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VA releases data on vacancies as required under MISSION Act

WASHINGTON — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) [released its figures on employment vacancies as of June 30](#), as mandated each quarter under the recently passed MISSION Act.

VA reported the following vacancies:

- 45,239 overall vacancies at the department, out of a total of 419,353 full-time authorized and budgeted positions. This overall number of vacancies includes:
 - 40,456 vacancies in the Veterans Health Administration, out of a total of 375,953 full-time authorized and budgeted positions
 - 1,978 vacancies in the Veterans Benefits Administration, out of a total of 25,560 full-time authorized and budgeted positions
 - 233 vacancies in the National Cemetery Administration, out of a total of 2,179 full-time authorized and budgeted positions
 - 2,572 vacancies in the department's Staff Offices, out of a total of 15,661 full-time authorized and budgeted positions

“President Trump has made it clear that achieving the optimal workforce at VA is a top priority as we look to provide the best care and benefits to our nation's heroes,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “My priority has been to have a clear and accurate picture of our vacancies, and getting this information out publicly is an important step in transparency to Veterans and taxpayers.”

With approximately 374,000 current employees, VA is the second largest federal organization in the United States. From the start of fiscal year (FY) 2014 to the end of FY 2017, VA achieved a growth rate of 12.5% and an average annual turnover (i.e., total loss) rate of 9.2%. **VA turnover rates compare favorably with other large cabinet-level agencies, which averaged 11% in FY 2017.** (1)

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Vacancies

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is the largest administration within VA, accounting for approximately 335,000 of VA's 374,000 employees. **VHA turnover rates compare favorably with the healthcare industry, including for those occupations identified as mission critical. (2) In FY 2017, VHA's annual turnover rate for full-time and part-time employees was 9.1%, which compares well to the healthcare industry turnover rate of 20-30%. (3)**

There is a consistent turnover of employees in large organizations such as VHA due to normal retirements and job changes. Vacancies represent current unencumbered positions due to turnover and new positions that are planned to meet an anticipated growth in services. VHA has approximately 40,000 vacancies, which is consistent with the historical annual 9% turnover rate and a 2-3% growth rate.

Staffing plans consider normal rates of workforce turnover, retirement, and growth, and the expectation that there will always be vacant positions. Each year, VHA hires more employees than it loses to replace turnover and keep up with the growth in demand for services. **The best indicators of adequate staffing levels include Veteran access to care and health care outcomes – not vacancies:**

- VA now provides same-day services for care needs right away at all primary care and mental health clinics.
- In FY18 to date, 21% of all appointments have been completed the same day that the appointment was requested.
- The average time it took to complete an urgent referral to a specialist has decreased from 19.3 days in FY14 to 3.2 days in FY17 and 2.0 days in FY18 - this number continues to improve now down to 1.3 days during July of 2018.
- VA completed 95% of follow-up appointments no later than the provider recommended date for time sensitive appointments in FY to date.
- According to a recent [RAND Corp. study](#), Veterans receive the same or better care at VA medical centers as patients at non-VA hospitals.
- For inpatient care specifically, VA hospitals performed on average the same or significantly better than non-VA hospitals on **21 of 26** measures.
- VA performed significantly better than commercial and Medicaid Health Maintenance Organizations on **28 of 30** measures, with no difference on the other two.
- Although there was variation in performance across VA, the variation was even wider among non-VA hospitals.

VHA's plans to fill vacancies

VHA's workforce challenges mirror those of the health care industry as a whole. **There is a national shortage of healthcare professionals, especially for physicians and nurses.** The American Association of Colleges of Nursing, Association of American Medical Colleges, and other national healthcare organizations have written about this workforce shortage at length.

VHA remains fully engaged in a fiercely competitive clinical recruitment market. VA has been successful in this fight – it has increased its number of clinical providers including hard-to-recruit-and-retain physicians such as psychiatrists.

VHA is taking a number of key steps to attract qualified candidates:

- Mental Health and other targeted hiring initiatives;
- Increased maximum physician salaries;
- Utilization of recruitment/relocation and retention (3Rs) incentives and the Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP);
- Targeted nationwide recruitment advertising and marketing;
- The “Take A Closer Look at VA” trainee outreach recruitment program;
- Expanding opportunities for telemedicine providers;
- DoD/VA effort to recruit transitioning service members; and
- Exhibiting regularly at key healthcare conferences and job fairs.

The Mission Act also provides additional authority that VA will leverage for recruitment and retention of medical professionals, including:

- Initiating a pilot scholarship program targeted toward Veterans for medical school education;
- Increasing the maximum award amount for the Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP), and expanding program eligibility to additional mental health providers; and
- Offering recent medical school graduates loan repayment opportunities in exchange for service in VA Medical Centers through the Specialty Education Loan Repayment Program (SELRP).

Together, these tools expand VA's already robust and aggressive staffing initiatives to retain high-quality providers for our Veterans.

“Despite a challenging and ultra-competitive market for filling health care positions across the country, VA has worked with Congress and other key stakeholders to deploy a number of new and important tools to help us reduce our vacancies,” said Secretary Wilkie. “We are always looking for new ways to recruit high-quality talent, and will continue to do everything we can to provide the best quality care for our nation's Veterans.”

Applying for a position at VA

VA is continuously recruiting for committed professionals who are dedicated to serving our nation's Veterans. Employment at VA provides a good salary, comprehensive benefits and great work/life balance. Above all else, the highest honor in working at VA is the opportunity to serve the brave men and women who have served our country. Additional information regarding careers at VA can be found at

<https://www.vacareers.va.gov/>.

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1. OPM Fedscope data retrieved in July 2018 <https://www.fedscope.opm.gov/index.asp>
 2. The annual “National Health Care Retention and RN Staffing Report” published by NSI Nursing Solutions Inc. in January 2017 identified turnover rates for nurses and other health professionals. VHA's turnover rate for registered nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists was lower than the industry average reported for these occupations.
 3. BLS (Bureau of Labor Statistics) JOLT (Job Opening and Labor Turnover Survey), <https://www.bls.gov/jlt/>