

**VA**



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

The Road to Veterans Day

Action Review

November 6, 2014

## **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – Road to Veterans Day**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has made significant progress in serving Veterans by accelerating their access to health care and taking action to address deficiencies identified across the system. Through the Accelerated Access to Care Initiative, VA medical centers have increased access to care inside and outside the Department. VA facilities added additional clinic hours and work days, deployed mobile medical units, and reached out to accelerate care to over 311,000 Veterans nationwide. As a result, over 1.2 million additional appointments were completed in the past four months than in the same time period in the previous year. At the same time, in communities around the country, VA made nearly 1.1 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector and other non-VA health facilities, a 46.6 percent increase over the same period in 2013.

Under the new leadership of Secretary Robert A. McDonald, the Department began developing the Road to Veterans Day – a series of quick actions to make both short- and long-term changes to VA; setting the course for long term success of the Department. The ultimate goal of VA is to improve service delivery to Veterans, rebuilding trust with them and the American people.



*“By getting out in the field and talking with Veterans and employees and learning as much about the organization as possible, I would be able to determine the processes that would need to be reorganized or streamlined. In the longer term, this will require restructuring employees’ performance metrics and evaluations.” – Secretary Bob McDonald*

In town hall meetings and stakeholder engagements across the country, VA leaders shared the Road to Veterans Day goals, strategies and tactics with employees and partners, outlining the steps the Department is taking to better serve and care for those who have borne the battle, their families, and survivors.

*“Time and time again, I’ve heard patients call their nurses angels and tell me that their doctors understand the needs and give great care. But I also hear that Veterans are waiting too long to be seen and that is simply not acceptable. And I’m hearing from those who have experienced the worst of the bureaucracy.” - Secretary Bob McDonald*

The initiative, found on page 12 of this report, targets improvements in three key strategic areas:

- Rebuild Trust with Veterans and other Stakeholders
- Improve Service Delivery, Focusing on Veteran Outcomes
- Set the Course for Longer-term Excellence and Reform

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## Rebuild Trust with Veterans and other Stakeholders

*“Over the past months, we've been taking a hard look at ourselves, listening to veterans, listening to employees, listening to Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), members of Congress, and our other partners. Their insights have been invaluable. And we're using their insights to chart our path moving forward.” – Secretary Bob McDonald*

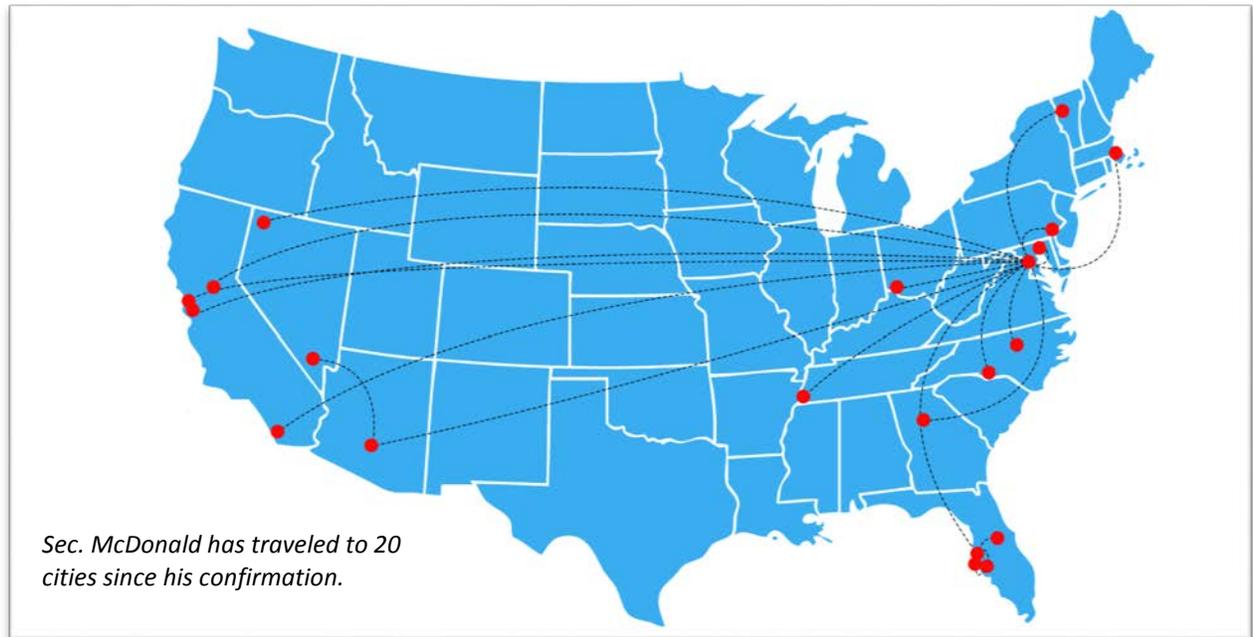
Since June 2014, VA has worked to identify the full scope of the problems, taken significant corrective actions to fix them, held employees accountable when there is evidence of employee misconduct, and worked to reinforce VA’s mission and core values with employees across the country. The new Secretary has built relationships with stakeholders and strengthened lines of communication with key groups.

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.



Employees have received information about the Department’s vision of sustainable accountability. Misconduct will not be tolerated at VA, and actions have been and will continue to be taken, consistent with the due process rights of employees, when allegations of employee misconduct have been confirmed. The goal is for every employee to understand how their daily work supports the mission, values, and strategy of VA to serve Veterans. Through continual dialogue and feedback, all employees will be empowered to fulfill their responsibilities to the Department, and to Veterans. Using the authority provided by the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA), VA has, and will continue to, hold Senior Executive Service employees accountable for misconduct as quickly as the law will allow. A list of these employees is provided to VA’s Congressional oversight committees weekly. As of this report,

over 40 disciplinary actions related to data manipulation or patient care have been proposed or decided by VA since June 3. 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).



Fulfilling the mission of VA is a noble calling, and the Department’s leadership meets regularly with front line employees to highlight their important work in meeting the organizational goals. Since being sworn in, Secretary McDonald has visited 41 VA facilities across the country, and met with those on the VA team who see and serve Veterans every day. In addition, he meets with stakeholder groups at each of these facilities, hearing directly from them about the concerns and issues at their local facility.

He has also met with unions, nongovernmental organizations, held 36 personal meetings with VSO and military service organization representatives, State Directors of Veterans affairs, tribal partners, and had more than 145 engagements with Members of Congress, through hearings, meetings, and working phone calls. In an effort to further enhance responsiveness to these important partners, VA has awarded a contract for a Lean Six Sigma Study to improve the efficiency of VA’s general and congressional correspondence processes.

Partnerships and support for VA’s way forward are vitally important to the Department’s ability to fulfill its mission and support Veterans through providing care and benefits. Partnerships allow VA to leverage existing expertise and increase its ability to more efficiently meet the challenges of evolving issues. Such partnerships also help VA quickly identify and adopt new ways of doing business by incorporating creative and innovative ideas from stakeholders.



A partnership that is currently being revitalized is the Special Medical Advisory Group, which provides advice to VA leaders on such issues as education and training of healthcare professionals, and research. The scope, charter, and membership of this committee will be revitalized in the coming months.

A critical component in regaining public trust is the Department's level of transparency. VA has posted data online 9 times since June 9, 2014, showing the number of appointments on waiting lists and the average wait times at each medical center across the country. This has enabled Veterans and the public to track our progress as we have accelerated care to Veterans and removed them from wait lists and get them into care. VA

also publishes quality and safety data for each medical center online, and is working with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to expand our public-facing data to the full range of Medicare quality, outcome, and satisfaction metrics that are appropriate for Veterans. VA's most recent quarterly release of quality and safety data showed quality improvements at 93 VA medical centers. Our expanded partnership with CMS will include posting available VA medical center performance on Medicare's Hospital Compare website.

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## Improve Service Delivery, Focusing on Veteran Outcomes

*“To address our immediate challenges, over the past several months we've prioritized efforts to get Veterans off wait lists and into clinics. We've added more clinic hours. We're recruiting additional staff, deploying mobile medical units, and having high-performing facilities share their best practices to help facilities all over the country rise to a higher level of improvement. Our people are making a difference.” – Secretary Bob McDonald*

As VA moves forward, we will judge the success of all our efforts against a single metric – the outcomes we provide for Veterans. The mission is to care for Veterans, so we must become more focused on Veteran needs. One of the ways VA will accomplish this is by integrating functions across programs and organizations to optimize the Veteran’s experience and minimize inefficiency and redundancies. The Department is undergoing a broad evaluation of options to reorganize along common regional boundaries and better integrate our Veteran-facing functions. This new proposed structure, “MyVA” will incorporate input from Veterans, employees, and stakeholders. VA employees from the “MyVA” workgroup have visited 20 field locations and talked with over 2000 employees to gather ideas from those at VA who work directly with Veterans every day. They are also receiving input from Veterans through in depth interviews, and have plans to leverage social media in order to develop and get feedback on VA’s draft plan.

As employees are in discussions about reorganization, there is also a redeployment of VA’s strategic plan being worked. It has been re-crafted and simplified to focus more clearly on our mission. The new strategic priorities will provide general guidance while the execution within the operational units is dynamic enough to respond to changing demands and environmental requirements. Each organization is responsible for implementing the guidance in ways that work best for their individual office. Prior to the next Fiscal Year, each employee will have their performance plan reflect their support of the Departmental strategic plan. Connecting employees to identify the way that their roles and responsibilities support the overall organizational mission fosters a daily recommitment to our mission.

**1.2 Million**

Increase in completed appointments from June to September 2014 compared to 2013

**98%**

percentage of completed appointments within 30 days

**61%**

percentage reduction in Electronic Wait List since May 2014

Part of this effort is a strengthening of internal communications between every level of the organization. There have been more robust communications between headquarters and facility leadership, as well as between facility leadership and frontline employees. Senior leaders engage directly through email, teleconferences, and in-person town hall meetings with employees to receive their feedback, hear their suggestions, and collaborate on ways to better serve Veterans.

Employee feedback, especially from those employees who interact with and serve Veterans daily, is imperative when looking to measure Veteran satisfaction. The Department is transitioning to a Veteran satisfaction focus with more meaningful measures to determine the success of the services offered, from the perspective of the Veteran. To better understand patient experiences, VA has recently enhanced the reporting of Veterans' satisfaction with their care and benefits. In addition, training is being developed for VA employees to help them more accurately represent VA's performance.

The Department continues to also evaluate options to integrate 'Lean Management' capability, as well as to empower employees to implement opportunities for cost savings and productivity improvements. VA will come out of this process better able to meet the needs of Veterans because we will be looking at everything we do, every service we provide, every customer interaction we have, through the eyes of our customers - the Veteran.

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### **Set the Course for Longer-Term Excellence and Reform**

*“So I'm working to right the wrongs and institute reforms to transform a modernized VA to better serve Veterans and I'm committed to fixing the problems and consistently providing timely and high-quality care Veterans have earned and Veterans deserve. That's how we'll begin regaining Veterans' and the American people's trust.” – Secretary Bob McDonald*

Even while addressing current problems and challenges, significant action is underway that will lay the groundwork for positive changes at VA.

A part of this initiative is continuing to accelerate access to care for Veterans while VA implements the VACAA. VA has conducted more than 19 million appointments (this is 1.2 million *more* appointments in the past four months than in the same period last year) since June 1, 2014, while making nearly 1.1 million authorizations for non-VA care, 46.6 percent more Veterans than the previous year. As a result of outreach to accelerate VA care, new patient Primary Care average wait times for VA appointments decreased by 18 percent during the same time period and completed 98 percent of these appointments within 30 days of the Veterans' preferred date, or the date determined to be medically necessary by a physician.

While this has been happening with previously existing authority, VA is implementing key initiatives within the VACAA to get Veterans care in the community. VA has signed contracts with two experienced health care companies who will be providing Choice Cards to Veterans, as required by law, and connecting them with non-VA care in their community. In addition, VA has taken steps toward implementing the additional 21 program modifications or expansions, 12 additional reports, and three required assessments that were included in the legislation. These modifications are aimed at improving care for Veterans while increasing accountability and performance.

The Department embraces the temporary Choice Program while VA builds capacity to care for these Veterans within our system, and has engaged in an extensive recruiting effort to bring new medical professionals to VA. There are an estimated 28,000 new and existing vacancies to fill in VHA. Through these recruiting visits, the Secretary has highlighted VA's noble mission, as well as the opportunities that come from serving those who have served.

The Department also developed a guiding document for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) called the “Blueprint for Excellence.” This document offers a detailed vision of how VA will evolve as a model national health care provider, delivering both excellent health care and an excellent experience to Veterans. This plan has ten strategies, the goals of which align with the



Road to Veterans Day and VA’s strategic plan, transitioning VHA from “sick care” to “health care” by delivering personalized, proactive, patient-driven care that focuses on what is important to the Veteran.

Empowering employees with the most useful and

effective technology is key to transforming VHA. In the coming weeks, VA will release a Request For Proposal for acquiring new scheduling software, since the existing software was outdated and difficult to use. VA expects an interim milestone towards this acquisition in spring 2015. Through this process, VA held an Industry Day and engaged with VSOs for their input on what kind of a system would be best for Veterans.

While focusing on setting our employees up for success to provide access to health care both immediately and in the longer term, the Department’s new leadership has spent time assessing other key programs and reviewing objectives, timelines, and resource levels, to ensure VA is delivering the success for Veterans.

Plans have been reviewed for VA’s health record work known as VistA Evolution where VA clinicians and technical experts are focused on modernizing the Department’s electronic health record and achieving seamless healthcare data interoperability with the Department of Defense. The VistA Evolution program delivered several key milestones in 2014 to improve VistA and will continue delivering improvements to provide better outcomes for Veterans.

Human Resource programs have been reviewed to identify barriers to staffing, improving employee engagement and accountability, and ensuring that employees will have avenues to report their concerns. As part of this review, VA is working to establish a department-wide program office to implement our Anti-Harassment Policy, designed to facilitate a culture of trust throughout VA. It will ensure that the Department takes all necessary actions to prevent

harassment in the workplace, and correct harassing conduct before it becomes severe or pervasive. Further, a team has been established to implement recommendations that will remove unnecessary barriers to healthcare hiring, streamlined hiring to eliminate excessive layers of review, and obtained certification from the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) for VA's Whistleblower protection program. 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. Whistleblower protection training has been offered to all VA managers and supervisors.

VA leaders have also taken a fresh look at VA's homelessness program and VBA's Transformation Strategy. With respect to the claims disability backlog, the Secretary expressed support for moving towards a National Work Queue, contracting for a third party evaluation and review of our quality assurance program and performance goals, and directed improvements to online claims submission capability in all programs, which will drive increased electronic filing. The backlog of disability claims has been reduced by 60 percent since its peak in March of 2013, and VA remains committed to ending the backlog in 2015.

Department leadership remains committed to ending homelessness among Veterans and continues to work toward a systematic end to homelessness, which means there are no Veterans sleeping on our streets and every Veteran has access to permanent housing. Should Veterans become or be at-risk of becoming homeless, VA will have the capacity to quickly connect them to the help they need to achieve housing stability. Through unprecedented partnerships with Federal, state and local partners, VA has greatly increased access to permanent housing; a full range of health and mental health care services; employment; working trades; and benefits for homeless and at risk for homeless Veterans and their families. The Department continues to develop new and innovative initiatives and partnerships to strengthen our efforts to prevent and end homelessness among Veterans. Since 2010, there has been a 33 percent decline in the number of homeless Veterans and a 40 percent decline in the number of Veterans sleeping on the street.

In an effort to increase the Department's ability to use technology to serve Veterans, VA's Digital Services Team has been created, which is bringing in some of the nation's top technologists to work at VA on high-impact, Veteran-facing projects. Digital service hires will pair with internal teams to build and strengthen the agency's internal technical capacity, expanding adoption of modern technology and approaches to enable rapid execution against agency missions such as claims processing, health data interoperability, and expanding access. Key initial projects include expanding and improving the Veteran digital experience, and providing tools to support implementation of VACAA.

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## Summary

In the past 90 days, VA has worked to challenge assumptions and move forward in ways that best serves our customers. By re-committing to our mission and evaluating everything we do from the perspective of the Veteran, the Department will be better positioned to provide the care and benefits Veterans have earned and deserve. This focus will continue as the Department moves forward with long term goals such as reorganization and the implementation of new programs and procedures. With our values, strategic goals, and mission in mind, VA will regain the public trust and come out of this effort better able to focus on Veteran outcomes.

### THE ROAD TO VETERANS DAY, 2014 VA "First 90 Days" Plan

*VA Mission and Objective: Better serve and care for those who have borne the battle, their families, and survivors.*

<p><b>Strategy: Rebuild Trust</b> with Veterans and other Stakeholders.</p> <p><b>Tactics:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforce VA Core Values and "re-set" VA culture where needed.</li> <li>• Identify the full scope of workforce and Veteran concerns and problems.</li> <li>• Build relationships and strong lines of communication with stakeholders.</li> <li>• Simplify communication and increase transparency.</li> <li>• Hold employees accountable through prompt and meaningful action.</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every employee reaffirms VA's Mission and Core Values now through their leadership.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reaffirm annually at VA's anniversary.</li> <li>○ Explore incentives to reinforce behavior.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Travel extensively to hear from employees and Veterans, as well as observe care/service delivery.</li> <li>• Engage Veterans and the VA workforce.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Personal messages (multi-media).</li> <li>○ Town Halls; VSO Conventions.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Engage other key stakeholders:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ VSOs, MSOs, NGOs, State VA Directors; Tribal partners.</li> <li>○ Union leadership; Congress.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Revamp VA's relationship with Congress, including our correspondence process.</li> <li>• Expand VA participation in public forums and reporting on health care quality and safety.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Establish a special advisory group.</li> <li>○ Expand quality/safety transparency.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategy: Improve service delivery</b> (effectiveness and efficiency), focusing on Veteran outcomes</p> <p><b>Tactics:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redeploy VA's Strategic Plan – establishing a clear line of performance requirements linking mission to individual work plans.</li> <li>• Reorganize to better align and simplify service to Veterans.</li> <li>• Strengthen internal communications – HQ to field; leaders to employees.</li> <li>• Engage federal, state and private sectors to partner and capture best practices.</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a "Renewal Plan" that guides VA Strategic Plan redeployment.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Publish a "Redeployment Plan" to cascade and better integrate the VA Strategic Plan.</li> <li>○ Publish a Directive for FY15 Senior Executive Service Performance Plans and develop a roadmap for GS-level implementation.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Evaluate options to reorganize VA along common regional service boundaries with an integrated control structure, focused on service to the Veteran as viewed by the Veteran, called "My VA."             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Review/rationalize sites of service.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Create enterprise-wide 'Lean Management' capability as well as a culture of cost savings/productivity improvement.</li> <li>• Improve VA's capability to capture and measure Veteran satisfaction in order to assess and improve service.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategy: Set the course for longer-term</b> excellence and reform.</p> <p><b>Tactics:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accelerate Access to Care while implementing the "Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014" (VACAA).</li> <li>• Assess key programs to affirm or adjust objectives, timelines and resource levels.</li> <li>• Develop a "Blueprint for Excellence" to transform VHA.</li> <li>• Identify strategic decisions that should be made in 2014 to inform VA's PPBE (Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution) Process.</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accelerate Access to Care to get Veterans off waiting lists and to receive needed care.</li> <li>• Create an interdisciplinary team of experts and process to implement the VACAA.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Set conditions to acquire scheduling system.</li> <li>○ Expand recruitment efforts to fill VA staffing needs.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Draft a "Blueprint for Excellence" for VHA.</li> <li>• Create a Digital Services Team to enable rapid innovation.</li> <li>• Review key programs, organizations, and business practices/technologies to include enterprise-level human resources and financial management.</li> <li>• Validate VistA Evolution and Electronic Health Records plans.</li> <li>• Review "Ending Veteran Homelessness" Program and VBA's Transformation Strategy.</li> </ul>
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