

## **DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**

### **Response to the Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans**

#### **March 2024 Recommendations**

**I. The Committee and its Mandate:** In compliance with the provisions of Public Law 104-262, section 333, this is the annual report of the Department of Veterans Affairs VA Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans is mandated to:

- Assemble and review information relating to the needs of Veterans in readjusting to civilian life.
- Provide information related to the nature of psychological problems arising from service in the armed forces.
- Provide an assessment of the effectiveness of the policies, organizational structures, and services of the department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in assisting Veterans in readjusting to civilian life.
- Provide advice on the most appropriate means of responding to the readjustment needs of Veterans in the future.
- In carrying out these activities, the Committee shall take into consideration the needs of Veterans who have served in a combat theater of operations.

**II. Committee's Mission Statement:** To promote the effectiveness and adequacy of VA programs, to include the availability, ease of access, quality and consumer satisfaction with delivery of services designed to meet the readjustment needs of America's war Veterans, by providing consumer-based recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

**III. Committee's Scope:** The Committee functions as an external body of Veteran consumer representatives charged with assessing the quality of VA services for Veterans' Post-war readjustment. As such, the committee is responsible for formulating recommendations that are focused on service delivery outcomes evaluated in terms of primary domains of value: access to care, technical quality (to ensure the visiting Committee's members have the clinical credentials to make such an assessment), and customer satisfaction. VA organizational structures and program policies are appropriate subjects for the Committee's evaluations to the extent that they potentially affect the quality of Veterans service outcomes.

**IV. Committee's Methodological Objectives:**

- To conduct meetings, to review and evaluate formal presentations by program officials, document program coverage, workload data, program policy guidance, program standards of care, and clinical guidelines.

- To conduct meetings to review and evaluate the results of scientific research regarding the frequency and dynamic manifestations of Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other war-related readjustment problems.
- To conduct meetings to review pending legislation that pertains to Veterans services.
- To conduct field visits to VA facilities to observe and directly review the provisions and coordination of services, to engage in discussions with VA program officials and service providers, and to engage in discussions with Veteran clients where clinically appropriate.

**V. Committee Membership:** In accordance with the Committee's charter, the committee shall consist of not more than 18 members who are from a wide variety of geographic areas and ethnic backgrounds, individuals from Veterans' Service Organizations, individuals with combat experience, and women veterans.

## **VI. Committee Activities and Focus Areas:**

### **2023 - 2024:**

The Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans conducted a one-day administrative virtual meeting via WEBEX July 13, 2023. At this time, they met with the following: Members of VA leadership, VHA program officials having implications for the Readjustment of Veterans and Active-Duty Service Members, as well as other Department of Veterans Affairs Staff:

- Richard Barbato, Designated Federal Officer
- Matthew Newman, Alternate Designated Federal Officer
- Andrew Tomacari, Alternate Designated Federal Officer
- Barrett Phillips, Alternate Designated Federal Officer
- Mike Fisher, Chief Officer VA Readjustment Counseling Services
- Jeffrey Moragne, Director VA Advisory Committee Management Office
- Carol Borden, VA Office of General Counsel

The meeting yielded the following to allow the team to effectively serve combat theater Veterans and Service members:

- Received training on rules and regulation for Federal Advisory Committee (FACA) procedures and expectations.
- Received special government employee ethics training.
- Conducted calendar forecast for committee meetings.

The Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans conducted a three-day in-person meeting on November 7th, 8th and 9th 2023, in Washington D.C. The Committee had the opportunity to engage with VA senior officials and leadership on programs having implications for the Readjustment of Veterans and Service members.

The Committee also had other Department of Veterans Affairs Staff along with public and private attendees:

- Richard Barbato, Designated Federal Officer
- Amanda Baker, Strategy & Analysis Office, Readjustment Counseling Service
- Michael Fisher, Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
- Pete Ortiz, Deputy Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
- Jessica Schiefer, Communications Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
- Kevin Swallow, Acting Operations Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
- Tanya Bradsher, Deputy Secretary, Department of Veterans Affairs
- Christina Zais, Director, TAP, Office of Outreach, Transition & Economic Development
- Barbara Wilson, Chief, VA Transition Assistance Program (TAP)
- Kelly Shaul, T.A.P.S.
- Dr. Paul Cordts, Defense Health Agency
- Babs Chase, Face the Fight
- RADM Matthew Kleiman, Assistant Surgeon General, National Guard Branch
- Julianna Hallows, Associate Director, Office of Mental Health & Suicide Prevention
- Barbara Morton, Deputy Chief Officer, Veteran Experience Office
- Heather Salazar, RAND
- Benjamin Patton, Patton Veterans Project

The meeting yielded the following conclusions of value effectively serving combat theater Veterans and Service members:

- RCS should continue to promote the development of partnerships with non-VA organizations that focus on both the legal programs and educational readjustment needs of Veterans; Veterans Court and Community Legal Service; Transition Assistant Program (TAP) and other programs that support the transition of our Veteran population.
- That a multi-prong approach will need to be followed to correct many of the current issues.
- A collaborative plan should be developed to address the types of services available and a reprioritization of those services between VA Medical Centers, Community Based Outpatient Services, Vet Centers and Mobile Vet Centers.
- Individual therapy sessions should not be replaced by group sessions which may be therapeutic, but are not actual therapy.

The Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans conducted a three-day in-person closed meeting on February 7th, 8th and 9th 2024, in Tampa, Florida. The Committee had the opportunity to engage with VA senior officials and leadership on programs having implications for the Readjustment of Veterans and Service members. They were able to meet with staff and Veterans at the Vet Center located at Tampa, Florida and the VA Medical Center Leadership and Staff from the Tampa, Florida VAMC. The

Committee also had other Department of Veterans Affairs Staff; no members of the public were in attendance:

- Richard Barbato, Designated Federal Officer, 10RCS.
- Matt Newman, Alternate Designated Federal Officer, 10RCS.
- Michael Fisher, Chief Officer, Readjustment Counseling Service
- Jeff Moragne, Advisory Committee Management Office
- Robert Moreland, Deputy district Director, RCS District 2
- Matthew Eaton, Vet Center Director, Clearwater, FL
- Stan Tucker, Vet Center Director, Pasco County, FL
- Michael Evans, Vet Center Director, Tampa, FL
- Jasmine Lane, Readjustment Counselor, Tampa Vet Center, FL
- Duncan Ratliff, Florida Department of Veterans Affairs

The meeting yielded the following conclusions of value effectively serving combat theater Veterans and Service members:

- Supporting the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Strategic Plan, Fiscal Year 2022-2028, Goal 4.1., *Our Employees are our Greatest Asset*; The Committee's interviews with current and former VET Center leadership and staff indicated that their grade level should be commensurate with their experience and level of responsibility. Furthermore, the Committee commonly heard that pay is a significant factor when deciding if VET Center leadership and staff will stay or leave.
- Underscoring the Veterans Health Administration's, Fiscal Year 2022-2025's Strategic Plan, Section 4.4.1: *Streamline and standardize human resources processes for recruitment, increased retention and competitive employee incentives, development and recognition*. The Committee concluded that retention and recruitment are critical to the VET Centers' survivability, daily operation, and overall capacity and capability to serving our nation's heroes.
- The suicide rate of Women Veterans is twice as high compared to their civilian counterparts (VA, 2022). The Committee observed the lack of privacy and compliance to a designated Women's Health area. Two male Veterans used the women imaging area and the doors were left open in public view.

Resulting from activities and deliberations over the last year, the Committee has identified the following strategic and critical areas for formal presentation as recommendations in the Committee's 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report:

### **1. Improve Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS) Recruitment and Retention.**

#### **Desired Result:**

- a. Improve the RCS current vacancy rate of 17 percent to 10 percent by Q4 FY25.
- b. Increase VET Center leadership and staffs' grade level to be commensurate with their experience, roles and responsibilities, and to improve retention (Director

[GS-13], Readjustment Counselors [GS-12], and Office Manager (GS-7/9) by 4Q FY25.

- c. VA's Human Resources (HR) to maintain timely hiring processes in accordance with VA Directive(s).
  - i. VA to provide accountability and oversight of their HR processes to RCS and its VET Centers in order to improve timely hiring.
  - ii. HR to provide applicants feedback within 30 days after their interview.
- d. Improve the current FY2023 hiring time from 108 days to 90 days by 3Q FY25.

## **2. Improve Women's Health Care Access, Safety, and privacy.**

### **Desired Result:**

- a. VA increases frequency of environment of care rounds to ensure women's healthcare, safety, and accessibility is congruent to their specific needs as a vulnerable Veteran population by 4Q FY25.
- b. VA will create a process that incorporates daily assessments of women's healthcare, facilities, programming, safety, and accessibility through the Veterans Experience Office and VAOIG.

Advisory Committee Membership

With identifying Information and location of combat theater service (If Applicable)

**Joseph Anderson, LTG, USA (RET)**

Chair, VA Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans Virginia

U.S. Army

Kosovo, Albania, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan

**Abigail Deluca, MHS** Massachusetts Military Spouse

**Cheryl Jacobs**

Akwesasne Mohawk Indian Reservation

U.S. Army & U.S. Marine Corps

**David Duren, Ph. D**

Massachusetts

U.S. Army Afghanistan

**Danica Thomas** North Carolina Gold Star Widow

**John Castles, MA**

Virginia

U.S. Army

Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq

**Kai Chitaphong, Ph.D, LCSW, BCD**

New York

U.S. Army Afghanistan, Iraq

**Terry Schow**

Utah

U.S. Army Vietnam

**Nate Tyler**

Makah Tribe

U.S. Marine Corps Somalia

**Greg Orto, CSM, USA (RET)**

Virginia

U.S. Army Somalia, Iraq

**Isaac Pike, LICSW**

Massachusetts

U.S. Army Iraq

**Heather Nystrom, LMSW, BCD, MBA**  
Michigan  
U.S. Army

**Viviana Marcotte MEd**  
Massachusetts  
U.S. Army Iraq

## DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)

### Response to the Advisory Committee on the Readjustment of Veterans

#### March 2024 Recommendations

#### Recommendation 1.

**Strategic Area:** Improve Readjustment Counseling Services (RCS) Recruitment and Retention.

**Recommendation 1:** The Committee recommends the following:

- a. Improve the RCS current vacancy rate of 17% to 10% by fourth quarter (Q4) fiscal year (FY) 2025.
- b. Increase Vet Center leadership and staffs' grade level to be commensurate with their experience, roles, and responsibilities, and to improve retention (Director [GS-13], Readjustment Counselors [GS-12], and Office Manager [GS-7/9]) by 4Q FY 2025.
- c. VA's Human Resources (HR) to maintain timely hiring processes in accordance with VA Directive(s).
  - i. VA to provide accountability and oversight of their HR processes to RCS and its Vet Centers in order to improve timely hiring.
  - ii. HR to provide applicants feedback within 30 days after their interview.
- d. Improve the current FY 2023 hiring time from 108 days to 90 days by 3Q FY 2025.

#### VA Response Recommendation 1 Part a: Concur in Principle

**VA Actions to Implement:** RCS concurs in principle at this time due to unknown impacts on recruitment prioritization resulting from current budget concerns. In January 2024, RCS and Human Resources Operations Office (HROO) executive leadership met for a collaborative meeting to identify strategic planning goals, objectives, strategies, and actions for improvement. One of the goals identified was to reduce the baseline vacancy rate of 17% by 3% by December 31, 2024. As of June 2, 2024, the vacancy rate was 15.1%. This collaboration and identified goal have demonstrated improvement. RCS will continue to work in collaboration with HROO partners toward improving the vacancy rate by utilizing updated dashboards and reports for District specific recruitment data; these data will grant RCS a clearer picture of recruitment needs and assist with recruitment prioritization. The bi-weekly Resource Board will also be used to determine District recruitment priorities.

In an effort to gain additional insight into the factors impacting the current vacancy rate, RCS is utilizing a Lean Six Sigma project to improve the understanding of employee



loss and turnover. RCS will continue, in partnership with HROO, to review the labor market to determine where and when to best utilize Special Salary Rates (SSR).

Where applicable, RCS will also continue to utilize other available incentive opportunities to optimize the recruitment of new employees and the retention of current staff.

| Lead Office               | Other Offices       | Steps/Tasks to Implement  | Due Date | Current Status | Contact Person                                |
|---------------------------|---------------------|---|----------|----------------|---|
| 10RCS<br>(Michael Fisher) | 106A<br>(Mari Beck) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Conduct on-going quality reviews to ensure information in HR SMART is accurate.</li> <li>2. Actively Review RCS District identified labor markets to determine when SSRs are needed to remain competitive in recruiting and retaining highly qualified candidates.</li> <li>3. HROO will act upon completed Manager Self Service (MSS) requests within 2 days of an approved vacancy.</li> <li>4. Access to updated District specific recruitment data dashboards and/or reports.</li> <li>5. Lean Six Sigma project regarding understanding loss and turnover.</li> <li>6. Biweekly Resource Board to determine approved District recruitment priorities.</li> </ol> | N/A      | Ongoing        | Chief Readjustment Counseling Officer (10RCS) |

**VA Response Recommendation 1 Part b:** Concur in Principle

**VA Actions to Implement:** RCS will continue the implementation process for position standardization for Vet Center positions set forth in the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (NDAA), P.L. 117-263. Vet Center Directors and Readjustment Counselors within Vet Centers are hybrid title 38 positions that fall into four disciplines, which are governed by Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Qualifications Standards for each respective discipline.

Readjustment Counselors meet the full performance level qualifications standards for each discipline and thus would not be eligible for GS-12 positions. The GS-12 senior assignments apply sound position management and have an assignment responsibility over and above that is required at the full performance grade level and cannot be used as the full performance level of this occupation.

The HROO Classification section is responsible for determining grade levels within the RCS system. Without the final classification determination, RCS is unable to determine if Program Support Assistants can be classified as a GS-7/9 based on the complexity of duties and responsibilities associated with the role.

| Lead Office               | Other Offices       | Steps/Tasks to Implement   | Due Date | Current Status | Contact Person  |
|---------------------------|---------------------|--|----------|----------------|---|
| 10RCS<br>(Michael Fisher) | 106A<br>(Mari Beck) | 1. Continue through with NDAA Implementation process for position standardization for Vet Center positions.<br><br>2. RCS will explore and promote growth opportunities for employee's career development. | N/A      | Ongoing        | Chief Readjustment Counseling Officer (10RCS)<br><br>Mari Beck (106A) |

**VA Response Recommendation 1 Part c:** Concur in Principle

**VA Actions to Implement:** HROO and RCS concur in principle and intend to adhere to the established Time 2 Hire (T2H) metrics and established requirements. HR will continue to send out Notice of Results to applicants based on currently established timeline requirements. Additionally, RCS will work to consistently meet the timely return of certifications within the established 14-day goal to expedite prompt notification to candidates.

| Lead Office         | Other Offices             | Steps/Tasks to Implement   | Due Date | Current Status | Contact Person   |
|---------------------|---------------------------|--|----------|----------------|--|
| 106A<br>(Mari Beck) | 10RCS<br>(Michael Fisher) | <p>1. HROO will adhere to established T2H metrics and established requirements.</p> <p>2. RCS will work to consistently meet the timely return of certifications within the established 14-day goal.</p> | N/A      | Ongoing        | <p>Mari Beck<br/>(106A)</p> <p>Chief Readjustment Counseling Officer<br/>(10RCS)</p> |

**VA Response Recommendation 1 Part d:** Concur in Principle

**VA Actions to Implement:** VA concurs in principle with this recommendation. In January 2024, RCS and HROO executive leadership met for a collaborative meeting to identify strategic planning goals, objectives, strategies, and actions for improvement. There has been a decrease in time to hire from the baseline of 108 days to 103.9 days, as of June 2, 2024. To further reduce this number, this recommendation includes both Workforce Management and Consulting and RCS for implementation. Updated dashboards will be utilized to monitor each stage of the T2H process, and HR will adhere to the established metrics and requirements. HR will also provide enhanced consultation to improve overall efficiency.

VHA will also implement increased and improved training to support the reduction of hiring timelines, including training specifically for Hiring Managers and Manager Self Service Submissions. VHA will use a Lean Six Sigma project to increase compliance with returning certificates within the currently required 14-day timeline and make an effort to reduce the length of time for both certificate issuance and selection return. There will be bi-weekly leadership meetings to monitor progress.

| Lead Office         | Other Offices             | Steps/Tasks to Implement   | Due Date | Current Status | Contact Person   |
|---------------------|---------------------------|--|----------|----------------|--|
| 106A<br>(Mari Beck) | 10RCS<br>(Michael Fisher) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. HROO will adhere to established T2H metrics and established requirements.</li> <li>2. HROO has enhanced the consultation process for overall efficiency.</li> <li>3. HROO will provide on-going training to support reduction of hiring timelines.</li> <li>4. Updated dashboards to monitor each stage of the T2H process for recruitment and onboarding.</li> <li>5. Biweekly leadership meetings to monitor progress.</li> <li>6. Lean Six Sigma project to increase compliance to returning certs within 14 days.</li> <li>7. Improving training to Hiring Managers.</li> <li>8. Enhancing training on MSS Submissions.</li> <li>9. Decreasing length of time for cert issuance and selection return.</li> </ol> | N/A      | Ongoing        | Mari Beck<br>(106A)<br><br>Chief<br>Readjustment<br>Counseling<br>Officer<br>(10RCS) |

**Recommendation 2.**

**Strategic Area:** Improve Women's Health Access, Safety, and Privacy

**Recommendation 2:**

- a. VA increases frequency of environment of care rounds to ensure women's health care, safety, and accessibility is congruent to their specific needs as a vulnerable Veteran population by 4Q FY 2025.
- b. VA will create a process that incorporates daily assessments of women's health care, facilities, programming, safety, and accessibility through the Veterans Experience Office and VA Office of Inspector General.

**VA Response Recommendation 2 Part a:** Non-Concur

**VA Actions to Implement:** VHA Directive 1608, The Comprehensive Environment of Care Program, requires all clinical areas to be rounded twice a year by the entire rounding team, which includes a representative from Women's Health. Local rounding teams conduct Environment of Care (EOC) rounds weekly to ensure all clinical areas have been evaluated twice a year. The Veterans Integrated Service Network Lead

Women's Health Program Manager receives automatic quarterly EOC reports to enable them to track deficiencies and intervene as needed.

| Lead Office             | Other Offices | Steps/Tasks to Implement | Due Date | Current Status | Contact Person      |
|-------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------|----------------|---------------------|
| 10W (Dr. Sally Haskell) | N/A           | None                     | N/A      | N/A            | Sally Haskell (10W) |

**VA Response Recommendation 2 Part b:** Non-Concur

**VA Actions to Implement:** Requiring VA to conduct daily assessments would be labor intensive and impractical, and would not allow time for any meaningful improvement between assessments.

| Lead Office             | Other Offices | Steps/Tasks to Implement | Due Date | Current Status | Contact Person      |
|-------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------|----------------|---------------------|
| 10W (Dr. Sally Haskell) |               | None                     | N/A      | N/A            | Sally Haskell (10W) |