

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON MINORITY VETERANS (ACMV)**

**Wednesday, September 25, 2024
MS Teams**

Committee Member Attendees:

- Charles Allen, MD
- Irma Cooper
- Lisa Carrington Firmin
- Edward DuBose
- Robert McDonald
- Georgina Dodge
- Linda Singh (Chair)
- Nathan Tilton
- Michael Yaguchi
- Dee James

Absent:

- Warren Jones, MD
- Beth Townsend

Center for Minority Veterans Attendees:

- James Albino, DFO
- Debra Walker, ADFO
- Ronald Sagudan
- D'Andrea Jacobs
- Dwayne E. Campbell
- Carl McPherson
- Gregorio Kishketon
- Prince Taylor
- William Vargas
- Jeannen Hill
- Dr. Stephanie Guedj
- Tynesia Evans

Other Attendees:

- Dath Panangala

Meeting called to order at 11:00 a.m. (EST) by Linda Singh, Chair.

Opening Remarks and Review Agenda:

James Albino, Designated Federal Officer

- Introduced himself as the DFO.
- Welcomed the Committee.

Debra Walker, Alternate Designated Federal Officer

- Introduced herself as the Alternate DFO.
- Welcomed the Committee.

Linda Singh, Chair

- Introduced herself as the Chairman of the Committee.
- Conducted roll call by having all (10) Committee members introduce themselves. Discussed committee ground rules reference conduct, allowing guest speaker's adequate time to present, and time management according to the agenda.

Video Remarks:

Dennis McDonough, Secretary Department of Veterans Affairs

Advisory Committee Management Office:

Jelessa Burney, Program Specialist

- Provided the ACMO annual requirement briefing to new and recurring Federal advisory committee members.

VA Leadership Remarks:

Shana Love-Holmon, VA Deputy Chief of Staff

- Congratulated Major General Singh on her appointment as the new chair and welcomed new members Dee (Danitza) James and Ed (Edward) DeBose.
- Acknowledged the 30th year anniversary of the establishment of the Center for Minority Veterans (CMV), which reminds us that progress is not only possible, but essential.
- Highlighted three initiatives that she has been intimately involved in as the agency senior designated official for equity and that I'm extremely proud of:
 - First is the establishment of the idea Sub Council that was established as an Enterprise Governance Council with the full support and backing of Secretary McDonough.
 - One of the best initiatives that we have right now to help us move the strategic needle forward on health in a coordinated and transparent way to embed diversity, equity and inclusion into all of our programs and policies.
 - On the very first day President Biden took office, he issued executive order 13985, advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government. And just a few months later, he issued executive order 14035 diversity equity, inclusion and accessibility in the Federal workforce.
 - Second is the launch of the Office of Equity Assurance within VBA. But this office is a critical component of the department's idea annual action plan and firmly supports the mission of this advisory committee.
 - Third initiative is the implementation of the PACT Act. Today VA is providing

more care and more benefits to more Veterans than ever before.

- More Veterans are using VA for their care, and VA is on pace to deliver approximately 127 million healthcare appointments in 2024, surpassing last year's all-time record of 120 million appointments.
- More Veterans are using their GI Bill and job training benefits to further their education and their careers. In 2020, three 850,000 Veterans and beneficiaries use these benefits, and we expect this number to increase to almost 940,000 this year.
- I greatly appreciate your partnership and your work is paramount to our mission of taking care of Veterans.

Veterans Experience Office (VEO):

Jason Thomas, Chief of Staff VEO

- VEO is primarily in charge of the customer experience. And what I say by that is we partners with the administration and staff offices to increase. Positive impacts for Veterans across the board.
- Our North star that we track is what we call trust and, in this instance, its overall VA trust. VEO has had been monitoring the trust level for VA since about 2015.
- VEO has four core capabilities, data, tools, technology and an engagement arm and what we try to do is bring them all together to bring the voice of the Veterans.
- Essentially, VEO's vision is to be the absolute best customer experience organization in government and industry. We pace ourselves with private industry such as Amazon, Ritz Carlton which are customer experience type of organizations that we want to import things from.
- During 2024, VEO managed to move the needle with our partners across VA up to 80.2, acknowledging there's a lot of work to do.
 - VEO wants to get to 90% and is doing everything that we can to try to continue to improve.
- VEO's customer experience principles codified in the Code of Federal Regulations to developing other policies and directives that the secretaries supported us on through multiple administrations.
- VEO has developed a Veterans Journeys Map which covers ten life stages any Veteran may encounter, from pre-service to end of life. These life stages are organized in three phases in which Veterans' goals and aspirations are distinctly different.
- Through Human-Center Design methodology VEO is able to better understand the moments that matter to Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors and identify bright spots or pain points in the experience journey.
- VA.gov was redesigned and launched in November 2018 to be Veteran-focused, customer satisfaction with the site increased 23% and average monthly total users increased by 221%. After customer feedback, it was updated and relaunched July 2023.
- VA mobile application was launched in July 2021, the app has been downloaded nearly 2 million times. With ratings of 4.8/5 in the Apple Store and 4.6/5 in Google Play, VA's Health and Benefits App is on par with industry leading applications.
- One easy-to-remember number to connect Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors with all parts of VA and 24/7 live agents. Through MyVA411, VEO's Contact Center answers 1M+ calls annually – with average speed to answer 46 seconds.
- In response to the need for increased community engagement, outreach, and

partnerships, VEO released the VA Community Playbook in October 2022, followed by the Vet Resources Community Network (VRCN) Community of Practice in November 2022. There are currently over 650 VRCN members and 300+ consultation requests received.

- The mission is to build trusted relationships, increase access, reach those underserved, channel the voice of the Veteran-customer, and provide playbooks and promising practices to engage with the VA and community.
- Through easy-to-read products and resources designed for customers, VA is improving transparency and access to resources.
- VA hosted virtual workshops with Veterans, caregivers, external partners and VA employees to better understand the values/qualities that are important in a VA mission statement.
- The new VA mission statement was chosen over the current version by Veterans from various age groups, gender, and race and ethnicity.
- The VA-wide trust score is compiled by surveying approximately 257K randomly selected Veterans with recent interactions with VA products and services. Minority Veteran groups report lower levels of trust.

Office of Health Equity (OHE):

Kenneth Jones, Deputy Director, Office of Health Equity

- OHE advances health equity and ensures social needs are met for all Veterans through leadership, data analysis, education, tool development, and quality improvement initiatives.
- VHA Health Equity Operational Plan FY 2024:
 - Leadership - Share and coordinate VA work to advance equity with external partners.
 - Education and Cultural Competency and Diversity - Educate on health disparities and actions for improvement.
 - Health Care Outcomes - Advance equitable healthcare outcomes through equity-guided quality improvement.
 - Social needs - Advance efforts to identify and address social risk factors and social needs.
 - Data and Analytics - Identify strategies for capturing data for vulnerable populations.
- OHE conducted listening sessions and collected narratives from Veterans, staff, and stakeholders. Feedback focused on individual perspectives, opinions, and future directions about health equity. OHE will use this information to update the VHA Health Equity Action Plan, FY2025-FY2030.
- Health Equity Policy Impacts:
 - Provide Veterans the ability to enter/edit race and ethnicity.
 - Track sexual orientation, gender identity, race and ethnicity data entries in health record and address barriers.
 - Pilot screen collection of social determinants using screening tools for women and historically underserved/marginalized Veterans.
- The Reproductive Health Equity Miniseries promotes work from the field to eliminate reproductive health disparities for women and gender-diverse Veterans. Seven episodes were recorded in FY24.

- The OHE Health Care Outcomes team promotes equitable health care outcomes through embedding equity approaches to quality improvement and standard operational and clinical work.
- Center for Pacific Islander Veterans Health (CPIVH).
 - Healthcare providers and scientists of the CPIVH in Honolulu, Hawaii, will coordinate research, data analysis, and practice improvement efforts from all over the Pacific Islands and the United States to Veterans Health in the Hawaiian Islands and throughout the Pacific.
- OHE consults with VA stakeholders and shares with the wider health care sector on its successes, challenges, and approaches to addressing algorithmic bias.
- Assessing Circumstances and Offering Resources for Needs (ACORN) aims to systematically identify and address unmet social needs among all Veterans to improve health and advance health equity.
- OHE created a vision level report that uses data from this larger national Veterans' Health Equity report to look at quality and safe and satisfaction at the business level, which can also be broken down at the facility level.
- The VHA Primary Care Equity Dashboard has become an incredibly powerful and widely used tool for advancing equity-focused quality improvement initiatives.
- Data and Analytics: LGBTQ+ Patient-Centered Care (PCC) Tool:
 - Identifies disparities in quality of care & health screening measures by sexual minority status (e.g., LGBTQ).
 - Promotes provider/staff education regarding LGBTQ+ health care equity.
- The Veterans Geography of Opportunity Tool uses Veteran population information from the VHA and the American Community Survey as well as data from County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.
- Social Determinants of Health in Specialty Care Dashboard Visualizes data by neighborhood or zip code to identify community-level disparities and potential areas for intervention.

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA):

Joshua Jacobs, Under Secretary for Benefits

- VBA set a goal to execute on our most important priorities and to deliver more care and more benefits to more Veterans and survivors than ever before and thanks to the PACT act, has been able to do that since that law was signed in August of 2022.
 - Delivered more than 1.2 million Veterans and Survivors, Pact Act claims, so that has translated to more than \$7 billion In earned benefits.
 - Fiscal Year 24, VBA processed more than 2.4 million claims, which is a 65% grant rate for all claims and a 75% grant rate for PACT act related claims.
- VBA has added 12,000 new employees over two years, that's a 35% increase in the time that I've been in the organization, from 25,000 to now 35,000 employees.
- VBA has identified that it needs to increase the rate at which the average disability compensation level is increasing.
- VBA will continue to keep a handle on the data in its system as it continues to do research to identify the root causes of some of the inequities within our system.
 - VBA can then use that additional staff it has to drive them towards the appropriate data-driven solutions.

- An enterprise approach to equity within VBA is really to through the creation of what we're calling the equity leadership Collaboration Council. VBA identified leaders, staff from across the organization, various business lines, as well as both folks in the regional offices and in program offices, to be part of the solution set.
- VBA needs the focus and determination of the entire organization so that we can make sure advancing equity is owned by everyone in VBA, not just the Office of Equity Assurance.
 - Working with the Office of Inspector General to make sure that we're continuing our focus to better study and understand grant rate disparities.
- VBA is working to get that funding so it can move on to the next phase of the research in Fiscal Year 25, many of you are familiar that we did a study with minorities that identified grant rate disparities for black Veterans with mental health conditions specifically.
- VBA is continuing to work and engage both across the country with our military service partners DoD (Department of Defense).
- Working to improve and increase the level of coordination collaboration that's happening across the organization. Also working with external organizations and engaging with organizations like the Urban League that have a certain level of expertise to try to make sure we're learning from others, and we're also looking to engage with NAACP.
- VBA is identifying opportunities to help Veterans, particularly those in certain minority populations, better achieve their degree completion as they use their GI bill benefits. There is a lot of a lot of good work going on, a lot of outreach VBA has conducted, and will continue to engage in.

National Cemetery Administration (NCA):

Ronald Walters, Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs

- Updated the committee on several projects, discuss some of our upcoming activities and then briefly go over the status of the recommendations that you provided to us previously and sort of where we are and where NCA is headed.
- NCA is working toward achieving a 95% access coverage for all Veterans, which means that 95% of the entire Veteran population will be located within 75 miles of an open National Cemetery or grant funded cemetery. NCA is at 93.4% right now.
- Internment rates during the COVID years and post COVID have fluctuated as services were postponed during the pandemic and then rescheduled after the pandemic subsided.
- NCA has seen a stabilization in the internment levels and is on track to be around a 130,000-internment range for the next several years, at which point we will probably see a gradual decline in the number of internments per year.
- The Veterans Legacy Memorial IT modernization with a focus on the pre-need application processing improvements.
- In FY22, NCA's Office of Engagement and Memorial Innovation (OEMI) began administering the Veterans Legacy Grant Program (VLGP) as part of VLP.
 - VLGP is a Federal discretionary grant awarded using a competitive process.
 - Provides a forecast of Funding Opportunities under the Veterans Affairs Discretionary Grant Program.

- 2024 has been a very busy year for NCA with 9 (nine) grants awarded for \$2.4 million.
 - All grants focused on underserved or minority Veterans.
- Grantees focus:
 - Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles is working with Inner City High school students to study women Veterans.
 - The Go For Broke Foundation, also in Los Angeles, is focused on Japanese American Veterans.
 - Kennesaw State University in Georgia is studying African American Veterans of World War 2 and who later played a role in the civil rights movement.
 - Troy University in Alabama is studying U.S Colored Troops regiment, who died immediately after the Civil War and are interred at Mobile National Cemetery.
 - The University of Wisconsin Whitewater is studying homeless Veterans.
 - West Virginia Humanities Council continues to work with high school students to study underserved rural Veterans interred in West Virginia's two national cemeteries.
- IT modernization has been a priority in recent years for NCA. The goal is to reduce processing times for Veterans or their family members that are applying for memorial benefits, and NCA improved our processing times for pre-need applications significantly.
- NCA formed a partnership with VBA which provided A-Team to assist us with leveraging robotic automation technology to process pre-need applications and our pre-need eligibility forms whether they're mailed or faxed or completed online are now processed through our automation process.
- In this fiscal year, NCA received more than 79,000 prenatal applications that's the most we've ever received compared to last year at 59,000, that is a 34% increase, and it continues to grow as we become more proactive.
- NCA has recently partnered with the Veterans Experience Office to develop a visitor experience or VEX survey for visitors to our national cemeteries.
 - The survey is a digital feedback tool that visitors can access by scanning a QR code available on signage at the cemetery.
 - Received over 1,400 surveys with 93.4% of the respondents satisfied or very satisfied with their experience.
- ACMV recommendation 3 called for agents to assist minority Veterans families and rural Native American Veterans. As we noted in our written response, our scheduling office and our applicant assistance units, as well as the cemeteries themselves, provide information about burial benefit and memorial products to all funeral homes.
- ACMV recommendation 4 called for NCA to focus on data collection. we received guidance from Office of Management and Budget on collection standards for race and ethnicity. Collaborating with CMV to develop a database framework to identify demographic information for deceased Veteran population.
- ACMV recommendation 5 called for NCA to expand awareness in the women Veterans' community:
 - Partnered with Center for Women Veterans to conduct outreach to Women Veterans.
 - Awarded strategic communications contract.

/s/James Albino
Designated Federal Officer

/s/Linda Singh
Committee Chair
Date: December 11, 2024