



Federal Health Matters

VA's Project Reach Contest to Help Homeless Find Services

In March 2012, VA announced a contest where developers are challenged to create easy, mobile access to resources that the homeless need. "This contest taps the talent and compassion of the nation's developer community," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "We are asking them to make a free, easy-to-use Web and smartphone app that provides current information about housing, health clinics, and food banks."

Project REACH (Real-time Electronic Access for Caregivers and the Homeless) was launched by VA, the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, and the Jon Bon Jovi (JB) Soul Foundation, a nonprofit organization created to help the lives of people facing economic challenges.

"Last year's 12% drop in veterans homelessness shows the result of President Obama's and the whole administration's commitment to ending veterans' homelessness," said Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan. "I want to thank Jon Bon Jovi for being part of that effort and for using competition and innovation to advance the cause of ending homelessness."

With 1 out of every 6 men and women in homeless shelters being veterans, and with a 50% higher likelihood of becoming homeless compared with other Americans, the administration adopted a "no wrong door" policy that means all veterans who want to prevent or escape homelessness must have easy access to resources.

"At the Soul Kitchen we've seen the need for a simple, user-friendly,

comprehensive application that connects those in need to resources in their community. As we sought out a solution to resolve the disconnect, we found the VA, HUD, and HHS to be of like mind. Together we can provide the information about existing services—now we need the bright minds in the developer community to create a platform to tie it all together," said Jon Bon Jovi, musician, chairman of the JB Soul Foundation and White House Council for Community Solutions member. The winning entry will electronically distribute that information nationwide.

DoD Changes Sexual Assault Response

New methods are now available to help sexual assault victims reporting a crime or seeking assistance as they transition from service, according to the director of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. "We have several new options for victims of sexual assault," said Air Force Major General Mary Kay Hertog on March 30, 2012. "First, if you've been a victim of sexual assault in the military you now have the option of requesting an expedited transfer. We signed that into effect in December."

The new changes require a service member's local commander to respond to a transfer request within 72 hours. If the local commander denies the transfer, the service member can take it to the first flag or general officer in the chain of command, who must also respond within 72 hours. Hertog added, "We also have a new document retention initiative." She added, "We heard loud and clear from our veterans that present themselves at the [Department of Veter-

ans Affairs] years later that there was no documentation that they had ever been sexually assaulted [during] their military service."

According to Hertog, the varying standards of retention existing among all the services created this now-resolved issue, "We now have 1 standard of retention, so those individuals that file unrestricted reports will have their documents retained for 50 years. And those that file restricted reports will have their documents retained for 5 years. And of course, our victims of sexual assault who file restricted reports have that option to convert over to unrestricted reports at any time, and then we will retain their documents for that 50-year period."

Faster Claims Processing Now Available

VA announced on March 22, 2012, the availability of 68 new forms designed to help speed the processing of veterans' disability compensation and pension claims. "VA employees will be able to more quickly process disability claims, since disability benefits questionnaires (DBQs) capture important medical information needed to accurately evaluate veterans' claims," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "Disability benefits questionnaires are just one of the many changes VA is implementing to address the backlog of claims." The 68 forms now brings the total to 71 DBQs designed to guide physicians' reports of medical findings, providing VA with the right information needed to make a quick decision.

"By ensuring relevant medical information can be found on 1 form, we will cut processing time while improving quality," said Allison A. Hickey, the

under secretary for benefits.

Veterans can find DBQs on the VA site, <http://benefits.va.gov/disabilityexams>. The 68 new forms appear after the 3 DBQs for Agent Orange-related conditions. A claim may be filed through the eBenefits web portal at <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov>.

NAMI Statement on Afghanistan Tragedy

On March 20, 2012, in an effort to address the issues pertaining to the case of U.S. Army Sergeant Robert Bates, Executive Director Michael J. Fitzpatrick of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) issued the statement, "After 20 years of U.S. military experience in the Middle East and in light of the recent killing of 16 Afghan villagers by a soldier who news reports indicate may have experienced mental health problems, it is clear that the system of identification, diagnosis, and intervention for ongoing invisible wounds of soldiers serving America, as well as concern, care, and accountability, is not what it should be. NAMI deploras any and all unnecessary killing at home or abroad. We recognize the suffering of all victims of war, including their families and loved ones. NAMI offers expertise and partnership in developing protocols that will lead to education of those who are in positions of leadership, responsibility, and accountability, at all levels in our armed forces, with the purpose of helping to avoid future tragedies. NAMI also believes that strong programs of education and advocacy, coupled with accountability at all levels of management and command in both civilian and military settings, will lead to removal of the stigma of seeking help for mental illness and invisible wounds and will lead to healing and recovery. We pledge to continue our efforts for the good of our war-

riors, our veterans, and their families and for all of those who are affected by the invisible wounds of war and mental illness."

Mentors Prove Helpful to African American Vets With Diabetes

A recent VA study has shown that African American veterans with hard-to-control diabetes had improved blood sugar control when working with mentors with similar health problems.

"This study is another example of the benefits VA research brings to all Americans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "The researchers have shown the potential for the effectiveness of a safe, low-tech approach that can significantly enhance the quality of life for these veterans." The study comprised 118 African American veterans who were having trouble controlling their diabetes. The results of the study by the Philadelphia VAMC appeared in the March 20, 2012 issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. With the study length being only 6 months and the sample consisting of 118 people, the authors say further research is needed.

"Peer mentoring appears to be an excellent way to enhance self-management for this group of patients," said Dr. Judith Long, lead author and an internist at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center.

Veterans With PTSD Aided With Horse Therapy

A Pentagon Channel documentary reports that military veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are benefiting from horse therapy in "Recon: Unbridled." Flag Is Up Farms in California offers the program, "Horses for Veterans," a free,

intensive, 3-day program for veterans who have PTSD.

"I think No. 1 is to work with veterans who have given up on life," said Monty Roberts, a horse whisperer. Roberts' program engenders trust by allowing the horse and the veteran to learn to trust by choosing to, not by force.

"When they trust you, they will migrate toward you, rather than going away [out of fear]," Roberts said. "Horses are flight animals. They are frightened of everything they don't understand. If they don't trust it, they need to get away from it, and that's how a veteran feels, too."

VA, PVA Announce June 2012 National Veterans Wheelchair Games

VA and Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) will present the National Veterans Wheelchair Games with financial assistance from corporate, civic, and veteran service organizations. Each year, this sports competition attracts more than 500 athletes who use wheelchairs due to spinal cord injuries, amputations, or certain neurologic problems. Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center, in Richmond, Virginia, will be hosting the June 25-30, 2012 event.

The free competition features archery, air guns, basketball, bowling, field events, handcycling, a motorized wheelchair rally, nine-ball, power soccer, quad rugby, slalom, softball, swimming, table tennis, track, trapshooting, and weightlifting. Additionally, a whitewater kayaking exhibition will take place at Confluence Park. For more information, call Alison Faulk, local host coordinator, at (804) 675-5265; or Mary Hobbs, Paralyzed Veterans of America Sports and Recreation Program, at (800) 424-8200, ext. 752. ●