

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
ON
"VA'S TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY:
EXAMINING THE PLAN TO MODERNIZE VA"**

JANUARY 21, 2016

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) states "Communication" is one of their Core Values, and to define it they state:

*"We will listen to our veterans, to each other, and to people outside of our organization. We will be candid, accurate, and quick to heed their counsel and respond to their concerns. We will never stop trying to improve."*¹

The American Legion strongly believes listening to the voice of veterans is one of the most critical components of a successful VA. Unfortunately, "MyVA", VA's plan to transform their way of doing business to "one that puts Veterans in control of how, when, and where they wish to be served"² missed the mark right out of the gate, raising concerns about its ability to make VA the responsive entity it needs to be to meet the needs of veterans.

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the Committee, on behalf of National Commander Dale Barnett and the over 2 million members of The American Legion, the nation's largest wartime veterans' service organization, thank you for taking the time to focus attention on VA's modern transformation strategy, and for soliciting insight from the key stakeholders, the veterans, as to whether this plan can be successful.

"MyVA" is what VA calls their transformation plan to modernize and provide seamless service across the country. The plan is well intentioned, and recognizes and addresses real concerns. Veteran use of VA has been steadily increasing over not only the past decade of active war overseas, but over several decades as the Vietnam cohort of veterans ages and sees increasing health care needs. "[This] large increase in the oldest segment of the veteran population will continue to have significant ramifications on the demand for health care services, particularly in the area of long-term care."³

Before the onset of the MyVA plan, none of VA's regional authorities lined up with each other. Regional Offices (VAROs) that deal with benefits were not aligned in any real way with Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) that deal with healthcare delivery.

¹ http://www.va.gov/JOBS/VA_In_Depth/mission.asp

² http://www.va.gov/opa/myva/docs/myva_integrated_plan_overview.pdf

³ http://www.agingstats.gov/main_site/data/2012_documents/population.aspx

This impacts communication and consistency. That VA recognized this obstacle and sought to change things deserves recognition.

Unfortunately, one of the earliest acts in the MyVA plan was the creation of a MyVA Advisory Committee that minimized the input from Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) by limiting their access to the creation process for long term strategies. While corporations and academic institutions were robustly represented on the Advisory Committee, VSOs were relegated to a single seat to be shared in rotation.

As the National Commander of The American Legion Michael Helm pointed out in his March, 2015 letter to Secretary Bob McDonald:

“[The American Legion feels] that the lack of representation by those with the most expertise, the major Veterans Service Organizations, dooms any chance that the MyVA Advisory Committee (MVAC) has for success... While The American Legion welcomes the input and experience of leaders in the academic and business communities, it is the veterans that are the biggest stakeholders in VA...As accomplished and impressive as the current committee members are, nobody can match the collective wisdom and expertise of The American Legion and other VSOs when it comes to relating to veterans.”⁴

It is still too early to tell what, if any success in meeting the needs of veterans the MyVA plan is delivering. Anecdotally, discussing VA with thousands of veterans in communities across the country, The American Legion has found little difference in delivery of service now from when MyVA was initiated. To be fair, this is still early in the implementation and change does not occur overnight.

It is possible that MyVA may in fact change VA and provide a better experience for veterans. It is also possible that it will only add another layer to an already bloated bureaucracy. In this, only time will tell. What is clear is that the voice of those who matter, the veterans themselves, has been somewhat softened by diminished input in crafting their own VA for their own future, and that’s not what America needs to build the best system to serve veterans.

The American Legion staunchly believes in a strong and robust VA to serve the needs of veterans nationwide, in delivery of healthcare, benefits and a wide range of services. The American Legion is deeply committed to working with all stakeholders to ensure that a robust VA is built, maintained and operated with the needs of veterans first and foremost in its goals. To build that system, the voice of veterans must be robust. The voice of the principal consumers of the system must be the most important voice in planning the road ahead.

The American Legion thanks this committee for their diligence and commitment to examining VA’s roadmap to the future. Questions concerning this testimony can be directed to Warren J. Goldstein, Assistant Director in The American Legion Legislative Division (202) 861-2700.

⁴ <http://valegion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Comdr-Helm-to-Sec-McDonald-RE-MyVA-03302015120719.pdf>