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Progress on the "Road to Veterans Day" Sets Conditions for Long-Term Reform at VA

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced that the "Road to Veterans Day" initiative, announced on September 8th by Secretary Robert A. McDonald, has resulted in significant progress for Veterans over the past 3 months. During that time, VA has taken deliberate actions to improve service delivery for Veterans, rebuild trust, increase accountability and transparency and put the department on the path to long-term excellence and reform.

"Over the past three months, we've been taking a hard look at ourselves, listening to Veterans, employees, Veterans organizations, unions, members of Congress, and our other partners. Their insights are shaping our work to chart the path for the future," said McDonald, who has traveled extensively during his first few months in office, visiting 41 VA facilities in 21 cities while also making 11 recruiting visits to medical schools. "While more work remains, our dedicated employees are making progress to better serve Veterans."

To improve service delivery, VA has prioritized efforts to accelerate Veterans off of wait lists and into clinics through the Accelerated Care Initiative begun by Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson this summer. Through this initiative, VA medical centers have increased access to care inside and outside of VA, added more clinic hours and work days, deployed mobile medical units, and shared their best practices from VA's high-performing facilities throughout the organization. Significant improvements have resulted nationally:

Scheduling more than 1.2 million more appointments in the past four months than in the same period last year. In total, VA medical centers have scheduled over 19 million Veteran appointments from June to October 1, 2014.

- Reducing the national new patient Primary Care wait time by 18 percent.
- Completing 98 percent of appointments within 30 days of the Veterans' preferred date, or the date determined to be medically necessary by a physician.
- Authorizing 1.1 million non-VA care authorizations, a 47 percent increase over the same period last year.

On his second day at VA, Secretary McDonald addressed all employees via Video Teleconference, where he directed each employee to reaffirm the mission and core values of the Department. All senior leaders were responsible for ensuring this was carried out in all facilities across the country, and this re-affirmation has been confirmed. Moving forward, this will happen each year on the anniversary of VA becoming a Cabinet-level agency, and a new award program has been initiated to highlight employees who truly embody VA's ICARE values – Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence. The first nominations for this new incentive program will be accepted in January 2015.

Over the past three months, VA has focused on identifying the scope of the problems facing the department and taking significant actions to correct deficiencies, to include holding employees accountable. Since June 2014, VA has proposed disciplinary action against more than 40 employees nationwide related to data manipulation or patient care. VA is also working diligently to cooperate with the over 100 investigations currently being undertaken by the VA Inspector General, the Justice Department, and the Office of Special Counsel (OSC).

On October 3rd, OSC certified VA under their Whistleblower Protection Certification Program after VA worked to achieve compliance and protect employees who identify or report problems from unlawful retaliation. VA also worked closely with OSC to successfully resolve whistleblower retaliation complaints filed by three individuals from the VA Phoenix Health Care System. The Department's transparency is critical in rebuilding the public's trust. VA has posted data online on a regular basis since the beginning of June showing the number of appointments on waiting lists and the average wait times at each medical center across the country.

Additionally, each medical center and benefits office has conducted a town hall with Veterans and the public to collect feedback. These town halls will continue at each facility every three months.

As we march forward on the "Road to Veterans Day," we recognize that VA needs significant reforms to meet the expectations of Veterans well past Veterans Day. VA is reviewing options to reorganize the department for success, guided by ideas and initiatives from Veterans, employees, and all of our stakeholders. This reorganization will be known as "MyVA" and is designed to provide Veterans with a seamless, integrated, and responsive customer service experience—whether they arrive at VA digitally, by phone, or in person.

Another component of the "Road to Veterans Day" initiative that will continue past Veterans Day is the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) " Blueprint for Excellence," which lays out strategies for transformation to improve the performance of VA health care now —making it more Veteran-centric by putting Veterans in control of their VA experience.

Long-term reform of VA also means making sure VA has the medical professionals we need to best care for our patients, which is why Secretary McDonald launched a national recruiting effort in August, visiting medical schools in an effort to bring the best and brightest to work at VA. On September 17th, VA announced an increase in the salary pay scale for VA doctors and dentists to aid in recruiting and retention.

As part of the "Road to Veterans Day," Secretary McDonald has reaffirmed VA's homelessness program and the Veterans Benefits Administration's Claims Transformation Strategy. VA remains committed to working with its federal, state and local partners to end homelessness among Veterans, which has been reduced by 33% since 2010. With the backlog of disability claims reduced by 60% since its peak in March of 2013, VA is also on track to eliminate the backlog in 2015 and will continue to expand online claim-submission capability in all programs.

"VA exists to serve our Nation's Veterans and their families. I'm convinced that our comprehensive reforms will enable us to better meet the needs of our Veterans because we will be looking at everything we do through their eyes. We owe them nothing less," McDonald said.

For access to the full “Road to Veterans Day” report, see http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/RoadtoVeteransDay_ActionReview.pdf

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