These contracts are managed as Federal Supply Schedules, National Contracts, and competitive contracts for special purchases; all reflect savings from commercial prices. These savings allow VA to best utilize the resources available through our annual appropriations. Other federal agencies are also able to take advantage of these contracts. In addition to the savings from commercial prices, discounts are negotiated and competed on items VA purchases in high volumes. These contracts reflect the best values available to VA. The general public receives benefits through sound management practices of purchasing the best possible product at the lowest price.