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SERVICE VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS
AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

VA/DOD/DOL COOPERATION ON EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the progress made by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in improving the delivery of employment services and benefits to our Nation's veterans.

We are working in close partnership with the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Labor (DOL) to leverage every opportunity to improve the transition of our separating servicemembers from military to civilian life. We have expanded and cemented our relationships, allowing us to work smarter and better in our separate but related missions. Our reinforced partnerships now cut across a range of difficult issues and have reduced many of the problems encountered by previous generations of veterans.

I am pleased to provide an overview of the actions the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service has taken in response to the recommendations of the President's Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes, and the innovative partnerships, programs, and initiatives we have implemented together with DoD and DOL to improve coordination among our three systems as we deliver our programs, services, and benefits.

Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror
Heroes Recommendations

On March 6, 2007, President Bush established the Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes. The purpose of the Task Force was to improve the delivery of Federal services and benefits to Global War on Terror (GWOT) servicemembers and veterans. The Task Force report includes 25 recommendations that focus on enhancing the delivery of services and information to GWOT servicemembers and veterans within existing authority and resource levels. The report outlined one recommendation specifically directed toward the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) Program.

The Task Force recommended that the VR&E Service authorize the immediate extension, to 18 months, for an Individualized Extended Evaluation Plan (IEEP) for those OIF/OEF participants whose severity of injuries warrant additional time to determine feasibility of achieving an employment goal. During this extended evaluation, VA will continue to provide independent living services to these severely injured servicemembers and veterans.

Current law does not allow the provision of a program of solely independent living services to a servicemember through the VR&E Program. However, independent living services may be provided to either a veteran or a servicemember with a serious employment handicap under an extended evaluation plan or as part of a plan of services leading to an employment goal. When the feasibility of achieving a vocational goal cannot be readily determined for an individual with a serious employment handicap, an IEEP is developed. Various services to evaluate an individual's feasibility of achieving a vocational goal can be provided under an IEEP, including independent living services.

Many individuals returning from the GWOT with very serious injuries require extensive medical treatment and a prolonged transition to civilian life. Those individuals who are so severely disabled that a decision cannot yet be made about whether an employment goal is currently feasible may need an extended evaluation of more than 12 months. A requirement for a formal request for an extension at the end of the 12-month period could potentially cause an interruption in needed services if there is any delay in preparing, evaluating, or approving the request. An extension of the IEEP at the time the plan is developed will avoid interruption and allow sustained access to specialized assessments and any necessary independent living services.

In response to this recommendation, VR&E Service authorized VR&E Officers at our 57 regional offices (ROs) to approve the extension of an IEEP at the time a plan is developed for those GWOT participants whose severity of injuries warrant additional time to determine feasibility of achieving a vocational goal. In such cases, an initial IEEP may be developed for a period of up to 18 months. Extensions for additional periods of an IEEP, including independent living services, may also be authorized prior to completion of the initial 18 months.

Partnership with the Department of Labor's Veterans' Employment and Training Service

VR&E and DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) continue to work in partnership to provide comprehensive employment services to veterans with service-connected disabilities.

In October 2005, VR&E and VETS signed a revised memorandum of agreement (MOA) that expands and solidifies our cooperation in case management, employment services, communication, reporting, oversight and monitoring, and accountability. These activities are all necessary to assist veterans to successfully achieve their rehabilitation goals. Associated with the MOA, guidelines and parameters for three workgroups have been established to develop and implement the following critical activities:

- Establish effective performance measures for assessing the results of partnership activities;

- Design a joint training curriculum for use at the National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI); and
- Develop a methodology for joint data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Our goal of achieving excellence in the delivery of employment services requires that we establish and maintain close working relationships with our VETS partners. Implementation of the MOA with VETS has been made easier with the co-location of 72 Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists at 36 VA regional offices and 36 outbased facilities. At these offices, DVOP specialists and VR&E staff work together to efficiently and effectively deliver employment services. Both groups have access to the same resources and online technologies such as the VR&E job resource labs and VetSuccess.gov.

As a result of the national MOA, 38 regional offices have established formalized memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with VETS partners at the local level within their state. VR&E's Employment Coordinators partner with DVOP specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) staff. As partners, they assess the feasibility of employment services, recommend an appropriate vocational rehabilitation plan with the goal of suitable employment or independent living, and deliver job-readiness skills training and job-placement services.

I believe we have successfully established effective partnerships with VETS, and that disabled veterans are benefiting from our success through the availability and delivery of more comprehensive employment services. My staff and I meet with our VETS counterparts on an ongoing basis. We have developed the Five Track Employment Model so that, from a service-delivery point of view, consultation and assistance from local DVOP specialists, LVER staff and VETS federal staff are detailed and emphasized in each employment track.

From our standpoint, the VR&E/VETS partnership is strong and continues to gain momentum through our ongoing communications and joint participation in training activities and development of effective employment policies.

Partnership with the Department of Defense (DOD)

VR&E Service and the Department of Defense (DoD) collaborate in many ways. We recognize the importance of partnering with DoD, as they are a main component of our early intervention and outreach efforts to assist in the transition of seriously injured servicemembers.

U.S. Army Materiel Command

In June 2005, VR&E signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with U.S. Army Materiel Command (AMC) in support of its "Always a Soldier" initiative. This initiative is focused on providing continued support to veterans beyond their active duty service by ensuring that they have access to both challenging and rewarding career opportunities. Furthermore, it underscores AMC's commitment to working with VA to link disabled veterans seeking employment with AMC offices across the nation. VR&E and AMC offer veterans with disabilities opportunities for employment, career advancement, job mobility, family economic well-being, and greater financial security. Through this MOU, VR&E and AMC have agreed to:

- Support AMC initiative by making "Always a Soldier" program information available to veterans with service-connected disabilities through the local VR&E staff at each RO across the nation, as appropriate;
- Encourage AMC human resource managers and VR&E employment staff to organize local activities for the "Always a Soldier" program; and
- Construct new lines of communication to inform veterans with disabilities about employment opportunities with AMC.

As a result of this MOU, AMC has contributed to the Department of the Army's commitment to hiring veterans with disabilities. Since the beginning of FY 2006, the Department of the Army has hired 372 veterans from the VR&E program.

Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division

In March 2007, the VR&E Service signed an MOU with Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division (NAWCAD) to advance, improve, and expand employment opportunities for veterans with disabilities. This MOU established a partnership between both agencies and provides the framework to bring veterans with disabilities into the civilian workforce through the NAWCAD Disabled Veterans Cooperative Education Program (DVCEP). Through DVCEP, NAWCAD and VR&E will assist qualified veterans in taking advantage of VA educational and vocational rehabilitation benefits while attending accredited college courses, leading to employment opportunities with NAWCAD. Beyond standard VR&E program services, NAWCAD has agreed to:

- Promote DVCEP to VA's 57 regional offices;
- Provide paid work experience to full and/or part-time college students;
- Provide on-the-job training opportunities;
- Provide participants with a program mentor;
- Work with program candidates to create an Individual Development Plan;
- Upon successful completion of the education program, consider program participants for permanent hire;
- Use Student Career Experience Program (SCEP) as a mechanism to provide tuition assistance to program participants, where appropriate; and
- Use SCEP appointing authority to non-competitively convert eligible program participants to permanent positions after satisfactory performance and completion of all academic requirements, subject to funding limitations and needs of the organization.

VR&E Service and Program staffs are officially kicking-off this partnership today. They are touring the NAWCAD facility in Patuxent River, MD with the goal of formalizing relationships, practices, and referral processes. Once the program is up and running, we plan to expand DVCEP to seven additional locations across the country.

VR&E and DoD Working Partnerships

Integral to the success of employment services within VR&E are the combined efforts of DoD entities by which we link together, through mutual service delivery offerings, to provide necessary vocational rehabilitation services to servicemembers and veterans with disabilities, and their families. There are many working partnerships of an informal nature that support successful vocational rehabilitation and employment programs. VR&E, in conjunction with DoD, consults, advises, and coordinates employment services for servicemembers and veterans. We also provide VR&E training for DoD staff members. VR&E works closely with the following DoD organizations to coordinate the provision of priority services to the most severely injured servicemembers.

- Department of the Navy "SAFE HARBOR" program
- Department of the Army "Wounded Warriors Program"
- USMC's "Wounded Warrior Regiment (formerly "Marines for Life")
- Department of the Air Force "Palace HART"
- DoD's Military Severely Injured Center

Combined Partnership with the Department of Labor
Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) and
Department of Defense (DoD)

VR&E Service & VR&E field staff, DOL-VETS, and DoD cooperate to provide Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) services to separating servicemembers. Through this relationship, the agencies partner to ensure that the transition from active duty to veteran status is seamless for servicemembers. The proportion of separating, deactivating, and retiring servicemembers who participate in VA benefits and TAP/DTAP briefings prior to separation, deactivation, or retirement was 53 percent in FY 2006.

Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)

In FY 2006, VA conducted 823 DTAP briefings attended by 15,500 participants. We are significantly expanding our program, as evidenced by the nearly 1,500 DTAP briefings we have already provided this fiscal year for nearly 29,000 participants.

DTAP briefings are not mandatory in all military services. However, VR&E, in cooperation with DoD and DOL, strongly encourages servicemembers who are separating with a service-connected disability to attend the DTAP briefing. VR&E Service has also worked through the TAP Steering Committee to suggest that DTAP become mandatory for servicemembers being medically separated or servicemembers who believe they are separating with a service-connected disability.

Coming Home to Work (CHTW) Program

VR&E Service has partnered with DoD and DOL to expand its outreach to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) servicemembers and veterans through early intervention and seamless transition initiatives, to include the Coming Home to Work (CHTW) program. CHTW provides valuable civilian job skills, exposure to employment opportunities, and work experience to servicemembers facing medical separation from the military and uncertain futures. Participants work with VR&E, DoD, and DOL staff to obtain work experience in a Government facility that supports their career goals.

VR&E coordinates the Coming Home to Work (CHTW) initiative for servicemembers pending medical separation from active duty at eight primary military treatment facilities: Walter Reed Army Medical Center, National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, Naval Medical Center Balboa (San Diego), Brooke Army Medical Center (San Antonio), Eisenhower Army Medical Center (Fort Gordon), Evans Army Community Hospital (Fort Carson), Darnall Army Community Hospital (Fort Hood), and Madigan Army Medical Center (Fort Lewis).

To date, there have been 442 participants in the program with the following results:

- 23 in active work-experience programs

- 201 receiving early intervention services
- 182 transferred from MTF to local RO for continued VR&E services
- 26 returned to active duty
- 10 direct hires

Closing

Mr. Chairman, I believe our efforts and progress underscore our dedication to removing barriers to the employment of veterans with disabilities through cooperative partnerships with the Department of Defense and the Department of Labor. We are better coordinating our overlapping infrastructure and services, and we continually seek additional opportunities for partnership. Our Departments are singularly committed to the men and women we all serve. They are our highest priority.

Our greatest challenge, and our greatest opportunity, is to build and deploy employment services that meet the needs of veterans, servicemembers, and their families for today and tomorrow. We will continue to persevere toward that goal.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I thank you and members of this committee for your outstanding and continued support of our servicemembers, veterans, and their families. I greatly appreciate being here today and look forward to answering any questions you or other members of the Committee may have.