



CONGRESSWOMAN

**Louise M. Slaughter**

SERVING THE PEOPLE OF NEW YORK'S 28<sup>TH</sup> DISTRICT



## **Louise Slaughter and her colleagues in Congress taking care of Veterans**

**July 2010**

“Members of the military and their families have the hardest job in the world. Our veterans have served us proudly putting themselves in danger thousands of miles from their families in tour after tour. They deserve the very best care, and I am committed to seeing that they get it.”

- Congresswoman Louise Slaughter

### ***People-Centric, Results-Driven, Forward-Looking***

**This short summary of many VA accomplishments reflects President Obama’s and Congress’ growing legacy as advocates for Veterans.**

#### **Educating the Next Generation of Veterans: The Post-9/11 GI Bill**

As of July 2010, VA has issued over \$3.9 billion in tuition, housing, and stipends for 292,000 student Veterans or eligible family members pursuing higher education. Early in the program’s implementation, VA took unprecedented steps to expedite over \$350 million in advance payments. To encourage more Veterans to use this historic program, in February 2010, VA launched a nationwide Post-9/11 GI Bill advertising campaign through college newspapers, radio adds, outdoor posters and information handouts at 60 schools with large Veteran-student populations. VA has also developed an automated processing system to replace its manual enrollment and payment processing system by the end of 2010.

#### **Ending Veteran Homelessness: VA Embarks on Historic 5-Year Plan**

VA’s intense campaign to end Veteran homelessness in five years has secured broad support at federal, state and local levels in both the public and private sectors. It also supports the Administration’s Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. As of March 2010, the number of Veterans homeless on a typical night dropped 18 percent (from 131,000 in 2008 to 107,000 in 2009). The Obama Administration and Congress have joined VA in their commitment with the necessary funds; VA invested nearly \$400 million in 2009 to serve over 35,000 Veterans and more than 5,000 spouses and children through outreach initiatives, a 15 percent increase from the

previous year. More than 8,300 Veterans are in permanent housing with dedicated case managers and access to high-quality VA health care. In 2010, VA is allocating \$39 million to fund 2,200 new transitional housing beds through grants to local providers. To better understand the causes of homelessness and coordinate efforts to end it, VA organized many collaborative events including the National Summit on Veteran Homelessness in November 2009, with more than 1,200 attendees from across federal, state and local levels in both the public and private sectors. To ensure that every opportunity to reach out to our homeless Veterans is taken, VA created a National Registry for Homeless Veterans and established a National Homeless Hotline (1-877-4AID VET).

### **Meeting Critical Needs: Traumatic Brain Injury and Mental Health for Veterans**

In July 2010, VA enacted an historic rule change to relax the requirement for evidence of proof for Veterans who pursue a claim for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Service in a combat zone now suffices as evidence if PTSD is diagnosed. VA also increased its exceptional mental health programs budget by \$288 million and hired more than 1,000 additional mental health professionals in 2009 to meet the important need for mental health screenings and treatment. For Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), a new disability rating system was fielded to greatly improve how claims are evaluated. More than 400 military leaders, health care professionals, and advocates attended the first National Joint DoD/VA Mental Health Summit in November 2009. One outcome of the Summit was a commitment to develop a Joint DoD/VA Mental Health Strategy.

### **An Open Line: Answering Calls for Help**

The Veterans National Suicide Prevention Hotline (1-800-273-TALK) has received more than 293,000 calls and interrupted more than 10,000 potential suicides since it began in 2008. Over 150 professional staff monitor the lines 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, to ensure any Servicemember, Veteran or family member in crisis can talk to someone who can help. In 2009, VA expanded the Hotline to include a Suicide Prevention Chat Room ([www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)), where Servicemembers and Veterans can use the Web to seek assistance. The VA employee who helped develop the hotline was recognized as the Federal Employee of the Year in 2009 by the Partnership for Public Service. VA has also increased its outreach through a significant national advertising campaign.

### **Preparing for Tomorrow: Progress on Electronic Records**

VA's Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) Initiative, directed by the President in April 2009, has already made great progress. In September 2009, VA and its first private-sector partner, Kaiser Permanente, in San Diego, exchanged data in a pilot program. In March 2010, VA and DoD selected the next step, a pilot site in the Virginia/Tidewater area of Southeastern Virginia, to join the Nationwide Health Information Network. Three additional pilots are planned through 2012, with the intent

of national deployment of a non-constrained, full production capability throughout VA and DoD.

### **“Breaking the Back of the Backlog” of Disability Claims: Leveraging Innovation and Technology**

VA has launched an aggressive campaign to attack the claims backlog problem on multiple fronts, and has set an ambitious objective: By 2015, with a 98-percent accuracy decision rate in place, a Veteran will not wait more than 125 days for a decision on a claim. To achieve these impressive objectives, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) expanded its workforce by over 3,500 people, began accepting on-line applications for initial disability benefits, initiated an innovation competition, launched over 30 pilot programs and initiatives to identify best practices, and invested over \$138 million in a paperless Veterans Benefits Management System that will be deployed in Fiscal Year 2012. Veterans are already directly benefitting from this effort, for example, through a pilot program establishing “express lanes” for simple claim actions and quick benefits payments done on a walk-in basis. Additionally, VBA has awarded a \$9 million contract to “fast track” Veterans’ claims for service-connected illnesses associated with Agent Orange herbicide exposure during the Vietnam War.

### **Delivering High Quality Healthcare: “Best Care Anywhere”**

In 2009, VA’s 8.1 million enrollees received award-winning healthcare in the nation’s largest integrated healthcare system, including 153 medical centers, 260 Vet Centers, 773 community-based outpatient centers, 134 Community Living Centers, and 50 domiciliary residential rehabilitation treatment programs. In 2009, J.D. Power and Associates recognized VA pharmacies with the highest customer satisfaction scores in a national sampling of pharmacy customers. VA also received an “Among the Best” ranking in the mail order category, the same overall ranking as Kaiser Permanente. In January 2010, VA won top national honors from the independent Institute for Safe Medication Practices for its excellence in preventing medication errors.

### **Strengthening Veterans Health Programs: Advance Appropriations**

The Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act which funds VA’s health care budget a year in advance is now fully implemented. The landmark legislation signed by President Obama in 2009, will assure timely, sufficient and predictable funding from year to year. For our Veterans, it means improved access to the doctors, nurses, and medical care that they need. Moreover, it does all this without adding a single penny to the deficit.

### **Rendering Honor: National Cemeteries Serving the Veteran Family**

VA’s National Cemetery Administration (NCA) performed over 105,000 interments of Veterans and eligible family members last year, and provided over 352,000 headstones and markers world-wide. In June 2010, VA began offering free bronze medallions to

attach to existing, privately purchased headstones or markers in lieu of a traditional government headstone or marker, signifying a deceased's status as a Veteran. VA expanded its burial policy, resulting in authorization for five new national cemeteries. VA awarded 10 grants to states for \$40 million to fund five new state Veteran cemeteries, and five new VA cemeteries opened for a total construction cost of \$89.1 million. Over the past six years, NCA has received a customer service rating of 95 from the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI). This is the highest customer service rating of any organization, public or private, that has ever been assessed by the ACSI.

### ***Increasing Access:***

#### **Addressing Veterans' Issues: Expanding Women Veteran Programs**

Women make up 15 percent of today's military, and the population of women Veterans using VA is increasing at a rapid pace. To answer the unique needs of this growing Veteran community, VA is evaluating and expanding care for all women Veterans. The Veterans Health Administration has provided comprehensive multi-residency training to over 500 providers in women's health, and is implementing comprehensive primary care for women Veterans at all facilities, with a completion date of 2013. There are now full-time Women Veterans Program Managers at 144 health systems. VA has expanded outreach programs for women Veterans, with local and national health conferences and forums, active web communications, local information initiatives such as posters and newsletters, and a proactive Women Veterans Advisory Committee on Women Veterans.

#### **Bringing Care to the Veteran: New Rural Health Initiatives**

Seeking to serve the more than 3 million Veteran enrollees in rural areas, VA awarded over \$200 million in rural health projects in 2009. Important rural health initiatives planned or underway include mobile clinics, home-based primary care, tele-health expansion, mental health services and education and training to best serve our nation's Veterans. In FY 2010, an additional \$250 million was allocated to support rural outpatient clinic development, fee-basis care and clinical programs.

#### **Enhancing Support to American Indian Veterans: New Outreach Initiatives**

There are more than 383,000 American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans living today. With greater proportions of American Indian and Alaska Natives in today's military, their proportion of the Veteran population is projected to increase. VA's new Office of Tribal Government relations will increase outreach efforts to the more than 550 federally-recognized Tribal governments and encourage Native American Veterans enrollment in VA services. VA is currently updating and expanding its working agreements with the Indian Health Service to better coordinate and deliver care to Native American Veterans.

## **Opening the Door: More Priority 8 Veterans**

VA continues its aggressive efforts to notify Veterans of the Administration's initiative to expand eligibility for Veterans' health care to over 500,000 veterans who were previously denied access to VA by 2013 for financial reasons.

## **Addressing Veterans' Issues:**

### **Herbicides Exposure**

Addressing a critical need, VA established a presumptive service connection for Vietnam Veterans exposed to herbicides exposure, including Agent Orange, with hairy-cell leukemia and other chronic B-cell leukemias, Parkinson's disease, and ischemic heart disease. Over 250,000 Veterans have already been identified as potentially eligible for essential health care and disability compensation.

### **Gulf War Veterans Illnesses**

In 2009, VA established a Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Task Force to comprehensively review both VA's programs for, and the health concerns of, 1990-1991 Gulf War Veterans. The extensive Task Force Report is near completion and has received unprecedented public comment, with over 150 ideas with 300 additional comments received through a new social media tool, *UserVoice* ([gulfwarvoice.uservoice.com](http://gulfwarvoice.uservoice.com)), allowing 189 unique participants to submit their input. VA also published its implementing rule regarding nine diseases associated with service in the Persian Gulf War which will make it easier for Veterans to obtain critical health care and disability compensation for these diseases.

## ***Delivering Essential Services and Support:***

### **VA Preparedness: Ready for Any Emergency**

VA greatly enhanced its readiness posture by creating an Integrated Operations Center to coordinate and execute a wide range of emergency preparedness and response plans across the federal government and within its own ranks. From natural disasters to monitoring and supporting H1N1 flu crisis activity, VA continues to demonstrate the ability to plan for contingencies, anticipate and solve problems, and sustain daily operations whether directly for VA or to assist other federal agencies. During the H1N1 flu epidemic, VA vaccinated more than 692,000 Veteran patients and over 133,000 staff. In 2010, VA will open a \$32 million facility in Martinsburg, WV that will enhance readiness capability. More recently, VA has established a Task Force and response plan to assist in the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill crisis, sent a response team to Haiti following the devastating earthquake, and provided two mobile work stations to the flooded Rocky Boy Indian Reservation in Montana.

## **Joint Programs: DoD/VA Assisting in Servicemember Transition**

In 2009, the Disability Evaluation System (DES) pilot program expanded to 27 sites, conducting 13,241 Medical Evaluation Boards. At these sites, VA and DoD use a single separation examination and rating for separating Servicemembers in lieu of two separate examinations usually required of our outgoing military, dramatically reducing processing time. VA also expanded its “Benefits Delivery at Discharge” program and established a “Quick Start” program to expedite benefits processing for separating Servicemembers. Currently, the average reductions in processing time for these programs are 63 percent and 31.5 percent, respectively. Additionally, VA, DoD and Labor unveiled an improved collaborative Web site for Wounded Warriors in February 2010.

## **Assisting Veterans and Homeowners: Providing both Service and Security**

Last year, VA managed approximately 1.3 million active home loans obtained through its highly-successful Loan Guaranty Program. Despite uncertainty in today’s housing market, VA-backed mortgage loans had a significantly lower foreclosure rate than any other type of home loans in the industry. Under Servicemembers Group Life Insurance, VA provided coverage totaling \$1.3 trillion to 6.1 million individuals. Under other VA-administered life insurance programs, VA provided an additional \$14 billion in coverage to 1.2 million Veterans. VA also conducted a first-year review of its Traumatic Injury Protection coverage under the Traumatic Servicemembers’ Group Life Insurance Program (TSGLI). Its significant success led to an expansion of the program to cover six additional types of impairment and also liberalized eligibility for other conditions. An additional \$35 million in TSGLI benefits have been paid to seriously injured Servicemembers and Veterans under the expansion.

## **VA Innovation: Visionary Solutions in Service to Veterans**

VA created the first department-wide program to bring the most promising innovations to VA’s most important challenges by involving employees and the private sector in the creation of visionary solutions in service to Veterans. As VA’s flagship Open Government initiative, the VA Innovation Initiative (VAi2), completed its first two competitions in early 2010 and generated over 10,000 ideas with participation by nearly 50,000 VA employees. \$20 million has been invested in the most promising proposals from these two competitions. In June 2010, VA launched its Industry Innovation Competition with nearly \$80 million focused on such key areas as housing technology to address Veteran homelessness, advances in telehealth, new models of dialysis and kidney disease prevention, improvements in polytrauma care, and systems to help launch and sustain Veteran-owned small businesses.

## **Open Government: VA Leads the Way**

As part of the Administration's Open Government initiative, VA contributed 30 valuable data sets, including Hospital Quality for 2008 and 2009, Homeless Grant and Per Diem for 2009, and geo-coded data for VA facilities. These data sets have been downloaded by the public over 14,000 times.

## **Communicating with Veterans: VA Enhances its New-Media Environment**

VA has dramatically increased its communication methods with Veterans by re-launching a more dynamic and user-friendly Web site and establishing a new-media presence on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to improve communication with our clients and stakeholders. VA's Facebook page is the fastest-growing FB page among Cabinet-level agencies, enabling even greater public engagement. In December 2009, VA had roughly 5,000 fans. By mid-July 2010, VA had 40,000 fans. In April 2010, VA also used online services to solicit feedback from the public on the draft report of the Gulf War Veteran Illness Task Force. During the 30-day comment period, VA received 150 new suggestions, 300 comments, and 2,100 votes from 189 voters. In 2010, VA's media team continues its success when it earned two Regional EMMY Awards for its broadcasts and several advertising awards for Public Service Announcements.

## **VA Transparency: Health Quality Data Now On-Line**

In March 2010, VA joined the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service (CMS), *Hospital Compare* program. This includes providing VA's extensive medical quality and safety data for posting on a consumer-oriented Website that allows viewers to compare how well hospitals provide recommended care to patients. It implements the important outcomes and performance measurement data used by the Joint Commission in its hospital accreditation process. Until all relevant VA medical quality data can be reviewed by CMS and posted on the *Hospital Compare* Web site, VA has created its own VA Compare website, [www.hospitalcompare.va.gov](http://www.hospitalcompare.va.gov), and posted all the information for public viewing.

## **Outreach: National Plan to Enhance Community Activities**

For the first time in the department's history, VA established National Outreach Office to coordinate all of VA's outreach activities. The office conducted a comprehensive audit of VA outreach activities department-wide and developed a national plan to enhance VA outreach to Veterans and their families.

## **VA Research: Moving to Improve Veterans' Lives**

VA's historic and highly-regarded research program invested more than \$510 million in over 2,193 studies in 2009 to pursue treatment, systems research, and discovery at over 100 different facilities across the country. VA also received more than \$515 million in other VA funding and \$433 million in federal and \$195 million research grants from

other sources. VA understands that many of our warriors who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan endure mental trauma. To address this issue, VA supported more than 100 research projects for a total of more than \$26 million on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In 2009, a VA research facility won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, America's highest honor for innovation and performance, presented annually by the President. The award was based on medical research involving 90,000 patients, ultimately benefitting millions of Veterans and other Americans.

### **Hiring Veterans: VA Advocates for Small Businesses and Veteran Employment**

VA's aggressive implementation of Public Law 109-461, the Veterans First Contracting Program, greatly expands opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) and Veteran-Owned Small Business (VSOB). In FY 2009, VA's total award to small businesses was \$4.8 Billion, or 34.5% of all VA procurements, far exceeding the national goal of 23% for small business procurements. VA's FY 2010 internal goals have increased for small business from 28.7% to 33.5%, service-disabled from 7% to 10%, and Veteran-owned from 10% to 12%. VA will invest over \$10 million in each of the next two years to eliminate the SDVSOB/VSOB contractor verification backlog. The Secretaries of VA and Labor are co-chairing the first Intergovernmental Council on Veterans Employment, working with the Office of Personnel Management to reform federal hiring practices in order to expand Veteran employment opportunities. Of the 304,000 employees in the Department's workforce, approximately 30% are Veterans (90,431 as of June 30, 2010) and 8.9% are service-connected disabled Veterans (27,027). Last year, VA Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment career counseling, job training and job placement services assisted 8,238 disabled Veterans in obtaining and maintaining suitable jobs.

### **Improving Business Practices: Acquisition and Program Reforms**

An innovative enterprise-level approach to acquisition, information technology, human resources, and financial management is driving substantial change within VA. Business process reengineering, along with integrated and centralized functions, are creating unprecedented synergy, asset visibility, and informed decisions within VA. VA announced in February 2010 that all of VA's nearly 300 information technology projects will be managed under its rigorous program management and accountability system (PMAS). PMAS assures only programs that meet strict time and performance standards will be funded.

### **Strengthening VA Performance: Training, Development and Accountability**

To ensure VA has the best leadership available, VA established a comprehensive Senior Leader Management Program, as well as a Corporate Senior Executive Management Office, to improve standardization and transparency in the management of more than 500 Senior Executives in its workforce. VA is creating and enforcing clearer and more consistent standards of performance and accountability. In FY 2010, VA initiated a \$300 million Human Resources Training Program to dramatically change the



way VA conducts business by focusing on three core aspects: talent acquisition, workforce engagement, and people development. To strengthen the skills of its information technology workforce in one of the largest federal uses of virtual training, VA opened a national training center in Falling Waters, WV, a hub for interactive training offered with several regional training sites.

### **Investing in the Future: The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)**

As of June 30, VA has obligated \$1.7 billion (93 percent) of its Recovery Act dollars. Veteran-owned small businesses currently account for 75 percent of all VA Recovery Act-awarded contracts. The National Cemetery Administration has obligated nearly \$46 million to improve our VA cemeteries as national shrines that memorialize and honor Veterans. The Veterans Health Administration has invested nearly \$957 million to improve the safety, security and effectiveness of over 141 facilities. Over 98 percent of all contracts were competed, and over \$122 million has been obligated to state Veterans homes. Recovery Act funds enabled VA to hire nearly 2,300 new claims processors, issue over \$465 million in one-time payments to eligible Veterans, and commit \$400 million to energy and green initiatives. Every dollar spent was posted on the Internet. VA created over 2,100 jobs as a result of ARRA funding (through June 2010). As of the end of June and as a key component of the total ARRA dollars spent, VA has obligated in excess of \$350 million for projects to produce renewable energy through the installation of solar photovoltaic, wind, and geothermal projects, and targeted a wide variety of energy conservation measures.

### **VA Construction: Building to Meet Veteran Needs**

VA invested \$1.9 billion in 123 major leases and construction projects for new facilities and major renovations in 31 states and Puerto Rico. Construction of five medical centers valued at \$3.6 billion was approved with groundbreakings held in Denver, Colorado, and New Orleans, LA. These are the first new medical centers since 1995. In February 2010, VA announced contracts totaling \$41.5 million to build a Polytrauma center at the San Antonio medical center to care for the most seriously injured Veterans and to improve the existing facility. VA is finalizing a Strategic Capital Investment Plan to greatly enhance our ability to manage infrastructure development in the years ahead.

### **“By the Numbers”: VA Delivering to Veterans**

- 300,640 employees serving Veterans daily
- \$124.3 billion budget for FY 2010
  - \$69.7 billion in mandatory spending (benefits and pensions)
  - \$54.5 billion in discretionary spending (including medical)
- \$40.7 billion in disability compensation benefits
- \$4.1 billion in pension payments
- 106,360 interments in 130 national cemeteries
- 5.7 million Veterans receiving health care
- \$510 million in research

- 7.26 million insured Servicemembers and Veterans
- 1.37 million home loans in force
- \$1.9 billion in major facilities leases, construction
- \$ 957 million in non-recurring maintenance
- \$19.6 billion in acquisition of goods and services