



Federal Health Matters

President's Commission Calls for Fundamental Changes in the DoD and VA

On July 31, the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors submitted to the President their final report, titled, "Serve, Support, Simplify." Since its creation in March, the nine-person commission—co-chaired by former Senator Bob Dole and former HHS Secretary Donna Shalala—heard testimony at seven public meetings; made 23 site visits to DoD, VA, and private sector health care facilities; conducted a survey of more than 1,700 service members; and launched an interactive web site designed for service members and their families to share their experiences.

On July 25, the commission held a White House briefing for the President, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, and VA Secretary R. James Nicholson on six recommendations, which are broken down into action steps containing clear goals and guidelines for the DoD, the VA, and Congress. Shalala explained that the recommendations "do much more than place Band-Aids on problems," adding that the commission intends to "simplify the pathway to recovery and ensure that injured service members achieve their maximum potential."

The first recommendation calls for the creation of a group of highly trained recovery coordinators to help seriously injured service members and their families navigate the DoD and VA health care systems to ensure prompt and continuous care.

To overhaul the current disability claims process, the second recommendation proposes that the DoD maintain

the authority to determine a soldier's fitness to serve but the VA establish the disability rating, compensation, and benefits. The VA also would reevaluate disability status every three years and investigate which vocational rehabilitation and educational programs are the most effective.

The third recommendation calls for both the DoD and VA to improve the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury. The commission also emphasizes the importance of reducing the stigma of PTSD.

To address the growing needs of veterans' family members, the fourth recommendation asks that Congress expand TRICARE respite care to combat-injured service members and amend the Family and Medical Leave Act to allow up to six months leave for the spouses and parents of combat-injured service members. The commission also recommends that the DoD and VA provide training to the families of service members who require long-term care.

The fifth recommendation suggests a joint DoD-VA venture to create an interactive web site, "My eBenefits," that would allow service members and veterans to enter personal information securely and receive tailored information about relevant programs and benefits in the public and private sectors. The commission cautioned, however, that current and future information technology will not be maximally effective until underlying administrative issues are addressed.

The final recommendation calls for Walter Reed Army Medical Center (Washington, DC) to actively retain and recruit all necessary professional administrative staff and resources through its planned closure in 2011.

Nicholson said the commission's recommendations will be addressed immediately by the Senior Oversight Committee, which is co-chaired by the VA and DoD Deputy Secretaries Gordon H. Mansfield and Gordon England.

VA Launches Partnership with Four Nursing Schools

In order to address the nationwide nursing shortage and to bring more highly trained nurses into the VA health care system, the VA announced on July 31 the launch of its Enhancing Academic Partnerships Program. The five-year pilot program will partner local VA health care facilities with nursing schools at the University of Florida, Gainesville; San Diego State University, San Diego, CA; University of Utah, Salt Lake City; and Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT. These schools, selected by the VA from a pool of 42 applicants, are the first in a series of 12 partnerships, with more nursing schools to be selected in 2008 and 2009.

According to VA Secretary R. James Nicholson, the partnership "will enhance the faculty and clinical resources needed to educate nurses." Specifically, the initiative seeks to expand faculty and professional development; increase nursing student enrollment by approximately 1,000 students, with a special focus on baccalaureate programs; provide opportunities for educational and practice innovations; and increase recruitment and retention of VA nurses by enhancing their role in nursing education. More information regarding the program can be found on the VA's Office of Academic Affiliations' web site (<http://www.va.gov/oa>). ●