



Department of
Veterans Affairs

Office of Public Affairs
Media Relations

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Fact Sheet

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Facts about the Department of Veterans Affairs

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was established on March 15, 1989, succeeding the Veterans Administration. It is responsible for providing federal benefits to veterans and their dependents. Headed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, VA is the second largest of the 15 Cabinet departments and operates nationwide programs for health care, financial assistance and burial benefits.

Of the 26 million veterans currently alive, nearly three-quarters served during a war or an official period of conflict. About a quarter of the nation's population, approximately 70 million people, are potentially eligible for VA benefits and services because they are veterans, family members or survivors of veterans.

The responsibility to care for veterans, spouses, survivors and dependents can last a long time. The last dependent of a Revolutionary War veteran died in 1911. About 439 children and widows of Spanish-American War veterans still receive VA compensation or pensions. Six children of Civil War veterans still draw VA benefits.

VA's fiscal year 2003 projected spending is \$59.6 billion -- \$25.9 billion for health care, \$32.8 billion for benefits, \$132 million for national cemetery operations, \$455 million for all VA construction and \$322 million for departmental administration.

Compensation and Pension

In fiscal year 2002, VA spent \$25 billion in disability compensation, death compensation and pension to 3.3 million people. About 2.7 million veterans receive disability compensation or pensions from VA. Also receiving VA benefits are 568,852 spouses, children and parents of deceased veterans. Among them are 143,437 survivors of Vietnam era veterans and 273,680 survivors of World War II veterans.

Education and Training

Since 1944, when the first GI Bill began, more than 21 million veterans, service members and family members have received \$75 billion in GI Bill benefits for education and training.

The number of GI Bill recipients includes 7.8 million veterans from World War II, 2.4 million from the Korean War and 8.2 million post-Korean and Vietnam era veterans and active duty personnel. VA also has assisted in the education of more than 750,000 dependents of veterans whose deaths or total disabilities were service-connected.

In 2002, VA helped pay for the education or training of 324,505 veterans and active-duty personnel, 85,766 reservists and National Guardsmen and 53,888 survivors.

Medical Care

Perhaps the most visible of all VA benefits and services is health care. From 54 hospitals in 1930, VA's health care system has grown to 163 hospitals, with at least one in each of the 48 contiguous states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. VA operates more than 850 ambulatory care and community-based outpatient clinics, 137 nursing homes, 43 domiciliaries and 73 comprehensive home-care programs. VA health care facilities provide a broad spectrum of medical, surgical and rehabilitative care.

More than 4.5 million people received care in VA health care facilities in 2002. VA is used annually by approximately 75 percent of all disabled and low-income veterans. In 2002, VA treated 564,700 patients in VA hospitals and contract hospitals, 50,267 in nursing homes and 22,541 in domiciliaries. VA's outpatient clinics registered approximately 46.5 million visits.

VA manages the largest medical education and health professions training program in the United States. VA facilities are affiliated with 107 medical schools, 55 dental schools and more than 1,200 other schools across the country. Each year, about 81,000 health professionals are trained in VA medical centers. More than half of the physicians practicing in the United States have had part of their professional education in the VA health care system.

VA's medical system serves as a backup to the Defense Department during national emergencies and as a federal support organization during major disasters.

During the last five years, VA has put its health care facilities under 21 networks, which provide more medical services to more veterans and family members than at any time during VA's long history.

VA has experienced unprecedented growth in the medical system workload over the past few years. The number of patients treated increased by over 9.5 percent from 2001 to 2002.

To receive VA health care benefits most veterans must enroll. More than 6.8 million veterans are enrolled in the VA health care system as of October 2002. When they enroll, they are placed in priority groups or categories that help VA manage health care services within budgetary constraints and ensure quality care for those enrolled.

Some veterans are exempted from having to enroll. People who do not have to enroll include veterans with a service-connected disability of 50 percent or more, veterans who were discharged from the military within one year but have not yet been rated for a VA disability benefit and veterans seeking care for only a service-connected disability.

Severely disabled veterans receive priority access to care. Veterans with service-connected disabilities rated 50 percent or greater receive priority for hospitalization and outpatient care for both service-connected and non-service-connected treatment.

Since 1979, VA's Readjustment Counseling Service has operated Vet Centers, which provide psychological counseling for war-related trauma, community outreach, case management and referral activities, plus supportive social services to veterans and family members. There are 206 Vet Centers.

Since the first Vet Center opened, approximately 1.6 million veterans have been helped. Every year, the Vet Centers serve over 126,000 veterans and handle at least 900,000 visits from veterans and family members.

Vet Centers are open to any veteran who served in the military in a combat theater during wartime or anywhere during a period of armed hostilities. Vet Centers also provide trauma counseling to veterans who were sexually assaulted or harassed while on active duty.

VA provides health care and benefits to more than 100,000 homeless veterans each year. While the proportion of veterans among the homeless is declining, VA actively engages veterans in outreach, medical care, benefits assistance and transitional housing. VA has made more than 300 grants for transitional housing, service centers and vans for outreach and transportation to state and local governments, tribal governments, non-profit community and faith-based service providers.

Programs for alcoholism, drug addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder have been expanded in recent years, along with attention to environmental hazards.

Indispensable to providing America's veterans with quality medical care are more than 118,000 volunteers in VA's Voluntary Service who donate more than 13 million hours each year to bring companionship and care to hospitalized veterans.

Research

In 2002, funding for VA research was \$371 million. Another \$377 million from VA's medical care account supports research efforts. Funding from the National Institutes of Health and other foundations, combined with supporting funds from pharmaceutical companies, contributed another \$624 million to VA research. VA currently conducts more than 15,000 research projects at 115 VA medical centers.

While providing high quality health care to the nation's veterans, VA also conducts an array of research on some of the most difficult challenges facing medical science today. VA has become a world leader in such research areas as aging, women's health, AIDS, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues. VA research has improved medical care for veterans and the nation.

VA researchers played key roles in developing the cardiac pacemaker, the CT scan, radioimmunoassay and improvements in artificial limbs. The first liver transplant in the world was performed by a VA surgeon-researcher. VA clinical trials established the effectiveness of new treatments for tuberculosis, schizophrenia and high blood pressure. The "Seattle Foot," developed in VA, allows people with amputations to run and jump. VA contributions to medical knowledge have won VA scientists many prestigious awards, including the Nobel Prize.

Seventy-five percent of VA researchers are practicing physicians. Because of their dual roles, VA research often immediately benefits patients. Functional electrical stimulation, a technology using controlled electrical currents to activate paralyzed muscles, is being developed at VA clinical facilities and laboratories throughout the country. Through this technology, paraplegic patients have been able to grasp objects, stand, and even walk short distances.

Special VA “centers of excellence” throughout the nation conduct research in rehabilitation, health services and medical conditions including AIDS, alcoholism, schizophrenia, stroke and Parkinson’s disease. Multi-center clinical trials investigate the best therapy for various diseases. Current projects include testing aspirin therapy for heart patients, surgical treatment to reduce the risk of stroke and treatment options for prostate cancer.

VA investigators continue to make major contributions to the understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder and Agent Orange exposure, both research areas resulting from the Vietnam War. More recently, VA has conducted a number of Gulf War-related research projects and has two environmental hazards research centers focusing on the possible health effects of environmental exposures among Gulf War veterans.

Home Loan Assistance

Since 1944, when VA began helping veterans purchase homes under the original GI Bill, through September 2002, about 16.9 million VA home loan guarantees have been issued, with a total value of \$748 billion. VA began fiscal year 2003 with 2.8 million active home loans reflecting an amortized loan amount totaling \$218.5 billion.

In fiscal year 2002, VA guaranteed 320,000 loans valued at \$40.5 billion. VA’s programs for specially adapted housing helped about 575 disabled veterans with grants totaling more than \$23 million last year.

Insurance

VA operates one of the largest life insurance programs in the world and the seventh largest one in the United States. VA directly administers six life insurance programs with 4.3 million policies in force having a face value of \$710 billion.

In 2002, VA returned \$625 million in dividends to 4.8 million veterans and service members holding some of these VA life insurance policies. In addition, VA supervises the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance and the Veterans' Group Life Insurance programs, which provide \$728 billion in insurance coverage to veterans, active-duty members, reservists and Guardsmen, plus 3.1 million spouses and children.

The high customer satisfaction with VA's Insurance Center is marked by a score of 90 in the American Customer Satisfaction Index, an independent survey that measures the performance of private sector and government agencies. Private-sector insurance companies scored an average 75.

VA's National Cemeteries

In 1973, most Army-administered national cemeteries were transferred to VA, which now manages them through its National Cemetery Administration. Currently, VA maintains 120 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico.

Interments in VA national cemeteries in 2002 increased by 5.3 percent over 2001, for a total of 89,329. That number is likely to increase to 109,000 in 2008. In 2002, VA provided more than 348,000 headstones or markers for veterans' graves. Since taking over the veterans cemetery program in 1973, VA has provided more than 8.1 million headstones and markers.

Between 1999 and 2002, VA opened five new national cemeteries: the Gerald B. H. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery near Albany, N.Y.; the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery near Chicago; the Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery; the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery near Cleveland; and the Fort Sill National Cemetery near Oklahoma City. Within the next five years, VA plans to open five more national cemeteries. Those areas are: Atlanta, Detroit, South Florida, Sacramento (Calif.) and Pittsburgh. Achieving this objective will advance VA's goal of serving 85 percent of veterans with a national cemetery or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their homes by 2008.

VA administers the Presidential Memorial Certificate program, which provides engraved certificates signed by the president to commemorate honorably discharged, deceased veterans. They are sent to the veteran's next of kin and loved ones. VA provided 290,000 certificates in 2002.

VA also administers the State Cemetery Grants Program, which encourages development of state veterans cemeteries. VA provides up to 100 percent of the funds to develop, expand or improve veterans cemeteries operated and maintained by the states. More than \$149 million has been awarded for 49 operational veterans cemeteries in 29 states and Guam. Six state cemeteries are under construction. In 2002, state cemeteries that received VA grants buried more than 17,177 eligible veterans and family members. This figure represented an 11.5 percent increase over the previous year.

VA Employees

On VA's rolls as of February 28, 2003 were 224,724 employees. Among all departments and agencies of the federal government, only the Department of Defense has a larger work force. Of the total number of VA employees, 202,709 were in the Veterans Health Administration, 13,479 in the Veterans Benefits Administration, 1,432 in the National Cemetery System, 3,166 in the Veterans Canteen Service and 409 in the Revolving Supply Fund. The rest - 3,477 employees - are in various staff offices VA is a leader in hiring veterans.

About 53 percent of all male employees are veterans. As of September 30, 2002, VA had 8,508 women employees who served in the U.S. armed forces. About 61 percent of male and 33 percent of female veteran employees served during the Vietnam War. More than 7 percent of all VA employees are disabled veterans and five hold the Medal of Honor.

Chronological History of the Department of Veterans Affairs

- 1930....The Veterans Administration created by Executive Order 5398, signed by President Herbert Hoover on July 21. At that time, there were 54 hospitals, 4.7 million living veterans and 31,600 employees.
- 1933....The Board of Veterans Appeals established.
- 1944....On June 22, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944" (Public Law 346, passed unanimously by the 78th Congress), more commonly known as "The GI Bill of Rights," offering home loan and education benefits to veterans.
- 1946....The Department of Medicine & Surgery established, succeeded in 1989 by the Veterans Health Services and Research Administration, renamed the Veterans Health Administration in 1991.
- 1953....The Department of Veterans Benefits established, succeeded in 1989 by the Veterans Benefits Administration.
- 1973....The National Cemetery System – renamed the National Cemetery Administration in 1998 – created when Congress transferred 82 national cemeteries from the Army to VA. The Army kept Arlington National Cemetery and the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.
- 1988....Legislation to elevate VA to Cabinet status signed by President Reagan.
- 1989....On March 15, VA became the 14th Department in the President's Cabinet.

Secretaries of Veterans Affairs

Anthony J. Principi	2001 – Present	Max Cleland	1977 – 1981
Togo D. West, Jr.	1998 – 2000	Richard L. Roudebush	1974 – 1977
Jesse Brown	1993 – 1997	Donald E. Johnson	1969 – 1974
Edward J. Derwinski	1989 – 1992	William J. Driver	1965 – 1969

Administrators of Veterans Affairs

Edward J. Derwinski	1989	John S. Gleason	1961 – 1964
Thomas K. Turnage	1986 – 1989	Sumner G. Whittier	1957 – 1961
Harry N. Walters	1982 – 1986	Harvey V. Higley	1953 – 1957
Robert P. Nimmo	1981 – 1982	Carl R. Gray	1948 – 1953
		Omar Bradley	1945 – 1948
		Frank T. Hines	1930 – 1945

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