



Federal Update for September 1 - 5, 2014



DoD/VA Mental Health ► Obama Announces New Initiatives

On 26 AUG President Obama announced 19 executive actions aimed at improving mental health care for servicemembers and veterans. Although many of the announced initiatives are already in place or have been under development for some time, there are several new initiatives focused on improving mental health treatment and support for currently serving and veterans and reducing the incidence of suicides in both the currently serving and veteran populations. The new initiatives include:

- Supporting a warm hand off from DoD to the VA by enrolling all servicemembers receiving mental health treatment in the DoD's In-Transition Program to ensure they are connected to a VA provider;
- Altering the VA drug formulary to match DoD's to allow servicemembers to continue using the same medications once enrolled in the VA;
- Expanding the popular mental health peer support programs to primary care settings in both VA and DoD; and
- Providing all first responders on military bases and DoD locations with opioid overdose reversal kits.

Further, a conference will be held this fall focusing on brain research, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. The VA and the Treasury Department will also partner to train volunteer tax preparers on mental health awareness. In spite of all of the efforts in place and in the works, suicide continues to claim the life of an active duty servicemember nearly every day and 22 veterans per day. Research reveals that combat deployments are not the only factor that leads servicemembers and veterans to take their own lives. Personal relationships, financial problems, drug and alcohol use contributes significantly. Speaking on the risk of suicide, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno recently said, "I want to take the time to communicate to our Army family that this can happen

to anyone, soldiers and family members don't always wear their scars on the outside; we may never see the struggles that someone is going through unless we take the time to ask." [Source: MOAA Leg Up 29 Aug 2014 ++]

Exchange Online Shopping Update ► All Vet Use Proposal Roadblocks

A proposal to allow all honorably discharged veterans to shop in the online military exchange has hit some roadblocks. At least one Navy policy official has raised concerns, according to sources who spoke on condition of anonymity. But there is also some opposition within the Defense Department. In addition to a number of questions about the business plan, a main concern is that expanding online access would result in "benefit creep" — access for veterans to brick-and-mortar exchange stores and even to other quality-of-life benefits, sources said. A 6 AUG point paper prepared by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service stresses that AAFES would clearly communicate that the new benefit would apply to online shopping only. "No additional benefits such as access to brick and mortar stores are implied or envisioned," states the document, a copy of which was obtained by Military Times.

The document, providing a business case, was prepared for the DoD Executive Resale Board, following a 29 JUL meeting at which a number of questions were raised. Currently, a limited number of honorably discharged veterans can shop in military exchanges — those who are hospitalized or determined to be 100 percent disabled. But about 90 percent of honorably discharged veterans are ineligible to shop. AAFES notes that expanding the online customer base to all honorably discharged veterans would "offer enormous potential upside for the entire military community." Allowing these additional 18.8 million veterans to shop "has the capacity to generate significant incremental sales and earnings." A majority of those profits would be distributed to morale, welfare and recreation programs, and would be shared with all service branches, depending on branch of service of the veterans doing the shopping. The document does not mention sharing profits with the veteran community or the Veteran Canteen Service, which operates retail stores inside Veterans Affairs Department hospitals.

"The AAFES proposal was formally submitted to DoD on 14 MAY and is currently under review," said DoD spokesman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Nate Christensen. "No

decision has been made, nor is there a timetable for reaching one.” Asked about the Navy’s concerns, spokeswoman Lt. Richlyn Ivey said that service “is receptive to proposals that recognize and honor the contributions and sacrifices of our veterans. As with any potential change to statute and/or policy, a thorough evaluation to determine the viability and impact of the proposition is necessary.” The 12-page AAFES document was prepared in response to a request from the DoD Executive Resale Board for additional information. In an email sent to the board members 7 AUG, a defense official encouraged them to include questions they may have in feedback provided to AAFES CEO Tom Shull after they reviewed the business case. “Hoping that all agree that the Board’s consideration of this proposal will benefit from an open exchange and discussion of any and all questions or concerns,” wrote Stephanie Barna, acting assistant secretary of defense for readiness and force management.

The AAFES point paper refers to another concern — how online veteran shoppers would be validated. AAFES officials have said planning has already started between AAFES and the Defense Manpower Data Center to establish an online verification process. The only true “con,” in AAFES’ view, is the inability to quickly move on the veterans’ online shopping benefits. Each month of delay in implementing the initiative is costing DoD \$8 million to \$14 million in profits and is costing MWR \$5 million to \$9 million in dividends, the point paper states. AAFES has been taking steps to shore up its financial position, reducing its overhead by \$250 million over the last three years. In 2013, it contributed \$208 million in dividends to MWR programs out of \$332 million in profits.

As the Army and Air Force have reduced their personnel end strength, AAFES has seen a 10 percent decrease in sales. “While the organization’s intent is to maintain the same level of service, earnings and dividends, [AAFES] may be unable to meet these objectives without this change in policy,” said AAFES spokesman Judd Anstey, when asked what it could mean to AAFES’ viability if the proposal is turned down. AAFES contends the new plan would require only a “modest change” to DoD policy, not a change in law. That remains to be seen; if the Executive Resale Board makes a recommendation to the Pentagon, DoD general counsel would determine whether a change in law would be required.

[Source: NavyTimes | Karen Jowers | Aug 25, 2014 ++]

Food Banks ► Military Use Data Disputed by Pentagon

The Pentagon's personnel chief is taking exception to statistics from a recent study that concluded 25 percent of military households use food banks. "I dispute that number ... I think that's totally incorrect," Jessica Wright, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, said at an 18 AUG meeting of the DoD Military Family Readiness Council. That said, she added, "I know there are members of our force who go to food banks and that's OK if they need to do that." The nonprofit Feeding America stated that one out of four households with a current military member is being served by the group's network of 200 food banks spread across all 50 states. But it is unclear how that military percentage compares to the general population; the report states that one in seven people in the U.S. uses food banks, but counting individuals is much different than counting households.

The military figure includes not only active-duty households, but also those of National Guard and Reserve members, whose financial circumstances offer differ significantly from active-duty families and may be adversely or positively affected by being called to full-time active duty. In addition, 15 percent of the clients surveyed by Feeding America are households of veterans who have no current links to the military. In 2013, the organization, which provides food to about 15.5 million households each year, surveyed about 60,000 client households of its food banks and found that about 4 percent had at least one person currently serving in the military. The group multiplied 15.5 million by 4 percent to reach the conclusion that it serves 620,000 current military households. Then they divided that number by the 2.5 million active-duty and Reserve component service members reported by DoD in 2012 to determine that 25 percent of all military households seek help from food banks.

Defense officials contend that food bank clients have very different demographic characteristics from the military population with regards to age, race, gender and education. For example, 51 percent of those surveyed by Feeding America were over age 50. So without making statistical adjustments to match the survey sample with the military population, it is impossible to accurately calculate an estimated percentage of military households using food banks, officials said. A

spokeswoman for Feeding America wasn't immediately available for comment. Wright said she will ask her personnel and readiness directorate's senior enlisted adviser to put together a "how-to" fact sheet for service members to apply for the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance, designed to provide supplemental income for families who need it. At the moment, 668 fulltime active-duty members and activated guardsmen and reservists are receiving it, she said, noting that others may qualify for it but have not applied. "We'll try to get that to the force to say if you're eligible and if you want to apply, this is available to you," she said.

Service members with large families and qualifying incomes may be eligible for monthly entitlements through the supplemental allowance program; more information is available at www.dmdc.osd.mil/fssa. "We don't ever want a family to go either hungry or in need," Wright said. "Our job is to take care of them." The National Military Family Association contends that the number of military families living on the financial edge is higher than it should be. "I can't speak to Feeding America's research because we were not a part of it, but I do know where the financial hardships come from: unemployment or underemployment of military spouses, frequent moves, lower income after deployments and youth and inexperience with financial matters," said Joyce Raezer, executive director of the association, in a statement from the organization in response to the study's results.

Raezer said more military families are on the edge because of military downsizing and other issues, such as the cap placed on the last military pay raise that kept the raise slightly below the rise in inflation. And some service members are reluctant to seek help from their commands partly because they're embarrassed, she said. "With so much uncertainty over downsizing, they don't want to do anything to draw attention to themselves," Raezer said. Unlike federal programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), those who go to a food bank aren't required to prove eligibility, Wright said. Anyone can go to food banks, the majority of which are operated by faith-based organizations. According to Feeding America's findings, in the food bank client households surveyed, 5.8 percent of "military families" included at least one senior citizen; 2.3 percent had at least one child; and 3.6 percent included neither senior citizens nor children. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | Aug 19, 2014 ++]

Sequestration Update ► 2016 Concerns

For the past three years, US military officials have frequently voiced opposition to defense budget caps that went into effect in 2013. But for the past eight months, US defense officials have spoken less about sequestration and more about immediate plans for this year and next. After all, Congress agreed on a budget plan for 2014 and 2015 that boosted Defense Department spending by more than \$30 billion above the levels mandated under the Budget Control Act. But now as crunch time begins inside the Pentagon as the services' craft their 2016 budget plans, sequestration fears have returned. And at the annual Space and Missile Defense Symposium here last week, numerous officials used speeches to warn of the looming defense budget caps. "[20]16 scares the heck out of me," Air Force Lt. Gen. John Hyten, then-vice commander of Air Force Space Command, told a small group of reporters after a 12 AUG speech. Hyten pinned on his fourth star and became the head of Space Command on 15 AUG. "Our [operations and maintenance funding] is very different in our command. It's bad on the aviation side, but they can ground squadrons. We can't." The problem, the general said, is that the entire military relies on satellites. The command's GPS satellites are used by the military, commercial industry and civilians globally. Many cuts offered up by the command when sequestration hit in 2013 were rejected because of the negative operational impact, Hyten said. "Everything we put forth is critical to some military mission," he said.

Army Gen. Charles Jacoby, head of US Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, said during a 13 AUG speech that it is "virtually impossible right now to make a strategic decision" due to funding unpredictability. "When you go to the Hill ... old friends are not friendly on this subject and old enemies are still enemies," he said. "It's really a different world approaching Congress about the budget." While the military has been raising concerns about sequestration for years, Jacoby said others need to speak up. "What we really need is other voices to join that because the voices in uniform are not carrying the day in [congressional] committees that they used to carry the day," he said. The general said Pentagon programs "won't survive if sequestration returns."

Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., the ranking Republican on the Senate Budget Committee and member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, voiced his

sequestration concerns, too. "We've been looking at the numbers and wrestling with these numbers for some time. The thing that worries me the most ... is the defense budget," he said Aug. 13. "There are a lot of places that we can save money. We are already saving a lot of money in the Defense Department. But meeting our national security challenges does require money. It requires a significant investment and a substance, money, that we have too little of."

Sessions said he is looking for places to save money and invest in defense. The senator said he will meet with Defense Department officials in the coming weeks about the issue. "I'll be spending more time in Washington in August than I ever have," he said. Both the House and Senate are in recess throughout the month. Giving DoD more time to prepare for the spending cuts might soften the blow, Sessions said, noting high global security threats could advise against defense spending cuts. "It simply may be that the Defense Department cannot, under the current global environment we find ourselves in, meet these targets and we're going to have to have more money," he said. "That is a very distinct possibility."

[Source: Defense News | Marcus Weisgerber | Aug 19, 2014 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,539) Korean War (7,822) Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,642), 1991 Gulf War (0), and OEF/OIF (6). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/accounted_for.

For additional information on the Defense Department's mission to account for missing Americans, visit the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) web site at <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo>

or call or call (703) 699-1169. The remains of the following MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

Vietnam - None

Korea – None

World War II

- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 18 AUG that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing since World War II, have been identified and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Pfc. Cecil E. Harris, 19, of Shelbyville, Tenn., will have a funeral Aug. 29, in Chattanooga, Tenn., and will be buried Oct. 22, in Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C. On Jan. 2, 1945, Harris and elements of the Company D, 179th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division were deployed to France. Harris was a member of the rifle platoon, whose mission was to hold a defensive position, near Dambach, France. During this mission, Harris' platoon was attacked by German forces and was forced to withdraw to a more defensible position. After the attack, Harris was reported missing. Between January 12 and May 20, 1949, the American Graves Registration Command (AGRC) conducted investigations on the loss of Harris, but were unsuccessful in locating his remains. On Sept. 3, 2013, the American Battlefield Monuments Commission (ABMC) contacted the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) to inform them a private citizen, while hiking near Dambach, found possible human remains and an identification tag with Harris' name. French authorities took possession of the remains. From Sept. 9-11, 2013, a JPAC recovery team excavated a burial site in Dambach recovering possible human remains, personal effects, and military gear that correlated to Harris. To identify Harris' remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used forensic identification tools such as dental comparison with his records and mitochondrial DNA, which matched Harris' sister and niece.
- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 20 AUG that two U. S. servicemen, missing from World War II, have been identified and are being returned to their families for burial with full military honors. The two servicemen are Army Air Force Staff Sgts. Robert E. Howard, 21, of Moravia, Iowa, and David R. Kittredge, 22, of

Oneida, Wis. The individually identified remains of Howard will be buried on July 19, in Moulton, Iowa. The individually identified remains of Kittredge will be buried on Aug. 13, in Green Bay, Wis. The remains that could not be individually identified will be buried as a group in a single casket, at a future date at Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C. On April 16, 1945, three aircraft were flying in a formation on a bombing raid to Wittenberg, Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany, when the pilots of two other aircraft reported seeing Howard and Kittredge's aircraft hit by enemy fire. The B-26B descended into a deep dive and exploded upon ground impact. In 2007, a German aircraft researcher interviewed eyewitnesses, who reported seeing two deceased crew members buried near the crash site under an apple tree. He also reported the crew members as being exhumed in 1947 or 1948, by an allied recovery team. In June 2012, a German national informed the U.S. government that he found possible human remains in Muhlangen, which he believed to have been associated with an April 1945, B-26B crash, and turned them over to the local police. In July 2012, a JPAC team began excavating the site recovering human remains, personal effects and aircraft wreckage. JPAC also took custody of the remains that the local German national had previously recovered. To identify Howard's remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools such as mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). To identify Kittredge's remains, scientists from JPAC and AFDIL also used mtDNA and dental comparisons, which matched his records.

[Source: http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ Aug 15, 2014 ++]

VA Secretary Update ► Message to Vets | Sustainable Accountability

A MESSAGE FROM THE VA SECRETARY

August 28, 2014

Sustainable Accountability

Over these first weeks as your Secretary, I have spoken to many of you across the country and shared how grateful I am for the work you do each day. I am inspired by your focus on our mission, your commitment to our values, and by your dedication to serve Veterans with dignity. Today, I signed a new VA policy on

accountability that responds to the President's and Congress' Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA). In accordance with VACAA, our new VA policy streamlines necessary removal and appeals processes for senior executives when the best interest of Veterans is served. In short, the law and our policy allow us to terminate a Senior Executive Service (SES) employee more quickly, where the evidence shows termination is warranted, than we might have previously. Due process rights remain. The new policy does not allow VA to terminate employment without evidence or cause, nor does it guarantee that VA's decision to remove an employee will be upheld on appeal. The law and policy do not change timelines related to front-line employees or lower-level supervisors. SES employees who are impacted by this law will receive more specific detail on our new policy soon.

As our new VA policy takes effect, I want you to understand my professional philosophy on accountability, what I call *sustainable accountability*, and what sustainable accountability means for us—VA employees, striving together to make our Department the high-performing customer service organization Veterans deserve and the American people rightly expect.

First, let me describe what sustainable accountability does not mean—it does not mean that heads always roll. That is an over-simplified, short-sighted, and negative interpretation of accountability, and it is not helpful to what we are about here at VA. Sustainable accountability means ensuring all employees understand how daily work supports our mission, values, and strategy. VA leaders provide resources and help employees understand this relationship so their work can support our mission, values, and strategy. Likewise, employees inform leaders when challenges hinder their ability to succeed. When necessary, leaders make adjustments that give all employees the opportunity to succeed. Whether you are hospital directors, cemetarians, members of the environmental maintenance services teams, or benefits coordinators—whatever your job—understanding and acting on the relationship between VA's mission, values, strategy, and our daily work is an imperative.

Sustainable accountability is about more than top-down, hierarchical behavior modification. It is collaborative. Supervisors provide feedback, every day, to every subordinate to recognize what is going well and identify where improvements are necessary. In that same spirit, employees fulfill their responsibility to Veterans

and to the Department to provide feedback and input on how we can better serve Veterans. That is sustainable accountability; the kind of daily exercise necessary in any high-performance organization.

We have work to do.

To achieve the sustainable accountability that we want, we are going to do a better job training leadership. We will flatten our hierarchical culture to encourage innovation and collaboration. We are going to rate the relative performance of employees—everyone cannot be *the best*. When necessary, we will provide the right training so lower-performing employees have the opportunity to succeed. If that fails, we will move on to the next person so others will have the chance to progress and succeed.

Each day, we must remind ourselves and one another that VA has a noble mission—caring for Veterans “who shall have borne the battle” and their families, as President Abraham Lincoln charged 150 years ago.

We have strong, institutional values—Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence. These are mission-critical ideals that must profoundly influence our day-to-day behavior and performance.

In performing that mission, guided by those values, we will judge the success of our efforts against a single metric—customer outcomes, Veterans’ outcomes. VA is a customer service organization. We serve Veterans.

We hold ourselves accountable to these standards. We do not want VA to just meet a standard. We want VA recognized as *the* standard—in health care and in benefits.

It is both an honor and a privilege to serve as your Secretary.

Robert A. McDonald

VA Physician Qualifications Update ► National Recruiting Initiative

Speaking to a crowd of medical students, residents and faculty at Duke University's School of Medicine, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald on 29 AUG launched a recruiting initiative aimed at bringing the best and brightest health professionals to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) which will ultimately expand access to care for Veterans. "At VA, we have the most inspiring mission and the greatest clients of any healthcare system in the world. That's exactly the message I'm going to share as I speak with health care professionals and students about the value of serving at VA," said Secretary McDonald. "We have taken action to get Veterans off of wait lists and into clinics in the short-term, but in the long-term, in order to provide timely access to care, we need to build capacity by hiring more clinicians. We need the best doctors and nurses serving Veterans, and that is why I will be out recruiting, leveraging the existing relationships and affiliations VA has with many academic institutions, and talking directly to medical professionals about joining us to fulfill our exceptional mission of caring for those who 'shall have borne the battle.'"

VA is taking multiple steps to expand capacity at their facilities, to provide Veterans the timely care they have earned and deserve. In addition to Secretary McDonald's direct messages to clinicians and clinicians-in-training, these steps include:

- Collaborating on a new nursing academic partnership (VA Nursing Academic Partnerships or VANAP) focused on psychiatric and mental health care to build stronger, mutually beneficial relationships between nursing schools and VA facilities.
- Partnering with the Department of Defense Health Affairs, Army, Navy, and Air Force to improve recruitment of recently or soon to be discharged health care professionals. VHA is already taking advantage of known separations of military health care workers.
- Expanding of a pilot program to bring combat medics and corpsmen in to VA facilities as clinicians.
- Improving the credentialing process for VA and DoD health care providers which will involve sharing credentials to speed up the process.
- Expanding of the loan repayment program, as included in the recently passed Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act.

- Considering options to revise pay tables to offer more competitive salaries for VA providers, in comparison to their academic and private practice colleagues.

These actions build on existing recruitment tools, including partnerships between local facilities and academic institutions, loan repayment programs, and scholarship programs. “In order to recruit and retain the highest quality medical professionals, VA needs to be competitive with other healthcare systems, and ultimately that is how we provide the best care to our Veteran patients,” said Interim Under Secretary for Health Carolyn M. Clancy. To learn more about how to work in VA health care and serve our Nation’s Veterans, refer to:

www.vacareers.va.gov. [Source: VA News Release Aug 29, 2014 ++]

VA Claim Numbers ► Why so High | Up 55% Since 2000

America’s population of living veterans fell by almost five million, or 17 percent, from 2000 to 2013. So why did the number of veterans drawing disability compensation climb by 55 percent over that period? And why has yearly VA disability payments tripled since 2000 to reach \$60 billion in 2014? The Congressional Budget Office explains why in a new report, and the primary reason is not found among veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. That source of claims is significant but not yet near its peak. A greater factor has been liberalized laws and policies on “service connected” ailments, particularly decisions to compensate Vietnam War veterans for common medical conditions of aging and lifestyle because of an “association” with possible exposure to herbicides used in that war. For example, in 2000 only 38,000 veterans from all war eras were receiving disability compensation for diabetes. By last year, 320,000 veterans from the Vietnam War alone drew diabetes-related compensation.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) expanded its list of diseases presumed caused by Agent Orange to ischemic heart disease, Parkinson’s disease and certain types of leukemia in 2010. By June of last year, that decision had led to VA processing 280,000 claims for the newly presumptive ailments and to making \$4.5 billion in retroactive disability payments. Another factor of growth in VA claims has been a weak labor market, CBO says, which encourages out-of-work or underemployed veterans to apply for disability compensation. Current law allows

them to do so at any age and as often as they like. Indeed, laws enacted in 2000 and 2008 required VA to strengthen the help given to veterans to apply for disability benefits and substantiate claims. VA also increased outreach to veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and eased PTSD diagnostic requirements. All such efforts, CBO says, are aided by the Internet and its capability to relay information quickly, and by websites that offer information on benefits and programs and encourages veterans to submit claims online.

CBO prepared its report, *Veterans' Disability Compensation: Trends and Policy Options*, at the request of the ranking Democrat on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Rep. Mike Michaud of Maine. It can be accessed via <http://www.cbo.gov/publication/45615>. As with most CBO reports, it offers only "objective, impartial analysis" and options, not recommendations. But the options for easing the river of VA compensation claims are, as expected, controversial. Many will be unpopular with veterans and condemned by powerful veteran service organizations, which would seem to make adoption by the Congress or VA unlikely outside of a larger bipartisan package of federal entitlement reforms. For example, CBO floats three options to alter policies on identifying service-connected conditions and to conduct long-term monitoring of disability ratings.

- One would impose a time limit on filing initial claims. CBO notes that in 2012, roughly 43 percent of first-time recipients of disability pay had filed claims while 55 or older, even though most had left service by age 30. Seven percent of new claimants that year were 75 or older. "Many Vietnam veterans, all of whom are now over the age of 55, began to receive compensation recently for such common medical conditions as hearing loss (35,000 new cases in 2012) and tinnitus (40,000 new cases in 2012)," CBO points out. It suggests that veterans could be required to file initial claims within a fixed period of time, for instance within five or 10 or 20 years of leaving active duty, depending on medical condition claimed, because some conditions would take longer than others to become apparent.
- Another option would require more reexaminations of veterans with disability ratings to track changes and thus adjust ratings.
- A third option is to change the "positive-association standard" VA has used to form its list of "presumptive" medical conditions. For example, VA presumes any Vietnam War veteran who has Type II diabetes or heart

disease contracted the condition from wartime exposure to Agent Orange. CBO notes that such a medical finding “does not prove that the occurrence of a disease results from exposure to a particular hazard.” Indeed, using the association standard, says CBO, “can result in providing benefits for conditions that are common in the general population and that may be more strongly associated with non–service-related risk factors such as genetics, aging or lifestyle.” This option would have VA continue to make “a positive association between exposure to a hazard and onset of a disease a necessary criterion for establishing the presumption that a condition is connected to military service, but it would no longer have such an association constitute the sole factor for establishing that presumption.” VA would have to consider “other known risk factors, such as diet and aging, in the development of the medical condition.”

Other CBO options to control disability pay include: an end to Individual Unemployability (IU) benefits to veterans old enough to qualify for social security; dampening cost-of-living adjustments, and restoring the ban on “concurrent receipt” of both VA disability pay and military retirement. Repealing concurrent receipt, CBO says, would have the largest budgetary effect of any option, saving the government \$119 billion over the next 10 years. It notes that “for decades before 2003” military retirement was cut by the amount a retiree drew in VA disability pay. Congress ended that offset for retirees with 20 or more years’ service who have disability ratings of 50 percent or higher or who have combat-related disabilities. Those changes too encouraged more vets to file compensation claim.

In 2000, only nine percent of veterans drew disability compensation and the average yearly payment, in 2014 dollars, was \$8100. Today 16 percent of veterans receive disability pay and it averages \$13,000. CBO says the jump reflects a rise in number and severity of rated ailments, especially for two eras of vets, those who served during Vietnam and the first Gulf War. “In 2000, about 735,000 Vietnam-era veterans were receiving benefits; by 2013, that number had grown to 1.2 million [or] more than 60 percent,” CBO reports. “Over the same period, the number of Gulf War-era veterans receiving benefits rose from 280,000 to 1.3 million -- an almost fivefold increase” so 22 percent of Gulf War vets now draw disability pay. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Tom Philpott | Aug 28, 2014 ++]

VA Appointments Update ► 3+ Month Wait Numbers Reduced by Half

The Department of Veterans Affairs has reduced by half the number of veterans waiting more than three months to see a doctor since a scandal erupted at the agency in spring over delays in health care, according to data released 28 AUG. The agency's health care system for veterans has paid to send nearly 200,000 patients to private doctors in order to speed up care, part of an effort that has decreased average wait times to see primary physicians from 51 to 43 days. Despite those gains, the agency's data tracking efforts, which now span three and a half months, also show some persistent problems: as of 15 AUG, the date of the last data collection, the number of patients who wait more than 30 days to see a doctor remained largely unchanged, at more than 630,000 — roughly 10.5% of the VA's patients. Reported wait times for established patients have also risen consistently since the VA first released figures in mid-May. Established patients seeking primary care have to wait nearly 6 days to see a doctor, up from 3.5 days, according to the latest figures. [Source: USA TODAY | Meghan Hoyer | Aug 28, 2014 ++]

VA HUD-VASH Update ► 33% Reduction in Vet Homelessness

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released 27 AUG a new national estimate of veteran homelessness in the United States. Data collected during the annual Point-in-Time Count conducted in January 2014 shows there were 49,933 homeless veterans in America, a decline of 33 percent (or 24,837 people) since 2010. This includes a nearly 40 percent drop in the number of veterans sleeping on the street. HUD, VA, USICH, and local partners have used evidenced-based practices like Housing First and federal resources like HUD-VASH (the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing voucher program) to get veterans off the street and into stable housing as quickly as possible. Since 2008, the HUD-VASH program has served a total of 74,019 veterans. The program's progress was lauded in the following statements by officials:

- “We have an obligation to ensure that every veteran has a place to call home,” said U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julián Castro. “In just a few years, we have made incredible progress reducing homelessness among veterans, but we have more work to do. HUD will continue collaborating with our federal and local partners to ensure that all of the men and women who have served our country have a stable home and an opportunity to succeed.”
- “The Department of Veterans Affairs and our federal and local partners should be proud of the gains made reducing Veterans’ homelessness,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert McDonald, “but so long as there remains a Veteran living on our streets, we have more work to do.”
- “As a nation, we have proven that homelessness is a problem we can solve,” said U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness Executive Director Laura Green Zeilinger. “Communities all across the country are meeting this costly tragedy with urgency and a focus on helping all veterans and their families achieve safe and stable housing.”

To accelerate progress on meeting the goal of ending veteran homelessness by 2015, First Lady Michelle Obama launched the Administration’s “Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness” in spring 2014. So far, more than 210 mayors, county, and state officials have committed to ending homelessness among veterans in their communities. The federal government has provided significant new resources to help communities pursue the goal of ending homelessness among veterans. Communities that target these resources strategically are making significant progress and can end veteran homelessness in their communities in 2015. These strategies include:

- Using a Housing First approach, which removes barriers to help veterans obtain permanent housing as quickly as possible, without unnecessary prerequisites;
- Prioritizing the most vulnerable veterans—especially those experiencing chronic homelessness—for permanent supportive housing opportunities, including those created through the HUD-VASH program;
- Coordinating outreach efforts to identify and engage every veteran experiencing homelessness and focus outreach efforts on achieving housing outcomes;

- Targeting rapid rehousing interventions, including those made possible through the Department of Veterans Affairs' Supportive Services for Veteran Families program, toward veterans who need shorter-term rental subsidies and services in order to be reintegrated back into our communities;
- Leveraging other housing and services resources that can help veterans who are ineligible for some of the VA's programs get into stable housing;
- Increasing early detection and access to preventive services so at-risk veterans remain stably housed;
- Closely monitoring progress toward the goal, including the success of programs achieving permanent housing outcomes; and
- Aligning local goals and strategies with Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness. [Source: VA News Release Aug 27, 2014 ++]