



Federal Health Matters

VA-HUD Announce 12% Veteran Homelessness Decline in 2011

The Obama Administration announced a \$100 million grant to expand the VA's homelessness prevention program. A recent national report, issued by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development, shows a 12% decline in veteran homelessness between January 2010 and January 2011, a decline that keeps the Obama Administration on track to meet its goal of ending veteran homelessness in 2015. "This new report is good news for the tens of thousands of veterans we have helped find a home. Our progress in the fight against homelessness has been significant, but our work is not complete until no veteran has to sleep on the street," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "We have been successful in achieving this milestone due to strong leadership from the President and hard work by countless community organizations and our federal, state, and local partners who are committed to helping veterans and their families get back on their feet."

Secretary Shaun Donovan of HUD added, "We're absolutely headed in the right direction as we work to end homelessness amongst those who have served our nation. This significant decline tells us that the Obama Administration is on the right path, working together across agencies to target federal resources to produce a sharp and measurable reduction in veteran homelessness. As we put forth in the first federal plan to prevent and end homelessness, there's plenty of work ahead to reach our goal, but these numbers validate the work done by both HUD and VA to reach our na-

tion's homeless veterans and get them into permanent housing."

All 152 VA Medical Centers Now on Facebook

VA announced that all 152 medical centers are now on Facebook. "This event marks an important milestone in the overall effort to transform how VA communicates with veterans and provide them the health care and benefits they have earned," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "Veterans and their families told us from the beginning that they want to engage and they want relevant information delivered at the local level. By leveraging Facebook, the department continues to expand access to VA, and embrace transparency and two-way conversation."

A single Veterans Health Administration Facebook page in 2008 has ballooned to more than 150 Facebook pages, 64 Twitter feeds, a YouTube channel, a Flickr page, and the *Vantage Point* blog. VA also produced, in June 2011, a department wide social media policy with guidelines for communicating online with veterans. One of the goals of this effort is to break down long-perceived barriers between the department and its stakeholders. "Veterans of all eras are depending on us to get the right information to the right person at the right time," said Brandon Friedman, VA's director of online communications, and an Iraq and Afghanistan veteran. "With more troops returning home, we also have a responsibility to connect with the thousands of service members who have been—and will be—entering our system. They're using social media, so that's where we need to be. Facebook helps us do that."

Veterans Now Eligible for Insurance Coverage Increase

Under a new law, some veterans under the Veterans Group Life Insurance Program (VGLI) can now increase their coverage to the current maximum coverage under the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI). Allison A. Hickey, Department of Veterans Affairs under secretary for benefits, said, "Currently, 70% of the veterans covered under VGLI are under age 60, have less than \$400,000 of coverage, and will greatly benefit from this law change."

The Veterans' Benefit Act of 2010, enacted on October 13, 2010, enabled veterans to increase their coverage by \$25,000 at each 5-year anniversary date of their policy to the current legislated maximum SGLI coverage of \$400,000. About 21% of eligible veterans, to date, have taken advantage of this opportunity, representing nearly \$113 million of new coverage being issued. The VGLI program permits newly discharged veterans to convert their SGLI coverage they had as a service member to a civilian program. Before the law's enactment, veterans could not have more VGLI than the amount of SGLI they had when concluding their service, which means if, for example, veterans left the service before September 1, 2005, when the maximum SGLI coverage was \$250,000, then they were limited to \$250,000 in VGLI coverage.

To be eligible for this additional coverage, veterans must have active VGLI coverage; receive less than \$400,000 in coverage; request the additional coverage during the 120-day period before each 5-year anniversary date; and be younger than 60 years old on the 5-year anniversary date of

their coverage.

Now veterans can increase their coverage to \$275,000 on their first 5-year anniversary, while on their next 5-year anniversary, they can increase their coverage to \$300,000, and so forth. You can find more information by visiting www.va.gov or calling 1-800-827-1000. VA's Web portal, eBenefits-Insurance, is another available information resource.

New Fact Sheet About Diabetes Screening

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced a new fact sheet that explains the A1C test. This important test is used widely to diagnose type 2 diabetes and prediabetes and monitors glucose levels of people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

The A1C test, originally recommended only for monitoring diabetes, is now recommended to diagnose type 2 diabetes and prediabetes, following an international committee of experts, convened by the American Diabetes Association, International Diabetes Federation, and European Association for the Study of Diabetes. This test shows average blood glucose levels (blood sugar) over the past 3 months and does not require fasting. The results of this test—sometimes called the hemoglobin A1C (HbA1C) or glycohemoglobin test—are reported as a percentage. A higher percentage indicates higher glucose levels, which can cause complications in people with diabetes.

Judith Fradkin, MD, a diabetes specialist at the NIH's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) explained, "The fact sheet, called the A1C Test and Diabetes, offers in-depth information for people being tested. Lab tests and results, particularly the A1C, can be confusing. We hope this fact sheet will help people better understand

why the test is important, how to interpret results, and why results may differ from expected."

Experts hope the availability of this convenient test will prompt more people to get checked for prediabetes and type 2 diabetes since early detection and immediate treatment can delay or prevent type 2 diabetes and complications of the disease. "Now people can be tested for diabetes without fasting," said David Sacks, PhD, chair of a group working to standardize lab testing for diabetes and a member of the NIH Clinical Center's Department of Laboratory Medicine. The A1C Test and Diabetes Fact Sheet can be found on the NIDDK's National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse at www.diabetes.niddk.nih.gov/dm/pubs/A1CTest.

Flu Pandemic Guidelines Established

The Department of Health and Human Services and the National Center for Ethics in Health Care of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) developed ethical guidance to assist VA facilities in pandemic workforce, communications, and patient care planning. Readers may access the "Guidance" by going to www.ethics.va.gov/activities/pandemic_influenza_preparedness.asp and clicking on one of the icons to download the file, *Meeting the Challenge of Pandemic Influenza: Ethical Guidance for Leaders and Health Care Professionals in the Veterans Health Administration*. Users may submit written comments through www.regulations.gov; by mail or hand delivery to the Director, Regulations Management (02REG), Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Room 1068, Washington, DC 20420; or by fax to (202) 273-9026. The public comment period opened February 8, 2012 and runs through April 9, 2012.

First Anniversary for VA Caregivers Support Line

February 1, 2012, marked the 1-year anniversary of the toll-free National VA Caregiver Support Line, 1-855-260-3274. In the previous year, dedicated staff helped more than 25,000 veterans, family members, and caregivers connect to resources and receive access to services they have earned. "VA recognizes the importance of caregivers to our veterans' health and well-being. We also recognize the sacrifices the daily care of their beloved veteran requires," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "It is the care and commitment of caregivers that allows veterans with chronic illnesses or severe injuries to remain in the homes they defended, surrounded by the loved ones they hold dear. I am proud we have been able to help so many caregivers in this first year of the support line's operation."

Responders provide guidance, education on VA programs and benefits, information on community resources, and emotional support. "Caregivers play such a critical role in the lives of our nation's veterans, often at great cost to themselves. VA recognizes this sacrifice and the Caregiver Support Line is just one way we seek to support caregivers," said Deborah Amdur, VA's chief consultant for care management and social work. "Caregivers often give so much of themselves and the social workers on the support line recognize this. They understand the challenges faced by caregivers and are able to offer a listening ear, education, and connection with needed resources."

Callers who need more guidance can get referrals to their local Caregiver Support Coordinator, found at every VA medical center. The VA Caregiver Support Line operates Mon.-Fri., 8 AM to 11 PM, ET, and 10:30 AM to 6 PM, ET, on Sat. ●