



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Fact Sheet

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Media Relations

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VA Making Progress to Improve Service for Veterans

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Continued Excellence in Service

- For the fifth consecutive year, VA's Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy received the [highest customer satisfaction score](#) among the nation's public and private mail-order pharmacies, according to a J.D. Power study.
- Since 2004, the independent American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey has shown [Veterans give VA health care higher ratings](#) than most private hospital patients.
- VA trains 120,000 healthcare professionals a year, more than any system in the Nation. An estimated [70% of all U.S. doctors have trained with VA](#).
- VA employee Kenneth Siehr, winner of the President's 2013 Securing Americans Value and Efficiency (SAVE) Award, conceived of [VA's online prescription tracker](#) that gives Veterans 24/7 access to prescriptions mailed from the VA Mail Order Pharmacy. Siehr's idea focused on the use of technology as a way to save money and improve the services VA provides to its patients.
- VA guarantees 2 million home loans—with the [lowest foreclosure rate](#) and highest satisfaction rate in mortgage lending.
- For the fifth consecutive time, VA's [National Cemetery Administration](#) topped the ACSI survey of customer satisfaction.
- In 2014, VA's Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery was listed as one of the most beautiful cemeteries in the world in an article appearing in both [Smithsonian Magazine](#) and [Travel and Leisure](#).

Increasing Transparency and Accountability

- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) began [publicly posting patient access data](#) online in June 2014. VA provides this access-to-care information to Veterans and the public knowing that transparency and accountability would help improve care for Veterans over time.
- On his first visit to the Phoenix VA last August, Secretary McDonald announced that every VA medical center would undergo an [independent review of scheduling](#) and access practices by The Joint Commission, the nation's oldest and largest standards-setting and accrediting body in health care.
- Medical center directors are required to ensure that all VA staff with scheduling privileges complete mandatory scheduler training and that scheduling operations are reviewed regularly.
- In the aftermath of Phoenix, Secretary McDonald [instructed all VA facilities](#) to hold town hall meetings quarterly to engage Veterans and improve the delivery of benefits and services.

- In 2014, VA established the Office of Accountability Review (OAR) to ensure leadership accountability for improprieties related to patient scheduling and access to care, whistleblower retaliation, and related matters that impact public trust in VA.
 - VA has terminated more than 2,060 employees since Secretary McDonald was confirmed on July 29, 2014. (Note: this includes removals and probationary terminations.) VA has proposed disciplinary action related to data manipulation or patient care against more than 270 employees nationwide.
- The U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) [certified VA under their Whistleblower Protection Certification Program](#) after VA worked to achieve compliance and protect employees who identify or report problems from unlawful retaliation.
- As of April 2015, VA has worked closely with OSC to provide relief for over 45 VA employees who have filed whistleblower retaliation including three individuals at the VA Phoenix Health Care System.

Expanding Access to Care

- Nationally, VHA completed 56.2 million appointments between June 1, 2014, and May 31, 2015, which is 2.6 million more than completed in the same time period in 2013/2014. In June 2015, VA completed 97 percent of appointments within 30 days of the clinically indicated or Veteran's preferred date; 92 percent within 14 days; 88 percent within 7 days; and 22 percent are actually completed on the same day.
- Average wait time for completed primary care appointments is 4 days, specialty care 5 days, and mental health care 3 days.
- While the number of Veterans using VA for care has grown about 2% per year, many locations where space, staffing, productivity, and community care enhancements have been emphasized are growing at multiples of that rate. For example, from 2012 to 2014 Las Vegas has seen the number of patients they are caring for grow 18%, Hampton, VA 16%, Portland, OR and Fayetteville, NC 13%, and Denver 10%.
- More Veterans are coming to VA for their care even though 78% have Medicare, Medicaid, Tricare, or private insurance.
- In Fiscal Year 2014, the Veterans Health Administration activated 80 new leases totaling 1.3 million square feet and activated new owned facilities totaling 420 thousand square feet.
- Where possible, the number of primary care exam rooms per provider has been increased allowing the provider to see more Veterans each day

Providing More Care in the Community

- VHA has made over 2.8 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector from July 17, 2014, through July 16, 2015. This represents a 31 percent increase in authorizations when compared to the same period in 2013/2014. Over [1 million appointments are completed per month through doctors and clinics in the community](#), which represents nearly 20 percent of total appointments.

Recruiting and Hiring Health New Professionals

- VA has [increased salaries for physicians and dentists](#) to close the pay gap with the private sector and to make VA an employer of choice. With more competitive salaries,

VA will be better positioned to retain and hire more health care providers to care for Veterans.

- From August 2014 to August 31, 2015, VHA has increased net onboard staff by over 14,000. This includes over 1,400 physicians, 3,800 nurses, 116 psychiatrists, and 422 psychologists for VHA's clinical care to Veterans. VHA hires on average 30,000 – 35,000 new employees every year.
- VHA's turnover rate is about 9 percent, which continues to compare favorably to private sector healthcare turnover rate estimates of 30 percent as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014).

Transforming the Customer Service Experience Through MyVA

- VA is working to [reorganize the department](#) for success, guided by ideas and initiatives from Veterans, employees, and all of our shareholders. [This reorganization](#) is a part of the MyVA initiative and is designed to provide Veterans with a seamless, integrated, and responsive customer service experience.
- My VA is what we are calling our transformation from VA's current way of doing business to one that puts the Veterans in control of how, when and where they wish to be served.
- The My VA Task Force was established at the direction of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and per the Executive Decision Memorandum (EDM) signed by the VA Chief of Staff on December 10, 2014.
- The Department developed the [Blue Print for Excellence](#) - a detailed vision of how VA will evolve as a model national health care provider delivering both excellent health care and an excellent experience of care to all Veterans served.
- Under MyVA, the department has created a [single regional framework](#) to enhance services. In March, VA established the [MyVA Advisory Committee](#), made up of skilled experts from the private, non-profit and government sectors that advise the Secretary with a focus on improving customer service, Veteran outcomes and setting the course for long-term reform and excellence.

Expanding Access to Benefits

- VA increased to over 5 million the number of Veterans and Survivors receiving monthly compensation and pension benefits.
- VA expanded the eligibility criteria for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits under the [Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship](#) to the children and surviving spouses of Servicemembers who died in the line of duty after September 10, 2001.

Leading the Way in Reducing Drug-Resistant Health Care-Associated Infections

- Health care-associated infections, or HAIs, pose a major risk to patient safety, and hospital systems across the country are striving to prevent them.
- A recent article in [The New York Times](#) noted that in comparison to other hospital systems, VA is making great strides in reducing one of the most significant causes of HAIs—methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, or MRSA.
- Within five years, health-care associated [MRSA infections declined 69 percent in VA acute care facilities](#), [81 percent in Spinal Cord Injury units](#), and [36 percent in Community Living Centers](#).

- The [VA MRSA Prevention Initiative](#) continues today, and has been expanded to focus on other multiple drug-resistant organisms.

National Leader in Telehealth Services

- VA is national leader in telehealth services. [VA Telehealth services](#) are critical to expanding access to VA care in more than 45 clinical areas.
- At the end of Fiscal Year 2014 12.7 percent of all Veterans enrolled for VA care received Telehealth based care. This includes over 2 million telehealth visits, touching 700,000 Veterans.

Impacting Millions Through VA Research

- [VA Research and Development](#) plays a pivotal role in improving the health status of Veterans and countless other Americans for generations to come.
- During fiscal year 2015, nearly 3,400 VA researchers will work on more than 2,200 projects, with funding of more than \$1.8 billion.

Building for the Future

- In 2014, VA completed 17 major construction projects and started 17 new projects.
- VA activated 93 buildings, which resulted in 1.4 million additional square feet for clinical, mental health, long-term care facilities, and administrative space.

Changing Lives Through the GI Bill

- VA expanded the eligibility criteria for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits under the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship to the children and surviving spouses of Servicemembers who died in the line of duty after September 10, 2001.
- Under a provision of the Choice Act, nearly all public schools' out-of-state tuition rates were lowered during 2015 to provide full coverage under the GI Bill for recently discharged Veterans.
- VA celebrated the 70th anniversary of the GI Bill of Rights in 2014. Since the inception of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2009, more than \$55 billion has been paid to more than 1.45 million Veterans and their dependents.
- Over 2.4 million home loans currently are active on the books as part of the original "GI Bill."
- VA has processed 3,951 applications for the Fry Scholarship through July 17, 2015.
- There are 3,425 Yellow Ribbon Program agreements at 1,974 schools for the 2015-2016 academic years.
- VA awarded benefits to approximately 519,000 GI Bill beneficiaries for the spring 2015 term.
- In FY14, VA guaranteed 440,000 home loans totaling \$100 billion, while also helping 80,000 Veterans avoid foreclosure, saving taxpayers over \$2.7 billion.
- VA has maintained the lowest foreclosure rate (1.4%) in the industry for 25 of the last 27 consecutive quarters when compared to all other types of home loans.

Ending the Claims Backlog

- The claims backlog has been reduced from peak of 611,000 in March 2013 to 72,623 this week, an 88% reduction— lowest since we started measuring the backlog in 2007 and a historic low
- Claim-level accuracy increased from 83% in 2011 to 91% - issue-level accuracy is 96%.
- VA completed a record-breaking 1.32 million claims in fiscal year 2014; nearly 1.4 million claims in FY15
- Veterans are waiting, on average, 190 days less for a claim decision compared to March 2013 peak

Reducing the Number of Homeless Veterans

- VA, together with federal, state, and local partners, [reduced the estimated number of homeless Veterans by 33 percent](#) as noted in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) 2014 Point-in-Time (PIT) Estimate of Homelessness. *(NOTE: This statement is still correct, however, we suggest considering not using it and focusing on number housed instead.)*
- Communities throughout the nation are announcing that they have achieved an effective end to ending Veteran homelessness.
- The number of Veterans experiencing homelessness has declined significantly since 2010. New Orleans and Houston have both announced an effective end to Veteran homeless. Phoenix, Salt Lake City and the State of Connecticut have announced an end to chronic Veteran homelessness. Philadelphia and other communities throughout the nation are poised to announce an end to Veteran homelessness, and are working closely with local, State, and Federal partners to determine if they've reached an effective end to Veteran homelessness.
- Throughout the country, community by community, we're drawing closer to achieving our national goal.
- Through partnerships with other Federal agencies such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), other Federal partners, state and local governments, and volunteer organizations, **from 2010 until today, nearly 230,000 homeless Veterans and their family members have been able to find permanent housing** through the various programs available.
- Through the homeless Veterans initiative, VA committed more than \$1 billion in 2015 to strengthen programs that prevent and end homelessness among Veterans.
- In FY 2014 alone, VA provided services to more than 260,000 homeless or at-risk Veterans in VHA's homeless programs. Not all Veterans required an intensive homeless program intervention, but for those that did, over 72,000 Veterans were either placed in permanent housing or prevented from becoming homeless. *(NOTE: This statement is still correct. End of FY 15 data will not be available until after the start of the new FY.)*

Ending Veteran Homelessness in Los Angeles

- On January 28, 2015, Secretary McDonald and attorneys representing homeless veterans in Los Angeles [announced a historic agreement](#) that dedicates the West Los Angeles VA campus to serving veterans in need.
- VA published a written [Veteran homelessness strategy and action plan for Greater Los Angeles](#) on February 13, 2015 with the goal of ending Veteran homelessness in Greater Los Angeles by the end of the year. A new Master Plan for VA's West Los Angeles campus will be completed by October 16, 2015.

Improving Healthcare Services for Women Veterans

- VA has enhanced provision of [care to women Veterans](#) by focusing on the goal of developing Designated Women's Health Providers (DWHP) at every site where women access VA. VA has trained over 2,000 providers in women's health and is in the process of training additional providers to ensure that every woman Veteran has the opportunity to receive her primary care from a DWHP.
- VA now operates a [Women Veterans Call Center](#) (WVCC), created to contact women Veterans and let them know about the services for which they may be eligible. As of March 2015, WVCC received over 20,000 incoming calls and made over 162,000 successful outbound calls. As of June 2015, WVCC received over 24,000 incoming calls and made over 219,000 successful outbound calls.
- VA accomplished its goal of [expanding eligibility](#) for both male and female Veterans in need of health care for mental and physical health conditions resulting from military sexual trauma (MST). Now Veterans who experienced MST while on inactive duty training, not just active duty or active duty for training, can receive free MST-related health care with no need for documentation of the experience or the Veteran to file a disability claim.

Increasing Patient Safety & Reducing Prescription Drug Abuse

VA has a comprehensive program for the management of chronic pain that includes the safe, well-managed use of opioids, complementary and integrative medicine with a focus on identifying and expanding the use of best practices across VA.

- VA is accelerating the deployment of Opioid Therapy Risk Report, a state-of-the-art tool to help protect Veteran patients from high doses of opioids. VA also implemented the [Opioid Safety Initiative](#) (OSI) system-wide in August 2013 to enhance safe and effective pain care for Veterans and reduce opioid use.
- From the fiscal quarter beginning in July 2012 (pre-implementation baseline period) to the fiscal quarter ending in June 2015 there are:
 - 115,575 fewer patients receiving opioids
 - 38,163 fewer patient receiving opioids with benzodiazepines
 - 86,932 more patients on opioids that have had a urine drug screen to help guide treatment decisions
 - 100,074 fewer patients on long-term opioid therapy.
 - 13,731 fewer patients are receiving greater than or equal to 100 Morphine Equivalent Daily Dosing.
- To improve medication safety in the home, VHA provides medication take-back options to Veterans. As of July 1, 2015, Veterans have returned approximately 2,000 pounds of

unwanted/unneeded medication to be destroyed in an environmentally responsible manner.

(NOTE: These reductions occurred at the same time VA experienced a 103,971 increase in the number of patients who utilized VHA outpatient pharmacy services.)

Improving Delivery of Benefits Through Digital Innovation

- Under VA's technology initiatives, [one major achievement has been its transition](#) from an outmoded paper-intensive process to a fully electronic processing system, the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS).
- Previously VA processed 5,000 tons of paper per year; now it is processing 95 percent of the disability claims inventory electronically.
- VA completed 3.4 million rating decisions and 1.8 million claims using VBMS.
- VA continues to exceed goals with regard to [Fully Developed Claims](#). In FY 2015, 44 percent of claims received were submitted as Fully Developed Claims, up from 3 percent at initiative start in 2012.
- Over 4.9 million Servicemembers, Veterans, and family members in [eBenefits](#).
- [NCA achieved a customer satisfaction index of 96](#), the highest ACSI score in either the private or public sector in the history of the survey.

Strengthening Partnerships with Stakeholders

- Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) continue to meet monthly with the Secretary McDonald and VA senior leaders. In the summer of 2014, then Acting Secretary Sloan Gibson issued a directive for every VA Medical Center Director to meet with local VSO leadership.
- VA has been transparent and responsive in providing Congress information and briefings on key matters. From fiscal year 2014 through the second quarter of fiscal year 2015, VA has conducted 835 briefings with Members and staff, answered nearly 4,600 requests for information, appeared at 107 hearings, supported 479 requests for technical assistance on legislation, and answered nearly 35,000 casework inquiries. Additionally, VA supported 80 Congressional oversight visits.
- In February 2015, Secretary McDonald hosted the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committee at VA headquarters for a briefing on progress to expand access to care along with a town hall meeting with VA employees.
- VA sought and received input from VSOs on the purchase of a new Medical Appointment Scheduling System to ensure the "voice of the veteran" was included.
- VA established a centralized triage system to more effectively develop, evaluate and report on new strategic partnerships.

Looking Forward

While we recognize these achievements for Veterans, we continue to tackle the challenges of the department and embrace the opportunities for transformation that they bring.

To achieve lasting success for the department, VA must develop a strategy for meeting an increased demand for services and benefits, and for meeting the needs of a changing Veteran population. This includes preparing for the increasing numbers of women Veterans coming to

VA for care; looking at the unique needs of post-9/11 Veterans; and using innovative approaches to reach every Veteran who needs services.

By focusing on rebuilding trust, putting the Veteran first, and setting the course for longer-term excellence and reform – VA will continue to improve and better serve our Veterans and the American people.