



Federal Update for August 12 - 16, 2013



DoD, VA Establish Two Multi-Institutional Consortia to Research PTSD and TBI

WASHINGTON (Aug. 10, 2013) -- In response to President Obama's Executive Order, the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) highlighted today the establishment of two joint research consortia, at a combined investment of \$107 million to research the diagnosis and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) over a five-year period.

"VA is proud to join with its partners in the federal government and the academic community to support the President's vision and invest in research that could lead to innovative, new treatments for TBI and PTSD," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "We must do all we can to deliver the high-quality care our Service members and Veterans have earned and deserve."

The Consortium to Alleviate PTSD (CAP), a collaborative effort between the University of Texas Health Science Center – San Antonio, San Antonio Military Medical Center, and the Boston VA Medical Center will attempt to develop the most effective diagnostic, prognostic, novel treatment, and rehabilitative strategies to treat acute PTSD and prevent chronic PTSD.

The Chronic Effects of Neurotrauma Consortium (CENC), a collaborative effort between Virginia Commonwealth University, the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, and the Richmond VA Medical Center will examine the factors which influence the chronic effects of mTBI and common comorbidities in order to improve diagnostic and treatment options. A key point will be to further the understanding of the relationship between mTBI and neurodegenerative disease.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, more than 2.5 million American service members have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Military service exposes service members to a variety of stressors, including risk to life, exposure to death, injury, sustained threat of injury, and the day-to-day family stress inherent in all phases of the military life cycle.

To improve prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental health conditions, the President released an Executive Order directing the Federal agencies to develop a coordinated National Research Action Plan. The Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Department of Education (ED) came forward with a wide-reaching plan to improve scientific understanding, effective treatment, and reduce occurrences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, co-occurring conditions and suicide.

VA Partners with American Bar Association and Legal Services Corporation to Launch a Pilot Program to Help Veterans Receive Decisions Faster and Reduce Claims Backlog

WASHINGTON (Aug. 9, 2013) – The Department of Veterans Affairs, the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) announced today a new partnership and pilot program aimed at reducing the claims backlog and making it easier for unrepresented Veterans to receive assistance developing their claims for disability pay.

“Ending the backlog is an ‘all hands on deck’ effort that requires teamwork, both in and out of government,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “This partnership between VA, ABA and LSC is aimed at surging resources to deliver earned benefits to Veterans more quickly.”

In the coming months, ABA and LSC attorneys will provide free assistance to a targeted group of unrepresented Veterans who request their help gathering and obtaining evidence required by law to support their disability claims.

The development of the claim is often the longest part of the process that determines whether a Veteran is entitled to VA compensation. These steps can take more than 200 days in the rating decision process. The pilot will offer pro bono attorney assistance to Veterans with claims pending at the St. Petersburg and Chicago Regional Offices who do not currently have an authorized representative.

Veterans will choose whether to accept this pro-bono assistance. Similar Veterans with claims pending at other VA regional offices may also be considered for the pilot, if warranted.

"The ABA is proud to take the lead in connecting veterans with pro bono attorneys who will help them receive the aid our nation owes them for their selfless courage," said ABA President Laurel Bellows. "We hope that our initial focus on Chicago and St. Petersburg can swiftly be expanded across the nation."

The claims selected for this pilot program, which are currently -- or will soon be -- part of the claims backlog, will vary in terms of complexity and degree of completeness. VA will accredit the attorneys who choose to participate, and the ABA and LSC will provide them with specialized training that will enable them to help evaluate and develop Veterans claims and make those claims ready for a rating decision. The two initial pilot sites were selected based on proximity to ABA headquarters, and the opportunity for the biggest impact on the backlog.

In the coming months, VA will identify eligible Veterans to participate in the pilot program and send letters advising them of all their options for representation to help them advance their claims - from Veteran Service Organizations, attorneys and claims agents, to pro bono attorneys participating in this pilot.

The VA letter will inform Veterans of a 1-800 hotline and website to connect them to an attorney who is willing to assist with their claim, free of charge.

Under the partnership, the ABA and LSC will match interested Veterans and attorneys on several factors, including geographic location, complexity of the claim and the Veteran's and attorney's preferences on the nature and scope of representation.

VA is continuing to implement several initiatives to meet the Department's goal to eliminate the claims backlog in 2015. As a result of these initiatives, VA's total claims inventory has dropped to its lowest levels since March 2011.

The number of claims in the VA backlog – claims pending more than 125 days – has been reduced by 18 percent, compared to the highest point in March 2013.

Veterans can learn more about disability benefits on the joint Department of Defense-VA web portal, *eBenefits*, at www.ebenefits.va.gov/.

Veterans' Health Care Budget: Improvements Made, but Additional Actions Needed to Address Problems Related to Estimates Supporting President's Request

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) expanded the use of the Enrollee Health Care Projection Model (EHCPM) in developing the agency's health care budget estimate that supported the President's fiscal year 2014 budget request. VA expanded the use of the EHCPM by using, for the first time, the model's estimate for the amount of care provided—workload—to develop estimates of the resources needed for 14 long-term care services. However, VA continued to use the most current expenditure data rather than EHCPM estimates for projecting needed resources for these services due to concerns about the reliability of the EHCPM expenditure data. Using this new blended approach, VA used the EHCPM in whole or in part, to develop estimates for 74 health care services that accounted for more than 85 percent of VA's health care budget estimate. Additionally, VA used a new budget category label for its estimate of certain administrative personnel costs, "Administrative Personnel," and identified the types of positions this estimate included. However, VA did not consistently use the new label across its three health care appropriations accounts. Instead, VA used "Administration" and provided no information clarifying the costs included in the estimates. Further, VA did not disclose all the costs included under "Administrative Personnel," nor did VA identify the costs included in one other category containing administrative costs, "Administrative Contract Services." The

lack of transparency regarding administrative costs and inconsistent labeling resulted in Congress and other users of VA's budget justification not having clear and complete information regarding the agency's estimates for such costs.

The President's fiscal year 2014 budget request for VA health care services was about \$158 million more than the earlier, advance appropriations request for the same year. The estimate for initiatives increased by \$1.021 billion and the estimate for ongoing health care services decreased by \$519 million. The increase in the initiatives estimate was further offset by \$482 million in estimated savings from new acquisition savings and other initiatives, which resulted in a net increase of \$20 million. This increase, along with a decrease of \$138 million in anticipated resources from collections and reimbursements, resulted in the net increase of \$158 million in the President's fiscal year 2014 request.

VA has taken steps to address, in varying degrees, five of the six problems GAO previously identified related to information in VA's budget justification. Specifically, VA has taken steps to improve (1) the transparency of its estimates for initiatives in support of the advance appropriations request, (2) the consistency of the language used to label health care services across its three health care appropriations accounts, (3) the reliability of its estimates for certain facility-related activities, (4) the reliability of its estimate for facility maintenance and improvement, and (5) the reliability of its estimates for proposed savings. However, VA did not address (6) the transparency of its estimates for initiatives and ongoing health care services. While VA improved aspects of the information in its fiscal year 2014 budget justification, it is important that VA ensure that the six recommendations from GAO's prior work regarding such information are fully implemented. Until these recommendations are fully implemented, the problems GAO previously identified will continue to limit for Congress and others the usefulness of information related to the estimates that support the President's budget request for VA health care.

Why GAO Did This Study

The Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009 requires GAO to report on the President's annual budget request to Congress for VA health care services. GAO's previous work has focused on issues related to the consistency, transparency, and reliability of information in VA's congressional budget justifications.

Building on GAO's past work and in light of the President's most recent request for VA health care, this report examines (1) changes in how VA used the EHCPM to develop VA's budget estimate supporting the President's budget request for fiscal year 2014 and changes in how VA reported information related to this estimate in its budget justification; (2) key changes to the President's fiscal year 2014 budget request compared to the advance appropriations request for the same year; and (3) the extent to which VA has addressed problems previously identified by GAO related to information in VA's congressional budget justifications. GAO reviewed the President's fiscal year 2014 budget request, VA's fiscal year 2014 budget justification, and VA data. GAO interviewed VA officials and staff from the Office of Management and Budget.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that VA (1) use consistent terminology to label estimates for administrative personnel costs and (2) provide consistent and comprehensive information explaining the costs in each budget category for administrative costs. VA generally agreed with GAO's conclusions and concurred with GAO's recommendations.

Recommendations for Executive Action

Recommendation: To improve the clarity and transparency of information in VA's congressional budget justifications that support the President's budget request for VA health care, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should use consistent terminology to label estimates of administrative personnel costs.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

Recommendation: To improve the clarity and transparency of information in VA's congressional budget justifications that support the President's budget request for VA health care, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs should provide consistent and comprehensive information explaining the costs included in each budget category for administrative costs.

Agency Affected: Department of Veterans Affairs

GI Bill Tuition Cap Increased

Those who are using the Post 9/11 GI Bill to fund their education at a private college or university saw their annual maximum tuition cap increased to

\$19,198.31 per academic year. Last year's annual maximum was \$18,077.50. Those attending state operated schools will continue to get up to the full in-state resident tuition and fees covered under the GI Bill.

President Obama Applauds Community Colleges' and Universities' Efforts to Implement 8 Keys to Veterans' Success

WASHINGTON (Aug. 12, 2013) -- As part of the Obama administration's ongoing effort to foster postsecondary educational opportunities and dramatically improve employment outcomes for returning service members, the Department of Education (ED) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced today a challenge to education institutions to adopt best practices supporting educational success. More than 250 community colleges and universities across the country have immediately answered the call to implementing the "8 Keys to Success" to help Veterans on campus.

President Obama introduced the "8 Keys to Success" on Saturday at the Disabled American Veterans National Convention in Orlando, Fla.

"We're announcing what we call '8 Keys to Success' -- specific steps that schools can take to truly welcome and encourage our Veterans," President Obama said. "And so far, more than 250 community colleges and universities have signed on, and today I'm calling on schools across America to join us in this effort. Let's help our Veterans get that degree, get that credential and compete for the high-skilled jobs of tomorrow."

With the more than 250 institutions leading the way, the "8 Keys to Success" can aid Veterans in their effort to afford and complete their college degrees, certificates, industry-recognized credentials and licenses in preparation for jobs in high-growth sectors of the economy.

To help draft the "8 Keys to Success," ED convened more than 100 experts to review approaches that could be scaled and replicated to foster Veterans' success on campus and via distance learning. A wide range of stakeholders participated in the discussions including non-profit organizations, foundations, Veterans service

organizations and, importantly, Veterans who had recently completed postsecondary education in a range of disciplines. Best practices learned from existing programs at ED and VA provided the foundation for the “8 Keys to Success,” specifically best practices from the highly successful VA “VetSuccess on Campus” programs.

“This is a major step forward in the administration’s work to encourage institutions of higher education to support Veterans with access to the courses and resources they need to ensure that they graduate and get good jobs,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

The “8 Keys to Success” include the following:

- Create a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community to promote well-being and success for Veterans.
- Ensure consistent and sustained support from campus leadership.
- Implement an early alert system to ensure all Veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming.
- Coordinate and centralize campus efforts for all Veterans, together with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size).
- Collaborate with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for Veterans.
- Use a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on Veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion.
- Provide comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to Veterans.
- Develop systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for Veterans.

More than 250 community colleges and universities in 24 different states and D.C. will fully adopt the “8 Keys to Success” and more are expected to rise to the challenge in the coming months. At Western Nevada College, for example, the school hosts a "Veterans Orientation" to make sure returning service members begin college on the right track, and that every Veteran has a counselor assigned to work with him or her on adjusting to the classroom environment, performance expectations, personal challenges and program completion.

“This commitment made by colleges and universities will help Veterans better transition from military service into the classroom, graduate, and find a good job to help strengthen our economy,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “Given the opportunity, Veterans will succeed because they possess exceptional character, team-building skills, discipline, and leadership.”

Another example of postsecondary institutions working to implement the keys is Virginia’s Community Colleges, where schools are leveraging partnerships to connect Veterans with jobs and careers in high-growth, high-demand fields.

“These partnerships bring together local businesses, community colleges, workforce investment boards, the Virginia Employment Commission, other state government agencies, and nonprofit providers of social services all in support of Virginia’s Veterans,” said Glenn DuBois, Chancellor of Virginia's Community Colleges. “The keys to success provide a helpful set of recommendations for moving forward.”

The keys build on the administration’s work to provide Veterans and military families with a high-quality, affordable education. In April 2012, President Obama signed an executive order establishing the Principles of Excellence (POE), which provide protections for our nation’s military, Veterans, and their families.

To further Veterans’ success in higher education and employment, the VA is also expanding its VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) and Veterans Integration to Academic Leadership (VITAL) programs, which connect Veterans to VA resources. Thousands of colleges and universities are developing or expanding their Veterans Success Centers as a result of the VA’s VSOC and VITAL investments. VSOC is currently located at 32 campus sites in 16 states and is expanding to additional campuses in 2013.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill has also played a large role in helping returning service members attend college. VA has issued approximately \$30 billion in Post 9/11 GI-Bill benefit payments since its inception in August 2009, and helped nearly one million service members, Veterans, and their families pursue an education. The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the most extensive educational assistance program since the

Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the GI Bill, was signed into law.

The administration will continue to build on its work to ensure Veterans' success by acting on our nation's commitment to place higher education within reach for all who are willing to work for it. Federal agencies, colleges and universities, and their many partners are united in their determination to make sure this generation of Veterans, active-duty service members and their families are aware of and take advantage of all the benefits and resources provided by a grateful nation.

Overhaul of Military Retirement Proposed

A recent article by Military Officers Association of America's Director of Government Relations, Mike Hayden, explains how some former Pentagon leaders and "think tank experts" have called for a complete retirement overhaul criticizing the 20-year retirement as either unaffordable or unfair to those who leave before that point, or both. Their points have gotten traction as a new commission -- established as a result of provisions in the FY 2013 National Defense Authorization Act and tasked with reviewing and perhaps overhauling military compensation and retirement benefits -- began its work in July.

VA and the New Care Act

If you are enrolled in VA health care, you do not need to take additional steps to meet the health care law coverage standards of the new Affordable Health Care Act. The health care law does not change VA health benefits or Veterans' out-of-pocket costs. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has launched an awareness campaign and a new website (www.va.gov/health/aca/) to let Veterans know what the Affordable Care Act means for them and their families. Veterans receiving health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs will see no change in their benefits or out-of-pocket costs when portions of the Affordable Care Act take effect next year. For more information, visit the 'VA, Affordable Care Act and You' webpage at www.va.gov/health/aca/. Veterans can apply for VA health care at any time by visiting www.va.gov/healthbenefits/enroll, calling 1-877-222-VETS (8387), or visiting their local VA health care facility.