

The Honorable Daniel L. Cooper, Under Secretary for Benefits, Department of Veterans Affairs - accompanied by Mr. Robert J. Epley, Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Policy and Program Management

Statement of  
Daniel L. Cooper  
Under Secretary for Benefits  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
Before the  
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to testify today on this important issue. Providing outreach to military service men and women, including Reserve and National Guard members, is a vital responsibility of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and particularly the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). We have dramatically increased our outreach activities over the last several years to reach service members, not only when they are preparing to separate or retire from the military, but also upon their induction into service and during service.

VBA is working with the Department of Defense (DOD) to ensure that all Military Entrance Process Stations (MEPS) give every inductee a copy of VA Pamphlet (21-00-1), A Summary of VA Benefits. We began providing this pamphlet to inductees in November 2004. It exposes new service members to basic information about the VA benefits and services for which they will be eligible when they leave military service. We are also working with the military service departments to ensure that information packets distributed to Individual Ready Reserve and Individual Mobilization Augmentees during the demobilization process include information on VA benefits and services.

Prior to separation or retirement from the military, VBA provides much more extensive information to service members on specific VA benefits and services in which they might be even more interested as they depart the military. This information is conveyed in transition briefings as part of a formal three-day Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and during the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP), as well as during individual interviews. To further improve DTAP briefings, VBA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service developed a standardized PowerPoint presentation and a new orientation video that greatly improve the quality and consistency of our outreach briefings for service members, including Guard and Reserve members.

During fiscal year 2004 VBA representatives conducted over 7,000 briefings, which were attended by over 261,000 active duty personnel and their families residing in the United States. Included were 1,400 briefings for more than 88,000 Reserve and National Guard members for whom VBA provides pre and post-deployment briefings. In fiscal year 2005 to date, VBA has conducted just under 4000 transition briefings attended by 157,000 plus participants. Nine hundred seventy four of those briefings were for over 68,000 Reserve/Guard members.

Returning Reserve/Guard members can elect to attend the formal TAP Workshop as well as DTAP.

In addition to the briefings conducted in the United States, in fiscal year 2004 we conducted 625 overseas transition briefings for more than 15,180 service members. Our people boarded three aircraft carriers and, during the return transit, conducted TAP briefings onboard the USS Constellation, USS Enterprise, and USS George Washington (on their return to the United States from extended deployments). To date this fiscal year, we have conducted 232 overseas transition briefings for 5,600 service members, and will continue to support additional requests from the Department of the Navy for TAP briefings onboard ships.

VBA has coordinated its efforts with military officials at the major demobilization sites to ensure that VA representatives are part of the briefings provided to returning service members at the time of discharge. VBA representatives work closely with personnel from VA's Vet Centers at these sites.

Soon after separation or retirement from the military, veterans, including Reserve and National Guard members called to active duty, receive a "Welcome Home Package" from VBA's Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS). The package includes a letter from the Secretary, a copy of VA Pamphlet (21-00-1), A Summary of VA Benefits, and VA Form 21-0501, Veterans Benefits Timetable. A six-month follow-up letter with similar information is also mailed to these veterans. Separate outreach mailings are sent concerning VA education and insurance benefits. In addition, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs sends a personal letter to each Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veteran based on lists routinely provided by the Department of Defense. Included with that letter are VA pamphlets A Summary of VA Benefits, and A Summary of VA Benefits for National Guard and Reserve Personnel.

A VA Web page, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, can be accessed from VA's home page [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov). Information specific to Reserve and Guard members is also included on this page as well as links to other Federal benefits in which returning service members may be interested. The Web page has been accessed over 377,000 times since its activation sixteen months ago.

To ensure a seamless transition for seriously injured veterans, particularly those from Iraq and Afghanistan, VBA has stationed benefits counselors to work alongside Veterans Health Administration social workers at key military installations where wounded service members are frequently sent. These seamless transition counselors have been in place since 2003.

Full-time VBA representatives are assigned to work bedside with patients at both the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC and the Bethesda Naval Medical Center in Maryland. Part-time VBA representatives are available at five other military medical treatment facilities throughout the U.S., and VBA representatives provide service, as needed, at all other military medical treatment facilities.

As of April 5, 2005, 5,383 hospitalized returning service members have been assisted through this program at the Brooke (TX), Eisenhower (GA), Madigan (WA) and Walter Reed (DC) Army

Medical Centers; Bethesda Naval Hospital (MD); and the Evans (CO) and Darnell (TX) Army Community Hospitals.

In addition to our disability compensation personnel, our Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service is actively participating with other organizations to strengthen our coordination and outreach efforts to disabled veterans. The goal is to ensure a seamless transition for OIF and OEF veterans. In December 2004, VR&E conducted a briefing for 150 severely disabled service members and their spouses at the Salute to America's Heroes Conference in Orlando, Florida. We are working within such service improvement workgroups as VA's Seamless Transition Coordination Office, the National Guard/VA Joint Workgroup, Army Disabled Soldier Support System (DS3) Employment Workgroup, DOD/Department of Labor (DOL) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Steering Committee, and the Marines for Life. VBA has assigned a point of contact to assist the staff at the new Department of Defense Military Severely Injured Joint Operations Center in northern Virginia to assist with inquiries from service members and survivors relating to VA benefits and services.

In our efforts to provide quality services to disabled veterans, VR&E has an ongoing partnership with the Department of Labor's (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS). VR&E staff in 57 regional offices and more than 100 outbased VA offices work closely with DOL's Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialists (DVOPs) and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs) to assist job-seeking veterans. There are currently 71 DOL DVOPs and LVERs co-located in 35 VA regional offices and 26 outbased locations. Additionally, there are four VR&E personnel co-located in DOL offices in Louisville, Kentucky and St. Petersburg, Florida. DVOPs and LVERs stationed or co-located with us in VR&E field facilities have the opportunity to access the same resources available to VR&E staff. This access can help to better integrate DVOPs and LVERs into the initial vocational evaluation process with the real goal of the best delivery of employment services.

VR&E has also collaborated with DOL on training for VA case managers as well as DVOPs and LVERs. VR&E and DOL jointly produced live satellite broadcasts about the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) and special hiring authorities for Federal employment. Originally broadcast in February 2004, the USERRA broadcast explained the law and the benefits available for veterans who desire to resume the jobs that they left when they went on active duty or in some cases, because of a disability, be reemployed with the same employer in a comparable position. This satellite broadcast has been shown over 50 times. The special hiring authorities broadcast aired in July 2004 and included information on the expedited Federal hiring process for veterans with disabilities. These broadcasts provided important information for veterans seeking employment, and copies of the broadcasts continue to be distributed to VR&E and DOL personnel across the country for use by both staff and employers. Joint efforts such as this help to ensure seamless delivery of services to veterans by both VR&E and DOL.

Additionally, VR&E and DOL have developed a draft memorandum of understanding (MOU) in which we agree to use our partnership to benefit veterans and provide quality employment services. Veterans need employment assistance as they return to civilian life and the VR&E/

DOL partnership supports that need. VR&E and DOL meet regularly to discuss progress on present collaborative efforts and future possibilities.

One of our newest and most successful initiatives is our Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. Following our outreach efforts to service members still on active duty, we now have an expedited process that will enable them to file an application for service-connected compensation even before they separate from the military. The required physical examinations are conducted, service medical records are reviewed, and a rating decision is prepared prior to discharge and delivered as soon thereafter as possible. For service members applying while on active duty, our goal is to adjudicate claims within 30 days from discharge. Upon receipt of the claimant's DD Form 214 (Report of Release from Active Military Service), benefits are immediately authorized and the recently separated veteran can receive his/her first disability check the month following the month of discharge or shortly thereafter. Currently, 141 military installations worldwide participate in this program. Included are two sites in Germany and three in Korea. In fiscal year 2003, we processed just under 26,000 BDD claims. In fiscal year 2004, we processed 39,000 claims. This expedited BDD process is also utilized for veterans applying for benefits within 180 days of discharge.

VA participated in a number of Family Readiness Conferences such as the Army Reserve's Annual Family Action Plan Conference. VBA, represented by the St. Louis VA Regional Office, staffed a VA benefits and services information booth along with representatives from the local Veterans Centers. It is anticipated that similar conferences will be held throughout the country. Also, local VA facilities participate in homecoming events for service members returning from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mr. Chairman, in summary, VA outreach to service members and veterans is extensive and far-reaching. This completes my statement, and I will be happy to answer any questions you and other members of the Committee might have.