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# United States Department of Veterans Affairs



## Open Government Plan

**June 2010**

Prepared on behalf of the  
Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
A letter of introduction of the Department of Veterans Affairs' plan for transformation and openness from the Chief Technology Officer and Senior Official for Open Government	4
Introduction.....	5
Leadership, Governance, and Cultural Transformation.....	7
1. Forward-thinking leaders.....	7
2. Governance.....	7
3. Changing the culture from top to bottom.....	8
4. How we measure success.....	9
5. How we hold ourselves accountable.....	9
Transparency.....	11
1. Communication.....	11
2. Data transparency at VA.....	11
VA's current data available for download.....	11
High-value data sets and tools.....	12
Prioritization, release, and monitoring high value information and data.....	13
3. Breaking the Back of the Claims Backlog.....	14
4. Compliance: eRulemaking; IT Dashboard; Recovery.gov; USAspending.gov.....	15
eRulemaking (Regulations.gov).....	15
IT Dashboard.....	15
Recovery.gov.....	16
USAspending.gov.....	16
5. Records Management.....	17
6. Congressional Requests.....	17
7. Freedom of Information Act.....	17
Participation and Collaboration.....	20
1. 21 <sup>st</sup> century public outreach.....	20
2. Plan for enhanced participation and collaboration.....	20
3. Innovation in Health Information Technology.....	21
Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record.....	21
A Virtual Implementation of VistA.....	22
Blue Button.....	23
4. Public feedback: Gulf War Veterans Illness Task Force's draft report.....	23
5. Veterans Relationship Management.....	24
Virtual Call Center (VCC).....	24
eBenefits.....	24
Flagship Initiative.....	26
VA Innovation Initiative.....	26
What's next for VA.....	29

## Executive Summary

On his first full day of office, President Obama issued his Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, an approach to public administration that Veterans Affairs (VA) takes very seriously.

Even as VA transforms itself into a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization that is people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking, we are fully committed to creating a more transparent, participatory and collaborative Agency. At VA, we believe that good leadership and good governance are essential to serving those who have served us. That is why Secretary Shinseki designated Peter Levin, VA's Chief Technology Officer, as the Senior Accountable Official for Open Government, and other senior leaders have stepped up to play important roles in the effort. VA is in the process of a profound cultural transformation, one that is open, transparent and already yielding results.

We believe transparency and accessibility are tools of transformation. Leveraging free and ubiquitous Web-based channels, we have connected with Veterans and their families via our new Web site, Facebook and Twitter to share stories about changes in policy and news from VA and from Veterans. We have developed a new data quality plan to ensure that when we report financial, business and other data that it is reliable and useful. We are also leveraging transparency to reengineer our business processes and improve performance across the Agency.

We have developed a very exciting flagship program the VA Innovation Initiative, or VAI2. This initiative will transform our business processes, provide transparency to our work, and create a collaborative effort between our Agency, the Veterans we serve and the private sector. Specifically, VA is tapping the talent and expertise of individuals from both inside and outside government to contribute new ideas that will ultimately produce new, innovative solutions at VA.

Candidly, VA has not always been the model for government performance or service delivery. However, with strong leadership, good governance, and a new commitment to creating a culture that is open, transparent, participatory, and collaborative, we will achieve our objective and create a high performing VA of which our citizens, our nation, and most importantly, our Veterans and their families can be proud.

## **A letter of introduction of the Department of Veterans Affairs' plan for transformation and openness from the Chief Technology Officer and Senior Official for Open Government**



**Peter Levin, VA Chief  
Technology Officer**

Secretary Shinseki is transforming the Department of Veterans Affairs into a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization that is people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking. An essential part of this vision is to meet our strategic goals with Web-based tools that enable transparent, responsive, and accountable government.

The following plan outlines our roadmap to be open, transparent, inclusive, and collaborative. At VA, we began this journey last Fall by asking our dedicated employees for ideas to fix the broken claims processing system, and the response was tremendous. More recently, and based on the success of our first web-based experiment, we just announced the winners of our Health Information Technology competition.

Veterans Affairs has great ambitions: to stay on the cutting edge of health care delivery; to lay the foundation of safe, secure, and authentic health record interoperability; to deliver excellent service for Veterans' who apply for disability and education benefits; and to create a modern, efficient, and customer-friendly interface that all Veterans will enjoy and all citizens will value.

With this plan, we challenge all VA colleagues to add four words to their transformation vocabulary: openness, transparency, participation, and collaboration. As essential as VA employees are to transformation, a truly successful open government initiative depends on Veterans and citizen engagement, from ordinary outreach to fast, reliable, and friendly communications. As we move more of our services and products online, we are constantly asking Veterans and citizens for the answers to "How are we doing?" and "What should we be doing better?"

For example, beginning in February 2010, we created a structured Web-based format that enables Veterans, citizens, and employees to give us exactly this input: we received hundreds of ideas and know that this is just the beginning. And our Facebook page is the second most friended in Federal government, and one of the fastest growing.

In the next pages, we describe our plan to be open and transparent. We look forward to hearing from Veterans and citizens about how we are doing and what else we can do to improve.

## Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has the solemn duty to serve those who have served our nation. America's Veterans have served in many conflicts, most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, with a mission to keep our country and the American people safe. VA's mission is to fulfill President Lincoln's promise "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan." VA fulfills this by providing benefits, healthcare, and memorial affairs to our Veterans and their families.

Today, VA's 300,000 employees work hard to accomplish our mission and keep our country's commitment to America's Veterans and their families.. Today we provide services, due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have created an influx of beneficiaries with complex needs. Our challenges are exacerbated for our Veterans and for VA by our current economic difficulties. From health care to homelessness, America's heroes need VA now more than ever before.

While the external demands on VA could not be greater, VA itself faces significant internal challenges. In a world where technology evolves at exponential rates, VA struggles with legacy systems that do not meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs of our Veterans. These antiquated, paper-bound systems are slow and difficult to scale. Old business processes need to be updated. Systems lack interoperability, and inefficiency has too often been the rule, rather than the exception.

Despite these external and internal challenges, VA is in the process of making critical improvements, and we are already seeing results. Low performing projects are being stopped, processes are being reengineered, backlogs are being reduced and customer service is improving. This is just the beginning of a long journey toward achieving the Secretary's vision and VA's full potential.

Creating a more transparent, collaborative and participatory VA is critical to achieving an important transformation and our long-term success. It is often said that sunlight is the best disinfectant, and we believe that openness and transparency will lead to increased efficiency and performance. Candor about VA's challenges is allowing us to identify issues and solutions from Veterans and VA employees. We also know that many of the best ideas come from outside of Washington, and, in fact, many come from Veterans and other citizens across the country. New Web-enabled technologies not only provide opportunities for VA to deliver services in a more open and transparent way, but also they enable greater participation and collaboration inside government, across VA and with other agencies, as well as outside government, with Veterans, their families, and all Americans.

In short, open government can help VA deliver real results. Soon, the days will be over when Veterans send their information, wait two years to learn, by form letter, that their claim is denied because of a trivial error. Instead, new Web-based tools will allow Veterans to monitor progress at each step in the process. They will have the opportunity to suggest improvements and get answers to questions in real time, online. Most

importantly, open government empowers Veterans not only to hold our Department accountable, but to directly participate in its improvement.

We are eager to hear how we can improve our system, and look forward to your feedback.

# Leadership, Governance, and Cultural Transformation

## 1. Forward-thinking leaders

Open government at VA is not just letters on a page. Open government embodies a transformation in our culture, a culture already steeped in pride and dedication to our mission: “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.” We recognize that excellent service to Veterans and their families means embracing transparency, participation, and collaboration in a way that positively affects all stakeholders. Therefore, the creation of the Open Government Plan at VA relied on the support and the vision of forward-looking senior leadership who recognized the need for openness at our Agency. VA’s most senior leadership shaped this document and they will play a critical, hands-on role in its implementation.

Before the President of the United States formally mandated that all Federal agencies adopt a culture of openness and transparency, the newly appointed Secretary of VA, Eric Shinseki, addressed the U.S House of Representatives’ Committee on Veterans Affairs, promising a 21<sup>st</sup> century VA, one that is people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking.

*“We must seek out opportunities for delivering best services with available resources; we must continually challenge ourselves to look for ways to do things smarter and more effectively. We will aggressively leverage the world’s best practices, our knowledge base, and our emerging technologies to increase our capabilities in areas such as healthcare, information management, and service delivery.”*

We at VA have proudly risen to the Secretary’s call to create the forward-looking organization he envisioned.

## 2. Governance

Secretary Shinseki has not only provided the vision and leadership for a more open, higher performing VA, he has also dedicated the resources to operationalize this vision. This begins with a governance structure that makes open government and service delivery a priority. That is why Secretary Shinseki began by creating the new and innovative position of Chief Technology Officer (CTO) to solve VA’s challenges with creative, business-oriented, technology-based solutions; the CTO is the Senior Official Responsible for Open Government. In addition to the CTO, VA’s Open Government Leadership Team includes VA’s Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Chief FOIA Officer, Roger Baker; VA’s Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Todd Grams; and VA’s Assistant Secretary of Policy and Planning, Raul Perea-Henze.

Good governance is open governance. That is why VA will use its renovated governance policy to ensure that Open Government is a department-wide priority, rather



than yet another duplicative leadership group. The individuals at VA leading the Open Government charge are senior leaders with a voice at the Secretary's and Deputy Secretary's table and the authority to get the job done. In cooperation with the Executive Leadership Board, all senior members of VA will be included in and responsible for the outcomes of open government.

### **3. Changing the culture from top to bottom**

Creating an atmosphere of openness at VA, the second largest Federal agency, will require not only leadership from the top of the organization, but also significant efforts to integrate these values into our business processes. Therefore, we at VA will take the following steps to support employee adoption of these values Agency-wide:

- **Open Government Online Employee Forums**  
We will adopt an online crowd-sourcing platform, used to engage the public while promulgating our VA Open Government Plan, to allow employee specific input, questions and suggestions for making VA more open and transparent. Our employees have the most hands-on working knowledge of VA's business lines. Their input and suggestions will provide excellent feedback on how to operationalize our Open Government Plan. (For more information, please see the participation and flagship initiatives section of the plan.)
- **Open Government Employee Innovations**  
Leveraging the success of Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) and Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) online innovation competitions, we will hold competitions for employee-generated ideas regarding the future implementation of openness related measures. These competitions will recognize extraordinary ideas that advance the open and transparency mission of this plan. Using innovative selection processes, VA employees will select the most innovative ideas for promoting open government at VA.
- **Sharing VA Open Government Initiatives on our VA intranet site**  
VA has struggled to communicate with our employees about our efforts and successes. In the next calendar year, we will add to the intranet home page a menu of the transparency initiatives, as well as information on how to get involved (through the online platform and the Innovations Competition) in open government.
- **Innovation Toolkit**  
Knowing about VA's open government successes is an important first step, but it will yield little results without providing VA employees with the correct tools to implement the open government policies. That is why VA is creating an Innovation Toolkit. In the toolkit, we outline the methodologies and mechanisms that VA uses to further open government as well as ways to collaborate with other Federal Agency employees with similar commitments to openness and transparency.

- **Celebrate Open Government Successes**

In addition to sharing our successes in creating a more open VA within the Agency, we must also communicate our efforts to those outside VA. That is why we will continue our existing social media efforts through tools such as Facebook and Twitter and expand to other new media as well.


#### 4. How we measure success

VA will know that we have been successful in our open government endeavors when the tidal wave of questions regarding the status of a claim recedes and Veterans receive the benefits and services they've earned, more quickly and more reliably. VA will use informal surveys on Web sites like Facebook to monitor how we are doing. In the next calendar year, we will develop a short, formal, and Web-based survey to determine whether stakeholders and the public have heard about our open government plan and whether it has been effective.

Furthermore, we will measure success based on participation with our private and academic partners, the number of employees participating and the level of participation, as well as how Veterans and citizens are also involved in the process.




#### 5. How we hold ourselves accountable

Throughout our Open Government Plan, we lay out very specific programs, many of which are already underway, that will enhance, demonstrate, and create transparency at VA. The table below lists each initiative in our plan, where it is addressed in the plan, how it relates to open government, the office responsible for the initiative and when you can expect to see a status update on each project:

Open Government Initiative	Responsible Office	Where it is in the plan	When you can see its progress on our dashboard
Employee innovations	VBA &VHA	page 10	July 2010
Innovation Tool Kit	Office of the Secretary	page 10	June 2010
Sharing open government success publicly	OPIA/New Media	page 10	May 2010 
How we measure success	Office of the Secretary	page 10	July 2010
VA Web site transformation	OPIA/OIT	page 12	May 2010
Web inventory	OIT	page 12	May 2010
VBMS	VBA	page 12	July 2010
VRO	VBA	page 12	July 2010
eRulemaking	OGC	page 15	July 2010
IT Dashboard	OIT	page 15	May 2010

PMAS (VAIT Dashboard)	OIT	page 16	May 2010
FOIA	OIT	page 16	October 2010
Records management	Staff Offices	page 17	October 2010
Congressional requests	Congressional & Legislative Affairs	page 17	October 2010
Online Communications Hub	OPIA/New Media	page 21	July 2010
Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record	OSVA/VHA/OIT	page 22	October 2010
AViVA	OSVA/VHA/OIT	page 23	July 2010
Citizen Engagement	OSVA/ /OPIA	page 23	May 2010
Blue button personal record consortium	Office of the Secretary	Page 23	June 2010
Gulf War Veterans Illness Task Force Report feed back	Office of the Secretary	page 24	July 2010
Veterans Relationship Management (VRM)	VBA	page 24	October 2010
Ebenefits	VBA	page 25	May 2010
VBA Innovation Competition	VBA	page 27	June 2010
VHA Innovation Competition	VHA	page 27	June 2010
VAi2	Office of the Secretary	page 27	October 2010 <b>RFP Announced June 2010</b>
Agent Orange RFI	Office of the Secretary/VBA	page 28	July 2010

As part of our Open Government Plan, we will use this information to create an accountability dashboard, hosted from VA's Web site at [www.va.gov/open](http://www.va.gov/open), which will monitor whether VA is executing on each open government project. Projects marked green will be right on schedule. Projects marked yellow will be either slightly behind schedule or are slow to get started. Red will indicate that a project has been halted. Each project and its color will be updated on a quarterly basis and accompanied by a written status update specifically illustrating why each project is given its current color indicator.

Open Gov Initiative	Status	Update	Update Date
Communication Hub		No dedicated resources to start Planning.	April 7, 2010
VBMS		Delivery dates slipping behind planned.	April 7, 2010
Agent Orange Fast Track		Received 23 RFIs. 3 day lockdown to write RFP.	April 7, 2010

**Illustration of accountability dashboard**

# Transparency

## 1. Communication



VA launched a redesigned Web site in November 2009. A major benefit of the new look and feel is that content is placed into discrete, user-friendly categories to make it easier to find information. A new rotating stories feature on the Web site's homepage includes topics such as the Secretary's public outings, special interest stories, and breaking VA news. The Web site also makes it easier to connect with VA through its multiple online applications for services and benefits.

While we are very proud of the redesign, our Web site transformation continues. In January 2010, our Web site suffered from some server stability issues and exposed flaws in our Web governance structure. At the direction of the CTO, we completed an inventory of our processes, equipment, software, human capital and contractor resources. From this exercise, VA has identified structural and infrastructural improvements that need to be made – some urgently – in order to maintain a highly reliable production and delivery environment. We will report improvements to our web environment by August 2010.

## 2. Data transparency at VA

From healthcare to building maintenance, VA collects and uses enormous quantities of data to carry out our mission. While we have not been as open and transparent with data as we could or should be, we are moving in the right direction. We have begun to take necessary steps to comply with the public reporting requirement for our data, as outlined in the Office of Management and Budget's Open Government Directive, while continuing to protect the privacy and security of personal information. We are also committed to improving our existing processes and efficiently providing high-value data to the public.

### VA's current data available for download

In response to the Open Government Directive, we developed a guide for our employees to use Data.gov to increase awareness of our mission and to help the public understand the data we produce and its impact on Veterans. As such we are creating and managing data sets and systematically uploading them to the online Federal data Web site, Data.gov. We are also responsible for providing the public with information about the data, called metadata, which makes data more accessible and usable. We are working diligently to ensure that the online data sources open to the public include VA's high priority data sets, as well as information and insight into potential applications

for the data. Data is available for download at <http://www.data.gov/>. Current data sets from VA on Data.gov include:

- **Patient Satisfaction Surveys:** These statistics offer a snapshot of the quality of care provided at VA health care facilities. The report includes information about waiting times, staffing levels, infection rates, surgical volumes, quality measures, patient satisfaction, service availability and complexity, accreditation status, and patient safety. Multiple data sources from across VHA were used to create this report.
- **Veterans Benefits and Compensation:** This dataset provides a count of the number of Veterans receiving disability compensation or pension payments from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The data is reported at the county level, by age group and by percent disability rating for each state plus recipients in Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico
- **Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures:** This report shows estimated VA expenditures for major programmatic areas by geographic area (state, county and congressional district). The major programmatic areas are: Compensation and Pension, Readjustment (Education) and Vocational Rehabilitation, Insurance, Construction, Medical Care, and Administrative.

### High-value data sets and tools

High value is defined as information that can be used to increase Agency accountability and responsiveness, improve public knowledge of the Agency and its operations, further the core mission of the Agency, create economic opportunity, or respond to need and demand as identified through public consultation. From our perspective, this definition

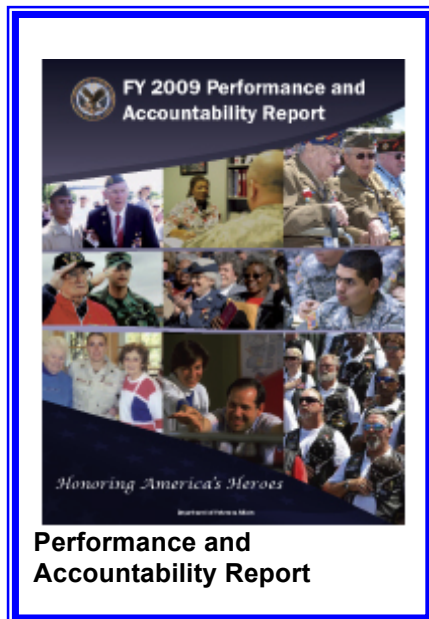


encompasses almost all of the data that VA owns: much of the Agency's data will help with accountability, both to the Veterans and communities that VA serves. This in turn will further the core mission of the Agency. An example of high-value data sets is VA's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funded projects. ARRA funded \$1.4 billion dollars for projects such as maintenance of facilities and construction of new facilities. In order to be open and transparent about where the funds are currently in use, we have created an interactive map that allows visitors to search for Recovery Act funded projects all over the country. One potential benefit is

that high-value information can help Americans find jobs by using the map. (<http://recovery.va.gov/varecovery/>)

## Prioritization, release, and monitoring high value information and data

While VA is more open and transparent with its data than ever before, we currently face the challenge of prioritizing and re-publishing data that is currently available to the public online. For example, each fiscal year (FY) we release the Performance and Accountability Report (PAR), the report card that measures our progress toward providing Veterans with outstanding services. The entire PAR is located on VA Web site and is available for download by the public in portable document format (PDF).



Unfortunately, PDF is not an easily machine-readable, thereby stifling interaction and analytical study, which is the underlying purpose for having transparency outlined in our plan. We are committed to republishing these and other reports in open, machine-readable formats. Additionally, we will require that the metadata for published reports, like the PAR, be available for download.

To ensure that we make these improvements across VA, we will develop a plan for data prioritization and release as well as milestones for implementation. VA's Web Governance Board is the key entity to ensure this vision becomes a reality. Representatives from each Administration within VA sit on the Board, and make recommendations concerning the use of the Internet and the associated Web sites and services.

Additionally Assistant Secretary of Policy and Planning Dr. Raul Perea-Henze is spearheading the effort to hone data transparency by creating a group of leaders to serve as Data Points of Contact within VA. These points of contact represent each administration, staff office, and administrative office within the Agency. The Data POCs meet monthly to discuss the state of Data.gov and the data assembled at all levels in VA. The Data POCs are leaders at VA who are intensely focused on data transparency.

Another example of our effort to continually improve the quality of the data we report, the acting Chief Financial Officer for VA, Todd Grams, has developed with his Senior Assessment Team a plan to improve and report all the financial data to USAspending.gov and Recovery.gov. The Chief Financial Officer is also a member of the Executive Leadership Board.

### **3. Breaking the Back of the Claims Backlog**

Secretary Shinseki charged the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to rethink and revamp the claims process to ensure that no Veteran waits more than 125 day for a claim decision, and that all adjudication will be 98% correct.

VBA, in turn, depends on internal organizations, like Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the Office of Acquisitions, Logistics, and Construction (OALC), and the Office of Information Technology (OIT), for assistance, guidance, and especially innovative ideas. Breaking the back of the claims backlog is a charge not shouldered by VBA alone, but by everyone at VA.

Processing a Veteran's claim is more difficult than private sector processing models. VBA understood quickly that they could not simply tinker with a broken system or automate a broken process. VBA, with some help, is systemically breaking the back of the claims backlog in the timeframe the Secretary mandated.

VBA developed a comprehensive, coherent, complete plan, starting with simple solutions that can be implemented quickly, like reducing the time between incremental steps in our current system that will interface with signature program, the Veterans Benefit Management System (VBMS). The plan is a time-phased overview of what happens, when it happens, how it happens, and who is responsible for making it happen.

One of the first successes of VBMS was the Virtual Regional Office (VRO). The VRO was designed to deliver an implementable, professional specification of the front end of a new claims processing system and the dashboard that claims representatives will see and use.

Next, VBMS is working toward another success in the Agent Orange Fast Track. After the Secretary designated three diseases presumptively service connected– ischemic heart disease, hairy cell Leukemia and Parkinson's – to in-country service in Vietnam, VBA, OALC, VHA and OIT teamed up and, in record time, determined that the private sector could assist by lending crucial knowledge and technology to help fast track these specific claims for our Veterans who suffer from debilitating diseases caused by Agent Orange exposure. Our four organizations sent representatives to draft the Performance Work Statement in March; Requests for Proposals were delivered in May; private sector companies submitted proposals at the beginning of June and an award will be made in early July with an end-to-end system delivered in October. This collaborative and transparent process is unlike any other project we've done, and demonstrates how forward-thinking and transparency can lead to better results, faster.

Taken together, the VRO, Agent Orange Fast Track, VBA Innovation Initiative (now part of our Flagship Initiative VAI2) as well as the other pilots and initiatives working in VBA, fall under the VBMS umbrella. The first pilot demonstration of VBMS is due to the Secretary in November, one month after the scheduled production delivery of the Agent



Orange Fast Track system. These and all of our innovative projects are on target to meet their objectives: transparent, collaborative, in scope, and on budget. We are making steady, methodical progress toward breaking the back of the backlog.

#### **4. Compliance: eRulemaking; IT Dashboard; Recovery.gov; USAspending.gov**

We, at VA, are committed to complying with Federal transparency initiatives. While we struggle with compliance on some of the initiatives, we have identified these shortcomings and are working within the Agency to improve performance.

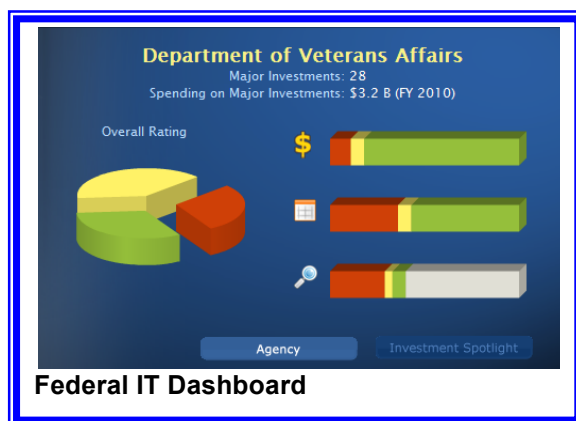
##### eRulemaking (Regulations.gov)

VA is an active and successful participant in the Federal Government's Inter-Agency eRulemaking initiative. This initiative provides the public with an opportunity to view and comment on all proposed Agency regulations electronically, by visiting a single government Web site that displays Agency regulations that have been published in the Federal Register and are open for public comment. VA utilizes the Federal Docket Management System (FDMS) to review and post public comments on the Web site, including those received by mail or other means. As a result, the public can actively participate in VA's rulemaking process while the regulations are under development.

VA's Office of Regulation Policy and Management (02REG), in the Office of the General Counsel, has a Web site at <http://www1.va.gov/orpm/>, which links readers to the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (eCFR), where all current VA regulations can be found. The site also lists all VA rulemaking documents published by 02REG in the Federal Register since its establishment in 2004, and provides convenient links to copies of those publications and other materials that might be of interest to the public.

##### IT Dashboard

The IT Dashboard is a Web site operated by the Office of Management and Budget that details information on Federal technology investments. Specifically, the IT Dashboard allows the public to track and review performance, spending, and progress of technology investments of the different Federal agencies. VA's CIO, Roger Baker, ensures full compliance with reporting requirements.





## VA IT Dashboard and Project Management Accountability System

Assistant Secretary Baker also provides leadership and accountability for the proper management of IT projects. He created the Project Management Accountability System (PMAS) in summer 2009, and all projects are in the system as of spring 2010. PMAS protocol will enforce delivery of IT products in short, iterative cycles. This level of visibility will mitigate the risk that VA only learns of from failed implementations, days before expected delivery. PMAS resulted in the immediate cessation of 45 projects that were not meeting our standards of excellence. As we report out this data, it will ensure absolute transparency of VA's spending on IT projects.

A result of the new culture of accountability created by PMAS, VA developed the VA IT Dashboard to capture critical information for projects including status, cost and schedule. The VA IT dashboard's development and display allows the public to view our projects, their pending status, and cost. The next step is to allow the public to view the VA IT Dashboard information in machine readable and open format. This will enable the public to use the information for research, or their own personal knowledge, and interface with our program offices in a meaningful way. Below is a graphic from our Web site illustrating the status of projects in the VA IT Dashboard:

<b>O&amp;T Product Delivery Dashboard Summary</b>												
<b>SUMMARY</b>												
	O	O	G	G	Y	Y	R	R	N/A	N/A	#	%
Overall Project Rating	5	6%	56	73%	11	14%	5	6%	0	0%	77	100%
Requirements	6	8%	35	45%	15	19%	21	27%	0	0%	77	100%
Schedule - Curr Increment	3	4%	70	91%	2	3%	2	3%	0	0%	77	100%
Schedule - Prev Increment	5	6%	55	71%	1	1%	6	8%	10	13%	77	100%
Cost - Curr Increment	3	4%	66	86%	1	1%	1	1%	6	8%	77	100%
Cost - Prev Increment	3	4%	64	83%	1	1%	2	3%	7	9%	77	100%
Cost - Project	6	8%	57	74%	3	4%	5	6%	6	8%	77	100%
Acquisition Plan	5	6%	58	75%	8	10%	3	4%	3	4%	77	100%

STATE	COUNT
Active	77

**VA's IT Dashboard**

## Recovery.gov

We take the responsibility of allocating American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds very seriously. That is why we ensure that our spending reports are prepared and submitted to OMB and Recovery.gov on time, every time. We have developed a set of departmental, Agency program, and expenditure plans that detail specific projects and the level of resources that ARRA funds. Our recovery plans, status of ongoing efforts and weekly financial and accomplishment reports are published online and available for download at [www.va.gov/recovery](http://www.va.gov/recovery).

## USAspending.gov

USAspending.gov collects all the financial spending data for an agency. The spending data is in one of four categories: Grants, Loans, Contracts, and Other Assistance. VA currently provides information for grants spending, but the data is deemed as low

quality. To improve the quality of the data and to ensure VA provides data on loans, contracts, and other assistance, the acting Chief Financial Officer, Todd Grams, developed a Data Quality Plan. This plan defines the governance needed as well as the technological changes required to be more transparent with our spending data.

## **5. Records Management**

VA maintains multiple systems of records as required by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). VA will continue to uphold Records Management standards by providing resources and tools for the Department's Records Managers. These resources are available online for download at <http://www.rms.oit.va.gov/Resources.asp>. The records within VA's system should be available for download for knowledge and use, and the Agency will explore the creation of such a site that is well maintained and easy to access.

## **6. Congressional Requests**

Due to the nature of VA's business, many offices within the Agency receive correspondence from members of Congress. VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs assists in the response to this correspondence and hosts information regarding the nature of Congressional interaction with the Department on their Web site at <http://www4.va.gov/oca/c2c.asp>. In an attempt to increase transparency and openness between VA and the public, the Agency will explore the possibility of an online reserve of declassified and logically cataloged Congressional inquiries and VA responses. Where applicable, metadata could be provided, showcasing VA's commitment to creating a community of users that understands VA's business lines and the clear ties to the important branches of the Federal government that it serves.

## **7. Freedom of Information Act**

### FOIA and Transparency

Providing information through Freedom of Information Act inquiries is one of the most important activities for any agency. We receive a high volume of these requests: VA received 99,333 requests in FY 2008 and 69,432 requests in FY 2009. On January 29, 2009, the Secretary issued a memo to Assistant Secretaries reinforcing his commitment to the principles of transparency and openness and asking key officials to ensure that requested information be made available in a timely manner. VA's Chief FOIA Officer, Roger Baker, disseminated this information department-wide, and held training sessions for FOIA Officers that explained how to apply the presumption of openness and the foreseeable harm standard. Additionally, several VA FOIA Offices held training sessions for their field offices to ensure a presumption of openness when making determinations on FOIA requests.

In April 2009, VA held a training session for FOIA Officers to discuss the Attorney General's FOIA Memorandum, which provided guidance to agencies on how to implement the President's goals of openness and transparency. Several offices within

VA have publicized the President's FOIA Memorandum and Attorney General's FOIA Guidelines, including distributing these documents and providing further training. Other offices have developed internal FOIA Standard Operating Procedures Guides, which provided guidance for authorized personnel to respond to FOIA requests.

Our Chief FOIA Officer has been instrumental in anticipating and encouraging a culture of openness through the transformation of the FOIA request process within VA. We recently implemented a new electronic FOIA processing and tracking system, which is improving VA's ability to reduce its backlog and enhance its reporting capability.

### VA's FOIA Backlog

Our number of backlogged requests decreased from 2,840 in FY 2008 to 503 in FY 2009. The decrease in the number of these requests is partly attributed to VA FOIA offices' successful backlog reduction efforts. VA has also been systematically closing out its oldest pending FOIA requests cutting in half the age of the oldest request (from 7 years to 4 years). The chart below reflects VA's backlog in terms of requests and administrative appeals, and in terms of the date the request was received:

<b>Freedom of Information Act Requests</b>				
	<b>Initial Requests</b>		<b>Appeals</b>	
	<b>FY 2008</b>	<b>FY 2009</b>	<b>FY 2008</b>	<b>FY 2009</b>
<b>Pending Backlog</b>	2,840	503	68	72
<b>Date of oldest request</b>	03/26/2003	04/04/2006	11/10/2005	04/07/2009

While it is difficult to determine the exact number of backlogged requests for the past fiscal year due to implementation of our electronic FOIA tracking solution in June 2009, our quarterly backlog averages have decreased from 1,300 overdue requests in the fourth quarter of 2008 to 319 in the first quarter of 2010.

### Responding to Requests

By acquiring a Web-based FOIA tracking system, FOIA officers can now track the status of FOIA requests, transfer cases electronically, and upload FOIA correspondences with requesters. This tool allows VA's geographically dispersed FOIA officers to be up-to-date on any FOIA request received.

To increase the effectiveness of the FOIA tracking tool, the Program Manager was designated to provide technical assistance to FOIA Officers using the system. The e-FOIA Program Manager also conducts routine data integrity checks to ensure that the data input into the system is accurate and available.

FOIA offices hired more staff and contractor support to address FOIA backlogs, as well as identify methods to help streamline the FOIA process to reduce department-wide response times to FOIA requests. VA's FOIA office is working with other FOIA offices such as VA's Alternative Dispute Resolution Office to train FOIA Public Liaisons on mediation skills and other alternative dispute resolution tools and techniques to improve customer service and avoid lengthy appeals and litigation.

To learn how to make a FOIA request, to learn more about the FOIA organization at VA, or to view the FOIA reading room, visit VA's FOIA Web site: <http://www.foia.va.gov/>.

### FOIA and Proactive Disclosures

In June 2010, VA's Open Government team and Data.gov team consulted VA's FOIA officers to identify data sets and information to proactively disclose. By July 2010 a list of these data sets will be made available on the VA's FOIA webpage. The plan is to better determine what categories of information receive the most requests and then prioritize the data VA can proactively release based on recent inquiries under the FOIA. The experiences of the FOIA Officers in responding to frequently requested information can also indicate what data sets could be released and what might be statutorily exempted from release. This type of analysis prevents disclosure of sensitive or privacy information.

VA will build on the existing FOIA body of knowledge to assist the programs that own the data sets to determine what types of data can be released to the public. This includes not only information within a data set but also information that, when combined with another set of data, could contain privacy or sensitive information. FOIA Officers would thus act as a line of defense against the inadvertent and erroneous disclosure of information.

VA's General Counsel (GC) is now advising FOIA officials that the standard for releasing records, where the decision is discretionary, is whether foreseeable harm may result because of the discretionary release. This shifts the presumption from the discretionary withholding of information to its release as long as no foreseeable harm would result.

# Participation and Collaboration

## 1. 21<sup>st</sup> century public outreach



VA's Facebook fan page

Transparency inherently requires communicating the actions we take and the services we provide in our offices, hospitals and benefits offices. VA is aggressively leveraging Web 2.0 technologies to reach out to Veterans, family members, employees, and other concerned citizens. These social media tools include Facebook and Twitter, among others. Currently, VA has the second highest number of “fans” among Cabinet-level agencies with over 36,000 from across the United States. VA has one of the fastest growing fan bases in the Federal Government and receives more than 180 comments per day responding to between 3-5 information posts submitted by

VA on Facebook. Posts that draw the largest feedback are those that trigger discussion among VA’s friends concerning topics such as benefits, hospital care and VA special events like the Winter Paralympics and our homeless stand downs held at VA Medical Centers.

## 2. Plan for enhanced participation and collaboration



Concept design for communication hub

To best serve its clients—and in keeping with tenets of open government—VA must continually foster a culture of productive, two-way communication. This will include both proactive communications across multiple venues and the development of techniques by which the organization can better receive and incorporate feedback from clients.

With an ever-expanding array of Web 2.0 platforms at its disposal, VA will create an Online Communications Hub (OCH), which

will function as a central online gathering place for Veterans, family members, and the general public. The purpose of the OCH will be to compete within the same media space as organizations like Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Blackfive, and other, similar drivers of traditional media coverage. VA’s OCH will fully integrate internally produced media, externally produced media, mechanisms for feedback, relevant traditional media, social media, and links to VA’s Web site.

VA will also add a new blog. Modeled after other successful Federal government blogs such as The Department of State's *DipNote* and the Transportation Security Administration *TSA Blog*, a VA employee will staff our central blog. The new blog will put a human face on the organization and will post relevant information about VA to the public, highlighting our programs, challenges, successes, and failures from the inside. One of the most exciting aspects of the OCH will be the guest blog submissions from employees and the public. The blog will enable VA to connect questions and comments about benefits to the correct office within VBA, and questions about health care to the appropriate office in VHA. This blog will also give VA a new way to both spot trends and better understand the needs of our Veterans, while at the same time openly and transparently engaging with the public. The guest blog section will emulate the clarity and diversity of the highly successful Huffington Post.

To capture feedback in an effective and efficient manner, we plan to establish a topical discussion forum, where registered users can comment and provide feedback to VA.

### **3. Innovation in Health Information Technology**

#### Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record

On April 9, 2009 President Obama announced the creation of a Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER). VLER, a collaborative project between VA, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and private health care service providers, will provide Veterans, Servicemembers, family members, care-givers and service providers with a single source of information for health and benefits in a secure and authorized way.

The goal of VLER is simple and straightforward. When a Servicemember separates from the military, they will not have to carry any paper files from DoD to VA because, if they choose, they will be electronically transferred. This automated interoperability will aid in the seamless transition from active duty to Veteran status. VLER will also make benefits delivery seamless, safe and convenient by giving authorized public and private providers access to information anytime and anywhere that it is needed.

VLER is our strategy to create a single portal for authorized users to access information that is necessary to receive and deliver health care, make benefits determinations and provide compensation based on claims. This strategy is becoming reality through the inception of a portfolio of interoperability mechanisms, all based on openly architected, standards based systems.

#### *VLER and Nationwide Health Information Network*

The National Health Information Network (NHIN) is a set of policies, standards and services that HHS developed, in conjunction with other federal and private stakeholders, for the transport of health information between two or more health care providers or

health information exchanges. The NHIN will be the primary transport mechanism to exchange health information for VLER. The NHIN is the trusted interoperability tool across the Federal Government and is the interoperability backbone for the VLER project.

### *VLER in Practice*

We have already begun a pilot of the VLER strategy in the San Diego area that uses the NHIN to exchange health information between VA and Kaiser Permanente for over 400 Veterans who are patients of both systems. Soon, we will expand that pilot to Tidewater, Virginia, partnering with DoD and other private providers who can exchange data through the NHIN.

Next fall we will begin a third phase by expanding in two more regions, and will expand the capability of the three-way exchange of information between VA, DoD, and private providers and networks. We are also exploring the possibilities of exchanges between VA and local providers across the nation.

Finally, we will also integrate VLER with our major initiative enterprise platforms, Veterans Benefit Management System (VBMS) and Veterans Relationship Management (VRM).

### A Virtual Implementation of VistA

A Virtual Implementation of VistA (AViVA) is a recent innovation that we are using to support collaboration. AViVA creates a universal user interface for the electronic health record and includes prototype data connectors to link securely the AViVA platform to patient data from any source. The AViVA project incorporates HealthVet as an update of the Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA) legacy database system.

VA's current electronic hospital management system uses a graphical user interface known as the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS). CPRS data is stored in the legacy data system within VistA. CPRS requires installation on each machine that operates the program rendering the program difficult to scale and expensive to maintain and update. AViVA's implementation improves this model. Among other benefits, AViVA creates a modular, Web-enabled electronic health record system that can be easily and remotely maintained.

AViVA is a very exciting program for the collaboration portion of our Open Government Plan. Because it envisions a modular, component-based architecture, AViVA will make it easier for third party providers to build applications, and for health care providers to collaborate to provide the best care for Veterans. AViVA's Web based presentation layer will allow our doctors and nurses around the country to search patient records as simply and succinctly as you can search for pizza on Google Maps and as securely as the best retail financial service businesses. Additionally, AViVA promotes collaboration



between VA and DoD, our partner in caring for our nation's heroes. Finally, AViVA creates an open source platform that allows software to be shared with entities outside of VA, creating opportunities for further innovation and development beyond the Agency.

### Blue Button

In January 2010 we were invited, in conjunction with the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS), to attend the Markle Consumer Engagement Workgroup, which focused on incentivizing the market to provide consumers with electronic access to their health data and technology solutions to better use this data. The workgroup concluded that VA, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and CMS, as major Federal health data holders, will participate in follow up discussions on the breakthrough idea of a download or "blue" button. The blue button will be accessible in online health data portals directly enabling individuals to download their personal health records.

While Veterans already have access to their health records through a secure, individualized portal called My HealthVet, VA will enable Veterans to download their individual personal health record by creating a download function, or the blue button. In August 2010, we plan to deliver a prototype of the blue button where Veterans can download an easy to read document containing their name, address, phone numbers, prescriptions, and any self-entered data.

### **4. Public feedback: Gulf War Veterans Illness Task Force's draft report**

The Gulf War Veteran Illness Task Force formed to address the needs of Gulf War Veterans who suffer from unexplained, chronic, multisystem, or undiagnosed illnesses. The Task Force is comprised of representatives from VA offices including health, benefits, policy, congressional and public affairs. This Task Force conducted a comprehensive review of VA programs that serve Gulf War Veterans. We believe that improving the responsiveness of VA to the challenges facing the 1990-1991 Gulf War Veterans is a priority that requires innovation and the engagement of all stakeholders, including VA employees, DoD, Congress and Veterans' Service Organizations (VSOs).



That is why, on April 1, 2010, VA released the Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Task Force Draft Written Report for public comment via a Federal Register notice on [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov). The public comment period for the Gulf War Illness Task Force Report closed May 3, 2010. This was the first VA initiative to solicit public feedback on policy proposals utilizing both the Federal Register and an idea management platform. An idea management platform was web-



enabled and it featured 21 subject areas that directly aligned with the report's recommendations. Users were able to submit ideas, make comments, and cast votes in a totally transparent manner. VA partnered with VSOs to spread the word to Veterans about the opportunity to submit comments on the draft written report. More than 150 new suggestions, including 28 formal written responses, were submitted, 300 comments were made, and 2,100 votes were cast. The response was historic-- never before had VA received so many public comments on a proposed rule, regulation, or policy in such a short period. VA continues the review process to evaluate all the public comments related to the draft findings for subsequent inclusion into the final written report to Secretary Shinseki in July 2010.

## **5. Veterans Relationship Management**

Veterans Relationship Management (VRM) will provide on-demand, self-service access to our services and benefits on an easily customized platform that each Veteran and his or her family can suit to their needs. The project creates multi-channel access to our employees, providing Veterans with important personal information, and puts the Veteran in the driver's seat of the benefits application experience.

VRM promotes participation in a way that is very tangible to the public and most importantly to our Veterans.

### Virtual Call Center (VCC)

An important component of VRM is the Virtual Call Center (VCC), a design specification exercise based on our successful experience with the Virtual Regional Office. The VCC proof of concept will consist of interactive voice response, call routing and a user desktop. We will ask our employee to actively participate in developing the specifications for the new system. The VCC will be used by developers and call center subject matter experts (SMEs) to iteratively document requirements for Call Center processing.

In fact, the VCC will jumpstart the design process for the larger Veterans Relationship Management by employing flexible, iterative, user-in-the middle development practices. The VCC will break down traditional organization and institutional barriers associated with large-scale business transformation efforts, allowing current system users (e.g., contact center agents) to provide real-time input into system functionality. The VCC will employ a flexible development platform that will allow VA to make changes quickly in both commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) configuration and custom-developed code.

The estimated time for award of the contract is August 2010. We anxiously await the award so we can begin improving our telephone service for Veterans.

### eBenefits

eBenefits is one of the early successes of the VRM project. eBenefits is an online portal that Veterans can use to access important benefits information and documentation.

eBenefits is an especially exciting achievement for our benefits administration because the effort has been spearheaded and supported by our partner in serving our nation's heroes, the Department of Defense (DoD). Our online portal, with the collaboration and cooperation of DoD, uses a single sign-on, familiar and easily accessible for Veterans and their families, to access all of our applications for the myriad of benefits available. Current self-service capabilities available on Ebenefits include:

- **[Military Personnel Record](https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/)** (https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/) Veterans and Active Duty Service Members can log into the "My eBenefits" portal and use Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) online to check, view, and print documents in their OMPF.
- **[State-Specific Benefits](https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/)** (https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/) Veterans can log into their portal to search for state provided benefits such as educational grants and scholarships, special exemptions or discounts on fees and taxes, home loans, Veteran's homes, free hunting and fishing privileges and more.
- **[MOVE!23](https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/)** (https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/) MOVE!23 Patient Questionnaire is VA's national weight management program for our Veterans. MOVE! can help Veterans lose weight, keep it off and improve their health.

The eBenefits initiative of VRM is ongoing, with new updates scheduled once a quarter for the next two consecutive fiscal years. Next quarter Veterans will be able to enjoy the following services:

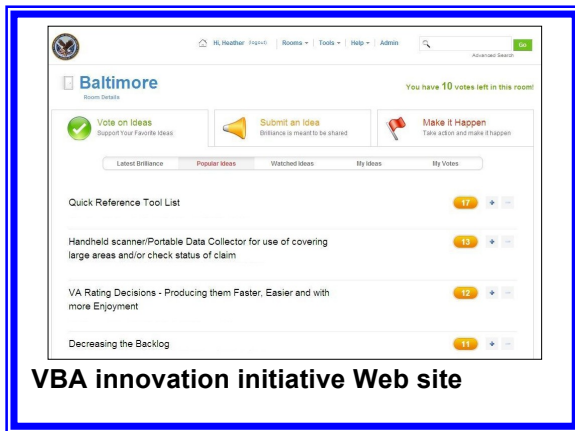
- **Certificate of Eligibility**  
Apply for, view and print VA Loan Certificate of Eligibility.
- **Health Eligibility Check**  
Online tools that help Veterans determine what types of Medical Benefits to which they are entitled.
- **Compensation and Pension Claims Status**  
Veterans will be able to track the status of certain benefits claims.
- **Personal Information Access**  
Our Veterans will be able to view and update important personal information such as their direct deposit banking information and their physical address.

# Flagship Initiative

## VA Innovation Initiative

VAi2 is a flagship initiative designed to tap the talent and expertise that exists both inside and outside of government. We invite employees, private sector companies, entrepreneurs and academic leaders to contribute their best ideas and solutions that increase Veterans' access to VA services, improve the quality of services delivered, enhance the performance of VA operations, and reduce or control the costs of delivering the services received by Veterans and their families. VAI2 provides a structure way for VA to identify, fund and test the most promising solutions to VA's most important challenges.

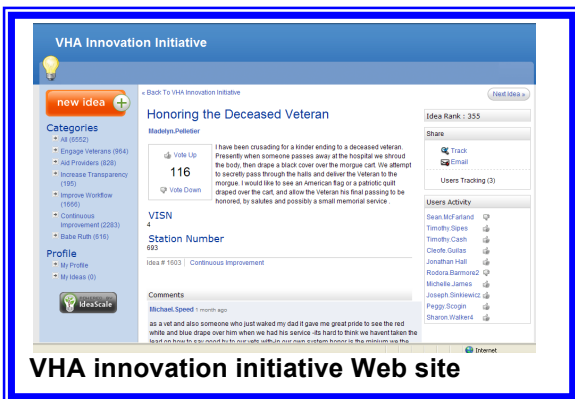
In August 2009, President Obama challenged employees of VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to an innovation competition to improve claims processing for Veterans. Over 7,000 VBA employees submitted 3,000 ideas. Each VBA Regional



VBA innovation initiative Web site

Office selected the top idea and the final selection panelists received all 57 ideas to evaluate them. Ten finalists' ideas were selected by a panel comprised of Admiral Patrick W. Dunne, former VA Under Secretary for Benefits; Craig Newmark, founder of craigslist.org; Dr. Peter Levin, Chief Technology Officer; and Garry Augustine, Deputy National Service Director for Disabled American Veterans. Ten ideas were chosen, including five that required funding, and all are currently being developed and implemented.

After the success of the VBA innovation competition, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) reached out to our employees to find innovative ways to improve or create health



VHA innovation initiative Web site

information technology using the same general process as in the VBA competition. In February, approximately 45,000 VHA employees submitted 6,500 ideas and cast 500,000 votes. Six panels reviewed the seventy-five ideas that received the most votes, along with twenty-five ideas dubbed "gems" by the Under Secretary. The panels selected 26 ideas for funding and implementation. These innovations are now in the early implementation phase.

On June 7, 2010, we announced the newest VAI2 program: the Industry Innovation Competition. In the Industry Competition, we ask the business and academic communities to submit innovative solutions that address some of VA's biggest challenges. Specifically, we chose 6 topics for this Competition:

- **Innovative Housing Technology to Address Veteran Homelessness:** Eliminating Veteran homelessness is a top VA priority. New design and construction techniques, materials, and building technology can enable VA to use existing buildings and unused space to rapidly create highly functional, energy efficient and affordable housing.
- **Telehealth:** VA is a leader in telehealth implementation and currently serves many thousands of Veterans with solutions such as home health monitoring. Potential applications for telehealth solutions are broad and varied, and we are interested in pursuing integrated solutions that improve our ability to provide the right treatment at the right place and at the right time.
- **New Models of Dialysis & Renal Disease Prevention:** VA currently provides dialysis for over 10,000 Veterans annually, at both VA and community-based medical facilities. Alternative treatment strategies and dialysis technology can extend and improve our ability to provide quality care in a patient-preferred setting.
- **Improvement of Polytrauma Care:** VA provides comprehensive, inter-disciplinary rehabilitation care to Veterans and returning service members with multiple injuries (polytrauma). Solutions in areas such as the application of dynamic treatment algorithms, home monitoring of diverse and complex symptoms and assistive technologies can help the broad advancement of polytrauma care.
- **Reduction of Adverse Drug Events:** The development and deployment of strategies to prevent patient harm from adverse drug events is an on-going priority at VA. Tools that can integrate with VA records and systems and provide an increased ability to continuously monitor for at-risk situations can enhance dramatically the quality and safety of care provided by VA.
- **Integrated Business Accelerator:** A wide array of services and benefits are available to assist Veterans, and Service Disabled Veterans in particular, in starting and sustaining new businesses. However, an integrated, long-term approach that assists Veterans in accessing existing resources and provides services that aid in the launch and maintenance of startup businesses can help insure the long-term success of Veteran-owned businesses.

The Competition runs through the end of September and will employ evaluation committees made up of VA and industry experts. Up to \$80M may be awarded to proposals that offer significant improvements to the services and benefits that we provide to Veterans. More information on the Industry Innovation Competition is available at [www.va.gov/vai2](http://www.va.gov/vai2).

VAi2 is our structured and sustainable vehicle for spurring innovation and introducing the best ideas into day-to-day operations within VA. Going forward, we will continue to conduct both employee-driven and industry-driven events in both a bottoms-up (open

programs that encourage a broad range of ideas) and top-down (directed programs focused on major challenges) fashion. We continue to be guided by Secretary Shinseki's transformation initiative and the 13 greatest challenges that he has outlined as we pursue innovations that improve our ability to serve our nation's Veterans.

## What's next for VA

We have a lot to be excited about at VA, especially where our Veteran-centric projects and initiatives relate to open government. We are committed to building a culture of openness and transparency at every field office, hospital, benefits center, and at headquarters. We welcome the opportunity for ongoing participation and collaboration from Veterans, other Federal agencies and the public to make our programs more effective and transparent. VA's journey toward transparency and openness is just beginning and we are thankful for the thoughtful input and support of our senior leadership, employees, concerned citizens, and Veterans.

The beginning miles of our journey is marked by extraordinary accomplishments of our employees nationwide – from their innovative ideas to their willingness to accept openness as part of their every day operation – and their commitment to our mission and now to an open government create the initiatives and programs that you read about here. We are proud that they have chosen VA to advance their careers and to care for our nation's Veterans.

We are proud to be part of a Federal community that embraces truth and honesty as part of our daily operations. We are anxious to share our successes, be honest and open about our shortcomings, and provide opportunities for our communities, Veterans and other agencies help us improve. One of the most important ways we need to improve is in our “data operations”.

VA is committed to meeting data transparency requirements and will develop a plan for data prioritization and release as well as milestones for implementation. We are committed to providing Veterans and the public with high priority data that is clear, concise and easy to use. We look forward to including input from the public concerning how best to reach this goal and to making high quality data accessibility a reality.

VA looks forward to learning and growing as new and different instruments for open government are created and implemented. The Department of Veterans Affairs is proud to use these tools to enhance our service to the citizens of America and especially to our Veterans.