

STATEMENT OF  
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

FOR THE RECORD

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

WITH RESPECT TO

**VA's Transformation Strategy: Examining the Plan to Modernize VA**

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal and members of the Committee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Auxiliaries, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify on VA's efforts and plan to modernize.

Soon after being confirmed as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Robert A. McDonald began his ambitious mission to transform the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) into an exemplary federal agency. The VFW is glad to see that Secretary McDonald has been inclusive of the major veterans service organizations (VSOs) from the very beginning. In an effort to shape his transformation plan, known as MyVA, Secretary McDonald turned to the VFW and our VSO colleagues to help him improve the veteran experience and identify barriers that adversely impact VA's ability to serve veterans.

As a direct result, many of the programs and incentives being championed by the MyVA Task Force reflect issues the VFW has highlighted for many years, including unsatisfactory customer service at VA facilities across the country and a disconnect between different administrations and programs, which leads to bureaucratic processes that place unnecessary burdens on veterans. The MyVA Task Force has established and begun to implement numerous programs geared towards veteran experience, employee experience, support service excellence, performance improvement, and strategic partnerships. Due to our mission as veteran advocates, our testimony will mainly focus on the veteran experience pillar of the MyVA transformation plan.

The VFW has consistently said that veterans do not see VA as three independent administrations. One of the many benefits of having the overwhelming majority of veterans' benefits and services administered by one agency is the seamless experience it is able to provide veterans who access multiple benefits and services. For example, when a veteran applies for disability compensation through the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), VA has the ability to access the veteran's Veterans Health Administration (VHA) health care records and, even though the compensation

and pension examination process has significant issues that need to be addressed, VBA is able to schedule a veteran's compensation and pension examination at a VHA health care facility without requiring the veteran to transfer the medical documentation from VHA to VBA or request a VBA appointment through VHA. However, there are a number of areas where the interaction between program offices can be improved. The VFW is glad that the MyVA Task Force has established the Veterans Experience Office to identify and address areas where veteran experiences and interaction with VA can be improved.

The Veterans Experience Office is independent of the three VA administrations, with a presence at VA central office and throughout VA's five districts. The Chief Veterans Experience Officer reports directly to the Secretary and coordinates an enterprise customer experience strategy, develops employee customer service training, and advises the three VA administrations. The field teams are tasked with building relationships, identifying systemic issues, and supporting national initiatives. While the VFW fully supports the Veterans Experience Office's current mission, we believe that the office could be strengthened by integrating the Patient Advocacy Service into its mission.

The Veterans Experience Office's mission already includes navigation and advocacy. Through a planned cadre of 34 employees, the Veterans Experience Office intends to ensure veterans' concerns regarding the benefits and services they receive are properly addressed. While the VFW believes this is a step in the right direction, we would ideally like to see the entire Patient Advocacy Service reorganized under the Veteran Experience Office of Navigation and Advocacy. Local patient advocates would remain embedded at VA Medical Centers (VAMC) on a day-to-day basis, but fall under the Veterans Experience Office's chain of command, rather than that of their detailed VA facility.

In speaking to VFW members from around the country, we find that patient advocates often assume the role of apologizing for VA medical center shortcomings rather than aggressively working to fix them. We strongly suspect that this is a function of the fact that they are ultimately employees of medical center directors, and are, therefore, hesitant to expose shortcomings in the administration of their facilities. Making the Patient Advocacy Service completely independent of the VAMC chain of command would mitigate this problem. We envision the Veterans Experience Office using the Patient Advocacy Service as their eyes and ears to provide the Secretary with a better understanding of the veteran experience on the ground, and address acute and systemic problems as they arise.

Ideally, the Veterans' Experience Office would then be able to aggregate patient advocacy casework and generate periodic public reports on the challenges veterans face from their perspectives. These reports could also be used to generate legislative requests to alleviate the problems veterans experience in timeliness of appointments, securing referrals for community care, access to benefits, and overall satisfaction. Conveniently, all the employees needed to execute this model are already in place at VA medical facilities around the country. Reorganizing them under an office that reports directly to the Secretary would maximize their usefulness to veterans, Congress and VA.

Another program geared towards improving the veteran experience is the Veteran Economic Communities Initiatives (VECI). Established to “increase the number of education and employment opportunities available to Veterans and their families in their communities,” VECI relies on economic liaisons around the country to incentivize employers to hire veterans and connect veterans to organizations and programs that help them overcome education and career challenges. Although the VFW strongly supports efforts to ease the transition from military service to the civilian workforce, we feel that many efforts by the VECI are duplicative of programs and services administered by the Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans’ Employment and Training Service (VETS). In recent years, VETS has made significant progress towards reducing veteran unemployment across key demographics. While there is still work to be done, VETS programs are embedded in with Department of Defense (DOD) through the transition assistance program and integrated in communities across the country through its presence at American Job Centers and its Jobs for Veterans State Grants program. One of the key advantages to VETS is that they are able to provide services to vulnerable veteran populations who may not be eligible for VA services, such as homeless veterans with other than honorable discharges. The VFW feels that a parallel employment service administered by VA is unnecessary and runs the risk of creating confusion for transitioning service members. Instead, we encourage VA and DOL to adopt better coordination and referral for the services each agency provides.

Still, the VECI initiative contains certain programs that are beneficial to transitioning service members and should be continued. The VECI Accelerated Learning Programs (ALP) and VA Learning Hubs allow veterans to receive free certifications in high demand fields through public-private partnerships, without tapping into their VA educational benefits. The VFW supports these programs and believes they should be expanded, perhaps under the VA Office of Economic Opportunity. With full coordination between VA and DOL VETS, ALPs and Learning Hubs could be integrated into DOL VETS programs and services to ensure veterans are maximizing the employment and education benefits they have earned and deserve.

An important measure of success for the MyVA Task Force will be its ability to incorporate local stakeholders into the transformation plan. The MyVA Task Force seeks to accomplish this goal through the creation of MyVA communities around the country. Each MyVA community will include local representatives from the three VA administrations; VSOs; local, state and federal government; Department of Defense and National Guard; and other organizations that represent the local community’s interests and priorities. The VFW has been an active participant in many of the MyVA communities around the country. In San Diego, our service officers report that the One VA Community Advocacy Board, which was the inspiration for the MyVA Communities Initiative, has served as a platform for veteran-centric organizations to share ideas and concerns at a leadership level sufficient to make true progress.

The VFW supports the MyVA Communities Initiative and recommends that they be expanded to every VA medical center and regional office. Doing so allows VA to leverage the expertise and experience of local stakeholders to improve the benefits and service it provides veterans.

Another vital pillar of the MyVA transformation is improving employee experience. The VFW agrees with VA that veteran experience is largely dependent on employee experience. We have constantly heard from veterans that VA employees lack customer services training and often turn veterans away when they should look for opportunities to help. We agree with Secretary McDonald that VA's rules-based culture must be transformed into a people-based culture that empowers VA employees to treat veterans as they would want to be treated.

The MyVA Task Force has established a number of programs geared toward changing culture at VA. The first is a "training the trainer" program called Leaders Developing Leaders. This program aims to ensure VA leaders at all levels are incorporated into the transformation effort and have the proper training and tools to improve the esprit de corps among VA employees. This includes providing local leaders the tools they need to improve VA benefits and service for the veterans they serve and empowering them to use those tools when needed. The VFW supports the Leaders Developing Leaders program and believes it has the potential of breaking through the institutional resistance of middle management officials who are only concerned with their day-to-day duties and disseminate the MyVA culture change to all VA employees. However, we have urged VA to incorporate outside stakeholders into the program's workshops to ensure VA leaders at all levels are aware of the benefits and services offered by veteran service organizations and other stakeholders whose main mission is to serve veterans.

The VFW also supports requiring all VA employees to receive VA 101 training, which gives them an overview of the full array of benefits services VA provides veterans. While such training helps VA employees understand the important part they play in the VA system, it also enables VA employees to inform veterans of the benefits and services they may not have known they were eligible to receive.

The MyVA Task Force has also established programs to improve VA's supports services, establish a culture of continuous improvement, and enhance strategic partnerships. The VFW supports VA's efforts to leverage economies of scale to reduce its supply chain costs by ensuring all VA facilities are able to quickly obtain high-level goods and services at reasonable prices. We commend VA for its plan to leverage the district model to consolidate and integrate support services, such as information technology, human resources, and procurement to ensure seamless operation and coordination among the three administrations. We also support VA's adoption of lean six sigma to improve problem solving at all levels throughout VA, and create a culture where VA employees seek to constantly streamline programs and processes to maximize their performance.

The VFW also supports VA's efforts to integrate outside stakeholders into its programs and services. Through its strategic partnerships, VA is able to ensure veterans who are using services through private or non-profit organizations are made aware of the full suite of veterans' benefits and services available to them. Through such partnerships VA is also able to ensure outside organizations who assist veterans receive the training they need to provide veteran-centric services.

The VFW understands that VA will not be able to change its culture overnight and that the numerous MyVA transformation programs must be given time to mature. However, we are

pleased to see that the MyVA Task Force has begun to implement many of its proposed programs and has set appropriate milestones and reasonable expectations to ensure these programs succeed. The VFW will continue to evaluate the MyVA programs and report on what is working and what needs to improve.

The VFW is concerned, however, that the impending change at the White House may stall the MyVA Task Force's hard work. While the Task Force has made a concerted effort to build momentum that cannot be stopped, a new president may refocus the Task Force's mission and erode the successful programs it has established. That is why the VFW has urged the presidential candidates to ensure they continue Secretary McDonald's MyVA transformation plan if they are elected.

We urge this Committee to use its legislative authority to ensure transformation programs and plans established by Secretary McDonald and the MyVA Task Force receive the resources and support needed to succeed.