

STATEMENT OF  
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HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATION  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CIVIL SERVICE  
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM AND OVERSIGHT  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of Secretary Jesse Brown to testify about the Department of Veterans Affairs support of the President's welfare-to-work initiative.

Secretary Brown, key Department officials, and I strongly believe that this initiative is important to the national economy and is compatible with VA's mission of serving veterans, and our commitment to be an employer of choice. VA's mission of serving veterans encompasses a wide variety of activities in over 300 locations across the country. The activities include health care, vocational rehabilitation, job training, compensation and pension, insurance and loan guaranty, and memorial and burial services. VA's work force of approximately 240,000 are employed in a wide variety of occupations including support

activities. To further our primary mission of serving veterans, our first priority in filling positions under the welfare-to-work initiative will be to consider veterans who are recipients of welfare benefits.

In developing VA's plan, we identified work that needs to be accomplished and positions that could be filled by entry-level applicants. Although VA is restructuring and streamlining, we have been able to identify 400 potential opportunities in Fiscal Year 1997 and the potential of 400 more in Fiscal Year 1998, that could be filled by welfare recipients. These positions fall primarily into the following categories: receptionist, general and file clerk, telephone operator, and escort, all in the General Schedule at Grades 1, 2, and 3; and warehouse worker, laborer, cemetery caretaker, housekeeping aid, and food service worker in Wage Grades 1, 2, and 3. We continue to have significant numbers of employees in these occupations although these numbers have declined over the past five years. Beginning in March, 1993 with 22,500 employees, employment in these occupations dropped to approximately 20,000 by March, 1995, and then dropped again by March, 1996 to 19,000 and to 17,500 by March, 1997. Even with these losses, this work force still presents opportunities for welfare recipients to move to self-sufficiency.

For these jobs, at entry levels little or no experience is generally required. For example, general clerical positions at Grade 1 require no formal office experience or formal education. Laborer jobs at Grade 1 perform simple tasks and require that applicants have no training or experience. Positions at these

grade levels do require close supervision, usually at regular intervals throughout the day.

We believe that welfare recipients will have no difficulty qualifying for these positions, especially those already in a state or other training program. In addition, since our focus is on veterans who may be receiving welfare assistance, most of these candidates will meet the minimum qualifications by virtue of their military service.

VA's targeted recruitment strategy has two important elements which focus on veterans. First, we will recruit candidates from among the graduates of our Compensated Work Therapy Program and Vocational Rehabilitation & Counseling Program. These programs provide clinically-based, supported-employment job training and vocational rehabilitation to veterans and are already successful in moving veterans from dependency to self-sufficiency. Graduates of these programs are potentially excellent sources of trained candidates for VA as well as for other Federal agencies and private industry.

The second key element is a local, community-based recruitment effort targeting veterans. Recruitment sources include a broad array of community service organizations as well as programs designed to assist veterans, such as the VA Readjustment Counseling Centers, Veterans Service Organizations, Disabled Veteran Outreach Program, and the Local Veterans Employment Representative Program (administered through State Employment Service Offices).

In hiring these candidates, we will use all available hiring authorities, as appropriate, including Worker-Trainee, Veterans Readjustment Act, 30% disabled veteran, and several other Excepted appointing authorities. In using each of these hiring authorities, we will continue to meet all Title 5 and Title 38 requirements, including veterans preference, citizenship, age, and suitability requirements, as well as adhering to rules governing the reemployment of separated Federal workers. We believe that targeting recruitment, using these hiring authorities, and filling positions at entry levels will provide excellent opportunities for welfare recipients to gain employment.

For welfare recipients who secure VA employment, a key component of success is training. VA has already developed training guidelines for these new employees and their supervisors. Guidelines cover general orientation and skills assessment, development of transitional work, quality of life and job skills, and interaction skills for co-workers and supervisors. Additional training and options are being identified and will be shared with field managers. Finally, local facilities will have full authority to work and partner with other Federal agencies and community services organizations to provide group training and coaching experiences.

Local VA facilities will also provide access to a variety of human and social services which will support the welfare recipient's successful transition into the work place and retention in his or her VA job. Among these support services is the Employee Assistance Program. The Employee Assistance Program provides counseling and referrals on dealing with personal problems affecting job

performance such as family crises or financial difficulties. Counseling and referrals are available to all employees, but are especially important for former welfare recipients moving to self-sufficiency. In addition, VA recognizes that transit subsidies may be an important factor in the retention of welfare recipients. We have received the Department of Justice opinion which advises that transit subsidy programs may target welfare recipients, low income employees, or Worker-Trainees. VA officials are assessing the cost implications of this opinion and will develop an appropriate transit policy. We are also aware that van pools have been developed in some areas and are recommending that local facilities explore this and other options.

Another important service is the provision of child care, a critical element in returning heads of households to the work place. VA child care centers are local initiatives, and we currently have 98 centers serving VA employees. Sliding fee scales and non-profit support foundations are already in use at some VA child care centers, and their expanded use will be promoted as additional policy guidance is developed.

Many of these retention strategies are already available to VA employees, but we agree with your assessment that workers at the GS or WG-1 level require extra efforts in supervision and training. VA is well prepared to meet these requirements. We traditionally have recurring turnover in the types of jobs to be filled under this initiative. Therefore, we have developed in-house instruction programs for new employees in these occupations. The employees hired under this initiative will join other employees in regular on-the-job training sessions. In

addition, VA plans to assign trainees to supervisors who are willing to accept the extra responsibility of coaching the new employees. VA will provide additional supervisory training depending upon the supervisors' experience. We will use existing training materials as much as possible.

We expect a substantial number of candidates to be hired who are graduates of the VA Compensated Work Therapy and the Vocational Rehabilitation & Counseling programs. These individuals will require little formal instruction but will receive on-the-job training with high levels of coaching and mentoring from supervisors and co-workers. We anticipate little or no additional cost for their training, which may require from 2-3 months. The other candidates will normally require some formal training, depending upon the support they have received from State and local programs. Recognizing that skill levels will vary widely with these individuals and the positions they occupy, we cannot accurately estimate the cost of training. However, they will also receive on-the-job training with high levels of coaching and mentoring from supervisors and co-workers. For these individuals, basic training may require 2-6 months. Some additional training time may be needed, but VA supervisors face turnover and new employees on a regular basis. Our supervisors are experienced and prepared for the challenge.

To meet National Performance Review goals as well as current funding levels, VA has been restructuring and streamlining. Staff reductions have been part of these efforts. VA has experienced a substantial reduction in part-time and temporary employment for the period from March 31, 1993 through April 1, 1997.

During this period, part-time permanent employment decreased from 20,000 to 15,800, a reduction of about 4,200, or 21%. Reduction-in-force procedures were used to separate 1,036 part-time employees in many occupations and grade levels, and buyouts accounted for 179 of the reduction. Temporary employment also experienced a significant reduction for the same time period, dropping from 21,200 to 15,800, a decrease of 5,400, or almost 26%. Reduction-in-force procedures do not apply to temporary employees, and buyouts are not available to them, either. Despite staff reductions and buyouts, VA still has employees who leave each year and must be replaced. In the jobs which provide most opportunities for welfare recipients, the turnover rate is about 15 to 25%. Therefore, even as we are reducing employment levels, we have positions which must be filled and which can provide job opportunities to welfare recipients.

We expect that former welfare recipients will fill entry GS and WG support positions that continue to be needed, have high turnover and are difficult to fill, rather than those eliminated in other initiatives. The positions lost in buyouts, reductions in force and staffing adjustments have generally been targeted toward supervisory, personnel, budget and acquisition occupations, rather than in support and entry-level positions in the field. Based on these considerations, we do not believe that the welfare to work initiative will result in the creation of unnecessary jobs.

Given current funding and budget levels, our facility managers simply cannot afford to develop "make-work" positions. They have real work to be performed and need committed staff to fulfill these tasks.

Finally, we have a responsibility to the taxpayers of this country to achieve greater organizational efficiencies while supporting the welfare to work initiative.

We do believe that, while difficult, we can meet the challenge.

Thank you for inviting VA to appear before the Subcommittee. I would be pleased to answer any further questions you may have regarding VA's plan.

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