

## Chapter 7

# Moving Forward: The Need for Change

The Task Force is convinced that the VR&E Service and Program must be rebuilt, not merely “tinkered with” or changed along the margins – in fact, it must become a totally new service and program for disabled veterans to achieve success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the view of the Task Force there are six principal reasons why VA should transform the VR&E Service and Program now, not later.

- The U.S. is at war. The treatment of our injured service members and their seamless transition and rehabilitation to achieve their quality of life and employment goals must become cardinal priorities. In this environment, vocational rehabilitation must take on a greater sense of urgency as the organizing paradigm for focusing the attention and resources of VA to achieve the ultimate goal of successful transition and employment for service-connected disabled veterans.
- This sense of urgency has never been more acute than now. The VR&E Service is facing a new challenge: the thousands of Guard and Reserve personnel who have been mobilized from their civilian jobs and who will return directly to employment or to college. Many of our injured are mobilized Guard and Reserve service members who bear the additional burden of perhaps having to make a career change. The VR&E Service and Program must be more responsive to meeting their needs now and in the future.
- Significant numbers of veterans – in war and during peacetime – will continue to experience illnesses or impairments that impact their lives forever. The advances in medical rehabilitation, biomedical technology, rehabilitation engineering, and assistive technology will enable many disabled veterans who were not previously employable to now be employed and for them to be employed for longer periods of time after military service than in previous generations. These factors coupled with the shift to the services and knowledge-based workplaces as well as the dynamics of those workplaces mean that veterans may need new and varied employment-driven services more than one time as they cycle through any number of jobs over a sustained post-military career. The VR&E Service and Program must be modernized to be on the leading edge – even breaking new ground – in leveraging 21st Century technology and knowledge to improve the life of disabled veterans.

- After every war, programs must adjust to the needs of the new veteran and the environment. The structure of the VR&E Program and its process are now out of sync with providing the type and timeliness of employment-driven services needed today and in the future because of the economic shift that has impacted the 21st Century labor market. This shift has reduced the demands for physical labor in favor of service and knowledge-based skills. Additionally, the dynamic nature of the labor market – high turnover rate of jobs, industries, and career fields – places a premium on providing rapid employment services to disabled veterans, which the current VR&E process is not designed to provide.
- The VR&E Program is also out of sync with 21st Century attitudes towards persons with disabilities. The economic shift has marched in tandem with a seismic shift in societal attitudes toward persons with disabilities, especially since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, the world’s first comprehensive civil rights legislation for people with disabilities. Twenty-first Century views of disabilities have shifted from the negative aspects of *disabilities* to a focus on the *abilities* of persons with disabilities with a rapid return-to-work strategy.

Employers place a value on the capabilities of a person to perform a job and less on what a veteran cannot do because of his or her disability. In today’s labor market, sidewalk curb-cuts, employer education and support of job accommodations, adaptive techniques and technology, and opportunities for persons with disabilities to achieve a better quality of life – to be included, not excluded, from the mainstream – are becoming the norm. The “world of disability” has dramatically changed. While the larger disability community has made the adjustment to these changes, the VR&E Program has not done so. To a large extent, the VR&E system has been doing business using the same approach within the same paradigm and work process for more than 40 years. The VR&E paradigm must change or it will become more and more outdated.

- Strong indicators point to the fact that the current VR&E program, organization, and traditional vocational rehabilitation process are stressed. These signs include: high caseloads among the VR&E staff; increasing demand for both vocational rehabilitation training and independent living services; essential functions of employment readiness, job placement, and marketing not performed either adequately or in a standardized way across the system; and veterans dissatisfied with the current level of employment services. Veterans deserve to be served by a service delivery process that is effective – doing the right thing – and efficient – making the best use of available resources.

### **Priority Actions to Build a 21<sup>st</sup> Century VR&E Service and Program**

VA must rebuild VR&E for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by making systemic changes in the infrastructure, programs, staffing, technology, and the processes by which services are delivered to service-connected disabled veterans. The recommendations contained in this report are comprehensive and reflect the

scope and detail of those activities that are necessary to provide a systems solution to meeting these 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges for successful transition of disabled veterans back to their communities and into employment. The task for VA is that these changes must be tackled in their entirety – the new employment-driven system cannot be implemented piecemeal. The changes the Task Force is proposing must be addressed as a whole.

As VA meets this challenge, the Task Force offers our recommendations on a set of priorities that VA may want to consider in prioritizing resource allocations and setting a management agenda for implementing these changes. We believe that VA should consider focusing on these five priority actions:

- Build VR&E Service Central Office capacities to lead, manage, and execute the elements of change. This is a key precedence and pacing action. It is critical that current capacities be enhanced and new capacities be created first before proceeding with change or change will proceed with increasing risk.
- Make changes in the VR&E program to streamline eligibility; to resource, plan, and execute the Five-Track Employment Process; and to plan and execute the Functional Capacity Evaluation pilot project. We recognize that some time will be required to put in place the requisite legislative, regulatory, and policy changes to fully implement the proposed eligibility changes. In the meantime, we encourage VA to use existing legislative and policy authority to provide interim guidance to begin making these changes in the VR&E process.
- Fund telecommunications for out-based VR&E sites to improve processing and productivity using CWINRS capabilities; take actions to rapidly upgrade the user and report functionality of the CWINRS system.
- Standardize the VR&E work processes and implement a specialization-based approach to more effectively and efficiently use the workforce.
- Conduct an implementation review of the recommendations contained in this report 6 months after the report is issued.

These recommendations must be approached with a heightened sense of urgency and proactive leadership and management to get ahead of the challenges of serving disabled veterans in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Task Force has been impressed with the hard work and commitment of the VR&E staff and VA's new leadership. We extend our gratitude to the many staff and individuals in the fields of rehabilitation, business, academia, and disability who have assisted with our report. We should always be guided in our purpose and commitment by the challenge that Secretary gave the Task Force when we started:

*"...Disabled veterans are the reason VA exists...veterans are not well served if their servants adhere to once sound doctrines rendered obsolete by changes in our society, economy and in the population we serve."*

