

**Testimony on Department of Veterans Affairs Outreach Efforts
Dr. Tommy Sowers
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Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Wednesday, April 24, 2013**

Good morning. Chairman Sanders, Senator Burr and distinguished members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. Thank you for the opportunity today to discuss the Department's outreach efforts, our approach and major accomplishments, along with emerging initiatives and the way forward. I will highlight successful programs we have already conducted and other programs we will be conducting in the coming weeks, months and year. One important theme of our outreach strategy is the importance of national and local partnerships, which are essential to reach Veterans and their families.

VA's three Administrations – Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration and National Cemetery Administration -- and our central office are working closer than ever to plan, coordinate and integrate meaningful outreach activities across the Department. The 2012 Biennial Report to Congress, submitted earlier today, outlines the outreach activities of the Department.

OVERVIEW

Since Secretary Eric K. Shinseki arrived in VA in January 2009, everything the VA does, including outreach activities is driven by a framework based on three fundamental principles; *people-centric, results-oriented, and forward-looking.*

- **People-Centric:** Veterans remain the centerpiece of our effort. As it pertains to outreach, this means VA must address Veterans' changing needs over time and develop strategies that effectively communicates how VA is meeting the needs of Veterans.
- **Results-Oriented:** The real measurement of VA's success is the timeliness, quality and consistency of the benefits and services we provide to Veterans and other beneficiaries.

- **Forward-Looking:** Seek opportunities for delivering the best services with available resources, continuing to do things smarter and more effectively. VA outreach efforts must leverage the latest technology to reach today's Veterans and future Veterans. Future outreach and services must take into consideration the changing Veteran landscape.

VA's approach to outreach is built on three pillars: (1) outreach efforts will be centrally planned with decentralized execution; (2) VA will leverage technology to the maximum extent possible; and (3) VA will maximize partnerships to achieve optimal results.

On a daily basis, the National Veterans Outreach Office (NVO), aligned under the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA), provides strategic oversight over VA's outreach efforts and ensures the above three pillars are applied throughout the Department.

To accomplish our important outreach mission, and among many other supporting efforts, VA is increasing the speed, accuracy, and efficiency of on-line information available to Veterans, Service Members, and eligible beneficiaries. The good news is our outreach efforts are making a difference in the lives of Veterans.

The Post-9/11 generation of Veterans is using VA benefits and services at higher rates than any previous group in Veterans in history. Iraq and Afghanistan combat Veterans are eligible, within 5 years from the date of their discharge or release from active duty, for up to five years of free health care. Over 55 percent of returning Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans are utilizing VA health care today.

Approximately one million Veterans have enrolled in the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill since its inception. The Post-9/11 GI Bill provides enlisted Service Members, officers and some family members with up to 36 months of benefits, payment of tuition and fees, a stipend for books, and a monthly housing allowance. Veterans and other beneficiaries are using these benefits to pursue undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, and non-degree-producing technical certification.

VA has also dramatically expanded its outreach to women Veterans. The number of women Veterans using VA health care has increased to 354,000. VA health care for women includes gender-specific

primary care such as breast cancer screens; mental health evaluation and assistance for issues such as sexual trauma, domestic violence and parenting; and specialty care including reproductive health care.

INCREASING AWARENESS AND ACCESS

The importance of outreach cannot be overstated. There are more than 22 million Veterans in the United States – and based on the most-recent National Survey of Veterans – less than half are currently accessing any VA benefits. In addition, that same survey revealed almost 60 percent of Veterans know either “very little” or “nothing at all” about their VA benefits. These statistics present both a challenge and an opportunity.

To address this challenge, VA is also moving to more self-service, technology-enabled interactions in order to provide Veterans easier access to information and the ability to execute transactions at a time and place convenient to the Veteran.

Closer coordination and synchronization of VA outreach activities and efforts has been instrumental in achieving several major accomplishments during the past few years:

- VA is working closely with State Directors of Veterans Affairs to ensure their veterans service officers are properly trained to better prepare fully developed claims to reduce processing time.
- eBenefits enrollment surpassed the 2.5 million point by the end of Fiscal Year 2012 – in part due to increased marketing, outreach and closer collaboration between VA and Department of Defense (DoD).
- Veteran’s homelessness has decreased more than 17 percent since 2009 as VA has intensified our national outreach, public communication, public-private partnerships and advocacy work in unison to rescue homeless Veterans while simultaneously implementing prevention programs.
- Veterans Health Administration (VHA) outreach is integrated with new construction and health service initiatives to better provide access, and serve Veterans as demonstrated through three hospital construction projects, including opening a state-of-the art hospital in Las Vegas – the first in 17 years.

- Since 2009, VA has added 57 new community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) giving us a total of 840 CBOCs through 2013 and we have increased the number of mobile outpatient clinics and mobile Vet Centers serving rural Veterans to 81.
- For the eleventh consecutive year, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) was rated the top customer service organization in the nation, outperforming major U.S. corporations. According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index, in 2012 NCA received the highest scores ever attained by a public or private organization.
- VA's Mental Health outreach is fully integrated with suicide prevention programs to reach Veterans through both traditional and social media to build awareness on how to seek VA help and assistance.
- VHA's "Make the Connection" campaign has been highly successful in getting Veterans to seek assistance and in saving lives. For example, in outreach conducted since November 2011, website visits have exceeded 2.3 million, more than 5.7 million on-line views, and 3.8 million impressions on Facebook.
- VBA has expanded its outreach to U.S. military Reserve Component (Army National Guard, Air National Guard, Marine Reserves, etc.) Service Members and their families. This outreach effort is accomplished through six major initiatives: (1) Demobilization Initiative, (2) Individual Ready Reserve Muster, (3) Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, (4) Post-deployment Health Reassessment, (5) Transition Assistance, and (6) OEF/OIF/OND Internet web page and social media.
- Since the beginning of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, through FY12, VA's Vet Centers have engaged 604,194 OEF/OIF/OND Veterans, 443,841 of whom were outreach contacts seen primarily at military demobilization and National Guard and Reserve sites. Services include mental health counseling, career counseling and VA service and benefits assistance.

- Eligible Veterans and family members received Vet Center Services at over 89,000 distinct outreach activities and events. These services include individual and group counseling, marital and family counseling, bereavement counseling, medical and benefits referral and employment counseling.

The Department continues to improve its outreach efforts by initiating many new programs such as deploying mobile vet centers into rural areas, establishing more community based outpatient clinics and providing mental health crisis line services; increasing visibility through different advertising and marketing campaigns; coordinating communication across VA using consistent messaging; and strengthening partnerships with other Federal agencies, state, city and local governments, Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), Military Support Organizations (MSOs), and other stakeholders who support or assist Veterans and their families in accessing VA benefits and services.

VA ACCESS CAMPAIGN

Shortly after my arrival in August 2012, we initiated detailed planning to launch a new outreach campaign called “VA Access.” The campaign launched in January 2013. VA Access is a comprehensive outreach strategy involving all resources within the Department. Its primary objective is to inform Veterans of the care and benefits they have earned and how to access them, for example, using the eBenefits portal. The campaign is a multi-year effort using both traditional and social media communication mediums.

VA Access is based on a three key principles. First, Veterans learn best from other Veterans. Second, sustained outreach empowers Veterans and their family members to stay informed of their benefits through important stages in their lives. Third, the life of every Veteran – or their family members – is improved or enhanced by accessing the Veterans benefits they have earned. I will now briefly summarize the major components of VA Access.

“Pro Bono” National Advertising Campaign. Our flagship project is VA’s first-ever national advertising campaign with the New York City-based Ad Council, which is made possible by pro bono contributions of our partners. With our close involvement and oversight, the Ad Council and our pro bono partner have conducted extensive research – including the

use of Veteran focus groups – and will create, produce and distribute ads on TV, radio, social media, billboards and magazines.

We recently completed our quantitative and qualitative research. Creative development and review, including field testing, will start in May. And the Ads will start running nationally this October.

The Ad Council program represents huge benefits to taxpayers and Veterans by maximizing a cost-efficient marketing and advertising program while reaching national Veterans audiences and stakeholders.

Social Media Enhancements/Efforts. VA also recognizes the importance of Social Media to reach our audiences. Our online communication presence is now fresh, relevant and Veteran-focused. This past October, we totally redesigned our public-facing web page [www.VA.gov]. Our new web design is more user friendly, intuitive, and features a new look and feel, so Veterans and beneficiaries can better navigate content for their specific needs. We are removing redundant, outdated and trivial information.

“Buddy Program.” Nearly one in four Federal employees is a Veteran. However, as is true with the larger population, many Veterans working in the Federal government may not be aware of VA benefits and services available to them. To address this, later this year we will launch a new initiative with our Federal Agency partners.

The objective of our “Buddy Program” is to inform Federal employees who are Veterans of their benefits, while encouraging them to share the information with other Veterans they know.

Veteran Employment Program Offices and public affairs staff can post information about the program on agency intra-net sites – informing participants on how they can enroll in eBenefits or learn more about VA health care programs, they may be eligible for. We are also distributing posters to other Federal agencies to help promote this effort.

Veterans Day. As we look toward November 2013, we see the culmination of intensive outreach activities coming together at the perfect point in time – Veterans Day. As our Nation pauses to recognize and thank Veterans, a positive sentiment focused on Veterans fills the air. This presents an incredible opportunity for VA and Veterans groups to join together for a unified call to action to increase access to VA.

As we approach Veterans Day, we are asking VSOs to have “open house” events and other events focused on getting more Veterans to access the benefits and services they have earned. The stage is set and we are moving forward.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS

OPIA’s Office of Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA) continues to implement a broad outreach strategy to ensure VA is communicating and coordinating our efforts across all levels of Federal, state and local governments.

Over the last two years IGA has established or strengthened its working relationship with the following groups and organizations that represent state and local governments or entities:

- Governors - National Governors Association (NGA).
- National Guard Bureau and the State Adjutant Generals.
- State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA).
- State Veterans Home Administrators (NASVH).
- Council of State Governments (CSG).
- State Legislators (NCSL).
- County Elected Officials (NaCo).
- County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO).
- Mayors (USCM).

IGA has implemented and routinely participates in the following outreach initiatives:

- Formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by the Secretary of VA and the President of NASDVA, furthering VA’s commitment to coordinating our efforts with our state partners.
- Quarterly conference calls with NASDVA to provide VA subject matter experts (SMEs) to address VA priority programs and initiatives.
- Bi-weekly meetings with the Governors’ Federal Representatives in Washington DC to provide information on VA priority programs and initiatives and address VA related issues or concerns.
- Weekly meetings with White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs to further coordinate our outreach efforts with other federal agencies with programs impacting Veterans.
- Annual Conferences for all state and local organizations listed above.

- Mid-Winter Conferences for NASDVA and NASVH.

TRIBAL GOVERNMENT OUTREACH

In November 2009, President Obama tasked all Federal departments to fully implement Executive Order 13175 on “Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments.” VA developed its plan in 2010, Secretary Shinseki signed VA’s Tribal Consultation policy in 2011, and the VA Office of Tribal Government Relations (OTGR) was established in OPIA and staffed in 2011.

The end result of our efforts is to expand and enhance communications between the Department and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) tribal leaders to improve services to AI/AN Veterans.

Outreach activities undertaken by OTGR include:

- Sponsoring outreach booths at approximately five conferences hosted by Native American advocacy organizations. VA staff gave presentations during conference events and gave updates on VA programs for Native American Veterans.
- Initiating tribal consultation on programs and services offered by the VA’s three Administrations. Tribal consultation events were held in Washington D.C., Anchorage, AK, Lincoln, NE and Denver, CO.
- Collaborating on tribal consultation with the Department of Health and Human Services/Indian Health Service (IHS) on a draft agreement to facilitate VA reimbursement for direct care services provided by IHS AI/AN Veterans.
- Hosting meetings in Washington, D.C.; Spokane, WA; Shakopee, MN; Albuquerque, NM; Grand Ronde, OR; Norman, OK; and Milwaukee, WI with tribal leaders, Veterans and Veteran service providers. Collectively, these sessions drew over 1,000 attendees.
- Facilitating three listening sessions between VA officials and tribal leaders and Veterans in Bismarck, ND, Billings, MT, and Albuquerque, NM.
- Drafting a resource guide for tribes interested in integrating aspects of Veterans Courts into tribal justice systems.
- Sponsoring themed outreach materials in 2011 to VHA Alaska, focused on outreach to Alaska Native communities within the state.
- Initiating a bi-weekly electronic newsletter for tribal leaders and Veterans in the Midwest.

HOMELESS VETERANS OUTREACH

In keeping with President Obama's pledge to honor and support our Veterans, the Secretary of VA established a VA priority goal of ending homelessness among Veterans in 2015. In support of that goal, OPIA's Homeless Veterans Initiative Office (HVIO) authored, with input from all VA administrations and staff offices, VA's Five-Year Plan to End Veteran Homelessness.

A vital component of VA's strategy to end homelessness among Veterans is VA's National Call Center for Homeless Veterans (NCCHV), because it serves as the entry portal through which many homeless and at-risk Veterans find out about VA homeless services. NCCHV provides 24/7 access to VA homeless services by phone at 877-4-AID-VET and by online chat at www.va.gov/homeless.

In 2011, HVIO launched a multi-pronged outreach campaign urging every citizen to "Make the Call" to the NCCHV if they are or know a Veteran who is homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The "Make the Call" campaign included the following six elements:

- Outreach awareness and information events in 28 targeted cities across the country in October 2012 to launch the outreach campaign;
- Outreach that enlisted assistance from national and local organizations that come into contact with Veterans on a daily basis;
- Assistance from over 2,300 community partners such as soup kitchens, shelters, local government agencies, first responders, and faith based organizations to help share information with homeless and at risk Veterans about VA resources;
- Four web videos that focused on the roles different professions (social workers, medical professionals, first responders, and legal professionals) can play in connecting Veterans with services to prevent or overcome homelessness.

VA is committed to preventing and ending homelessness among Veterans and their families by the end of 2015 and is poised to assist homeless and at-risk Veterans in achieving their optimal level of functioning and quality of life. Outreach is critical to ensuring the goal of ending Veteran homelessness is achieved.

As a result of VA's outreach campaign focused on homeless Veterans, calls to NCCHV increased by 123 percent and VA's media activities resulted in over one billion impressions during fiscal year 2012. More importantly, VA helped prevent many Veterans from becoming homeless and helped many others successfully transition from homelessness to having a home and becoming self-sufficient. Today, more Veterans are accessing VA homeless services than ever before. Below are a few specific measures that reflect the success of VA's homeless Veteran outreach activities.

- From September 2011 to September 2012, calls to NCCHV rose from 36,100 to 80,558. During the same period, there was a 125 percent increase in calls from Veterans seeking assistance to NCCHV, evidence VA is increasingly reaching its targeted population.
- There was a 334 percent increase in calls from Veterans at risk of homelessness between fiscal year 2011 to fiscal year 2012.
- The media campaign resulted in over 1 billion impressions:
 - Cable television - 15 second and 30 second spots: 358,978,000 impressions;
 - Out of home - posters, transit shelters, bulletins, bus advertising: 230,000,000 impressions;
 - Radio - 15 second and 30 second audio spots: 534,718,000 impressions;
 - Online display - banner ads: 100,653,568 impressions/80,000 clicks;
 - Online video share - 30 second and 60 second audio/video: 350,000 video views.

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIGITAL STRATEGY

Through the Office of Public Affairs, VA will continue to execute a digital media strategy that is content focused to provide Veterans and other stakeholders relevant and timely information delivered on a variety of platforms. Digital content is available through traditional va.gov websites as well as social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and blogs, and other cutting edge platforms.

Currently VA's Facebook page has more than 250,000 subscribers, which is more than any other cabinet-level agency.

REHABILITATIVE SPORTS

VA plans and executes outreach to our wounded, injured and ill Veterans through our rehabilitative adaptive sports programs. In a strategic partnership with the U.S. Olympic Committee, VA grant monies support both national events and local events in communities where our Veterans live. These events not only support rehabilitation, but provide VA an opportunity to educate Veterans about other available programs, benefits and services that could health and overall quality of life. These events also give Veterans opportunities to share information and success stories about VA benefits and services with other Veterans.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Successful Veteran outreach cannot be accomplished by the VA alone. Many Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs) are making a huge difference in the lives of Veterans. The Ad Council research underscores the importance of “Vet-to-Vet” contact and peer influence. Simply put, Veterans trust other Veterans.

Therefore, sustaining and building relationships with VSO and NPO groups is crucial to helping inform Veterans and to enrolling more Veterans in VA.

The Secretary and I both meet quarterly with several VSO representatives, and VA is now reaching out more directly to NPOs. In those forums, we share information and we are asking the VSOs to help us enroll Veterans in concert with their respective Veteran advocacy roles

SUMMARY

The Department of Veterans Affairs outreach programs focus on increased awareness and access of the VA benefits and services earned by Veterans and their families. We are working to coordinate and integrate outreach efforts across the VA to improve efficiency of resources, maximize technology and social media assets, and improving cooperation with Veterans Service and Non-profit organizations working to assist Veterans and their families every day.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I am pleased to answer any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.

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