

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MANAGEMENT OFFICE (ACMO)
Annual Assessment of Committee Activities

January 1, 2023 through December 31, 2023

Committee Name: Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses (RACGWVI)

Calendar Year 2022 Committee Goals: The Committee met most of its projected goals for 2023.

VA Strategic Goals: 2023 Committee Goals and Accomplishments:

Goal 1: Hold at least two RACGWVI parent committee meetings to examine current research and develop new and existing recommendations to advise the VA Secretary (SECVA).

The Committee held two parent committee meetings. The first was on February 8-9, 2023 in Oahu, Hawaii and the second on September 7-8, 2023 in Washington DC. Both meetings were held as hybrid meetings. See 'committee activities' below for additional information.

Goal 2: Hold two subcommittee Veteran Engagement Sessions (VES) to better understand Gulf War Veterans' health and quality of life concerns, increase trust and communication with Gulf War Veterans, enhance customer service and reinforce VA's commitment to excellence with the goal of understanding and treating the health consequences of military service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the 1990-91 Gulf War.

The committee held two hybrid VES. The first was on February 7, 2023 in Oahu, HI and the second on September 7, 2023 in Washington DC. Both sessions were scheduled for 3-hours. See 'committee activities' for more information.

Goal 3: Continue to follow progress on past concurred recommendations while forming new recommendations.

Following progress for RACGWVI recommendation, FY18: The SECVA concurred with the RACGWVI recommendation on its commitment to sustain the VA-NIH Deep Phenotyping Study of Gulf War Illness (Project IN-DEPTH). The Gulf War Senior Program Manager presented updates on this project outlining accomplishments and barriers.

The RACGWVI invited Dr. Avindra Nath from the National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Neurological Diseases and Stroke (NIH, NINDS) to present on the similarities and differences between long-COVID symptomology and Gulf War Illness (GWI) at the end of FY22. The committee expressed interest in the study design of exclusion of Gulf War Veterans (GWV) with GWI who experienced infection with COVID-19, therefore, Dr. Block convened a meeting with subject matter experts (SME) to further guide discussion of these topics. An update to the RACGWVI is expected in FY24.

Following progress for RACGWVI recommendation, FY22: Four recommendations were concurred in FY22. The status of each is outlined below:

Recommendation 1: Fund research into key focus areas, examples below, to support the diagnosis and treatment of Gulf War Illness (GWI). 1) Emphasis on, basic and clinical studies on the role of the microbiome in the etiology and maintenance of GWI. 2) Emphasis on, basic and clinical studies to determine the effects of dietary manipulations on the quality of life for Gulf War Veterans (GWV) with GWI. 3) Emphasis on, basic and clinical studies to further evaluate the status and/or influence of mitochondrial function in GWVs, with and without, GWI. 4) Determine the utility of the Department of Defense Serum Repository as a resource for Gulf War

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(GW)-funded investigators. Among other utilities, the repository's samples may be useful in confirming a correlation between butyrylcholinesterase inhibition (itself and as a biomarker of acetylcholinesterase) and pyridostigmine bromide exposures as potential sources which cause GWI. 5) Conduct a prospective, double-blind randomized clinical trial to determine the effects of antioxidants, ubiquinol vs ubiquinone, on the quality of life for GWV with GWI.

The Gulf War Research Program Manager updated requests for applications (RFAs) in FY23 to support incoming applications with these priorities.

Recommendation 2: Establish one or more Gulf War-Military Exposure Research Innovation Center(s) (GW-MERIC). The RACGWVI recommends that VA ORD establish one or more GW-MERIC(s) with a two-part mission: 1) To expedite and implement evidence-based clinical treatment and diagnostic research for GWV with GWI, and 2) Build upon existing collaborations and establish new VA and non-VA partnerships to leverage and expand subject matter expertise, data and specimen resources, and technology.

An application was submitted in FY23 and peer-reviewed by the Special Emphasis Subcommittee for Gulf War Research (SPLD) panel. The application did not receive a competitive score and it is anticipated that a revised application will be resubmitted in FY24.

Recommendation 3: Initiate research on the relationship between COVID-19, long-haul COVID-19, and their impact on GWI.

In progress: ORD approved additional research funding on Cooperative Studies Program (CSP) 2006 to specifically address this question. CSP 2006 is a subset of the Million Veteran Program (MVP), the largest well-characterized and validated GWV cohort to date. This addendum will address important questions such as analyzing data for:

- Risk of contracting COVID-19 in GWV vs ERA Controls
- Risk of contracting COVID-19 in GWV with and without GWI
- Symptoms or hospitalization of GWV vs ERA Controls with COVID-19
- Symptoms or hospitalization of GWV with and without GWI
- Mortality of GWV vs ERA Controls who got COVID
- Mortality of GWV with and without GWI who got COVID

Recommendation 4: Continue RACGWVI subcommittee, Veteran Engagement Sessions (VES). VES continues to meet twice per year in a hybrid format to maximize participation. The VES meetings were held in conjunction with the parent meetings. This decision was made to consolidate travel and expenses. However, the committee determined this was not an optimal format for the group due to long days and reduced stakeholder participation.

New recommendations, FY23: The RACGWVI committee submitted one recommendation under new Chair, Dr. Walker.

Recommendation: To obtain the Secretary's written response of support for Gulf War Illness International Classification of Disease (ICD)-10 codes to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

An ICD-10 code for GWV with GWI does not exist. The committee agreed obtaining an ICD-10 code is critical for: 1) Enabling and accelerating research on GWI; 2) Accurate epidemiologic monitoring and evaluation; 3) Validation of GWI for clinicians and patients; 4) Facilitating specific referrals and treatments for GWV; and 5) Improving the GWV patient experience and trust. This recommendation is still under review.

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Goal 4: Communicate and coordinate with PACT Act activities, with emphasis on sections 501 and 509, to enhance new collaborative scientific directions by encouraging collaborations with other government agencies to leverage subject matter expertise, technologies, data and biorepository resources to enhance Gulf War Veteran research.

The 1990-91 Gulf War conflict gave rise to chronic multisymptom illnesses, often referred to as GWI, in approximately 30% of deployed GWV. The PACT Act signed into law in August 2022 resulted in expansion of benefits and healthcare access for Veterans potentially exposed to toxins. This effort widened the ability of the VA to leverage research resources including subject matter expertise, technologies, and data and biospecimen repositories. Accordingly, PACT Act sections 501 and 509 are major research sections dedicated to assembly of infrastructure for this purpose. The RACGWVI is interested in leveraging new connections for furthering insights into the etiology of GWI with the promise of new care models for GWVs.

The RACGWVI staff coordinated senior VA leadership, VA Acting Deputy Secretary, Guy T. Kiyokawa, to attend the RACGWVI meeting on September 7, 2023. At this meeting, Mr. Kiyokawa addressed the PACT Act initiatives, new presumptive process, outreach to Veterans who do not use the VA for healthcare but are eligible for benefits, and VA research with emphasis on the need for collaboration and sharing of information across the various departments and agencies.

Goal 5: Support novel and validation research that delivers strength of evidence to inform care and policy for Gulf War Veterans.

The Senior Portfolio Manager for the Gulf War Research Program is currently working with the RACGWVI and other specialized offices within VA on this initiative. In progress.

Committee Activities: The activities of the RACGWVI committee in 2023 fully supported the committee accomplishing its mission:

Combined Parent Committee Meetings and Subcommittee Veteran Engagement Sessions February 7-9, 2023 Oahu, Hawaii. This meeting focused on 1990-91 military exposures, exposure assessment, and the health effects of genes, lifestyle and military exposures. Additionally, a VES was held. The RACGWVI committee chose this location to engage a rural population where significant numbers of GWV's live.

September 7-8, 2023, Washington DC: The focus of this meeting was to discuss the current state of the GWI case definition and scientific strength of the evidence needed for translational application and implementation, present new technologies that may aid in advancing the understanding of GWI and deliberate new RACGWVI recommendations. The meeting was attended by senior VA leadership, VA Acting Deputy Secretary, Guy T. Kiyokawa who addressed the committee and guests. Additionally, a VES was held.

Day 2 focused on discussions around the need for an ICD-10 code for GWV with GWI. This discussion led to the FY23 recommendation described above. Additionally, RACGWVI members extensively discussed information related to targeted research topics including engaging Veterans in research studies, data/biospecimen resources, health care effectiveness and other specific research topics related to GWV with GWI.

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Committee nominations and appointments

A new Chair and Vice-Chair were added in FY23. Terms expired for the previous Chair and two members. There are currently 11 members, a Chair and Vice-Chair. Together they represent the below balance plan.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS - Total	13	
VET DATA - Persian Gulf deployed		
White 67% (70%)	9	69%
Black 19% (23%)	3	23%
Hispanic 4%	1	8%
Asian 4%		
Native American 1%		
Other 5% (6.7%)		
VETERANS ON COMMITTEE - Branch	8	61%
Army (51.8%)	4	50%
Navy (21.9%)	1	12%
Air Force (11.5%)	1	12%
Marines (14.8%)		
Reserves (10.1%)	2	25%
GENDER		
Female (7%)	6	46%
Male (93%)	7	54%

Highlighted activities in alignment with VA:VHA Strategic Goals:

The VA FY2022-28 Strategic Plan is guided by VA's four fundamental principles—access, advocacy, outcomes and excellence. VA has set four strategic goals to achieve by 2028:

1. VA will consistently communicate with its customers and partners to assess and maximize performance, evaluate needs and build long-term relationships and trust;
2. VA will deliver timely, accessible and high-quality benefits, care and services to meet the unique needs of Veterans and all those the agency serves;
3. VA will build and maintain trust with Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors—as well as its employees and partners—through proven stewardship, transparency and accountability; and
4. VA will strive toward excellence in all business operations—including governance, systems, data and management—to improve experiences, satisfaction rates, accountability and security for Veterans.

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RACGWVI maintains alignment with these goals in the following ways:

- Engaging VA senior leadership to communicate VA priorities to the committee and stakeholders.
- Consistently communicating with stakeholders to assess and maximize performance, evaluate needs and build long-term relationships and trust.
- Continuing to engage, support and listen to GWV voices to understand their experiences and needs to improve health outcomes and satisfaction.
- Reaching out to GWV in underserved areas that lack information and access regarding current VA-based GWV/GWI nationwide opportunities.
- Including contact information for the VA Crisis Line, Vet Center, homelessness and chaplain services at each meeting and on its website.
- Maintaining a public email address as an additional resource for Veteran feedback.
- 508-compliance of all documents on the committee website.
- Selecting meeting topics relevant to current research and policy on military toxic exposures and other GWV concerns.
- Holding open hybrid meetings with a chat feature allowing engagement with other Gulf War attendees.
- Engaging national outreach within and outside of VA to maximize meeting/VES engagement.
- Maintaining a culture of trust, accountability and transparency by posting meeting minutes and presentations on its website within 90 days.
- Ensuring all RACGWVI members receive ACMO Federal Advisory Committee Management (FACA) and Office of General Counsel (OGC) training.
- Consulting ACMO and OGC resources when needed to ensure FACA guidelines are followed.
- Maintaining a balanced membership aligning with the GWV constituents served.
- Including in the agenda meeting topics that address GWV concerns.
- Responding promptly to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.
- Holding hybrid meetings to promote broad attendance, clear information sharing and transparency.
- Engaging GWV family members to understand the whole health perspective and quality of life concerns.
- Maintaining VA partnerships to stay abreast of relevant resources and initiatives.
- Applying a Veteran centric approach by aligning research activities to meet GWV needs and empowering a collaborative culture that promotes information sharing, diversity, equity and inclusion and a competent, high-performing workforce that attends to privacy and regulatory requirements to confidently serve Veterans and their families.
- Following ACMO policies and procedures to promote member nominations, recommendations to the SECVA, charter renewal, and other committee activities.
- Selecting RACGWVI members for their leadership, knowledge, diverse backgrounds and expertise.
- Providing relevant research resources and information to stakeholders.

Reports and Recommendations:

- One recommendation was submitted by RACGWVI in FY23.
- As required by ACMO, a FY23 annual assessment of activities and FY24 operations plan has been submitted.

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- The GSA website has been updated with all changes relevant to FY23.

Senior VA leadership Participation:

VA Acting Deputy Secretary, Guy T. Kiyokawa attended the parent meeting on September 7, 2023 to affirm VA's commitment and support to the RACGWVI advisory committee and to the health and well-being of 1990-91 GWV. Mr. Kiyokawa addressed the committee and guests. He noted that in addition to his professional titles he is himself a GWV, and described working at Walter Reed Medical Center when the first cases of GWI were being identified and recalling the frustration being expressed by both Veterans and doctors when trying to identify and diagnose the problem. He discussed the benefits of the PACT Act for GWV and held open discussion with committee members.

Program Office Assessment:

Historically, finding treatments and informing policy has been challenged by sparse knowledge in understanding the etiology and pathological underpinnings of GWI. The complexity of multiple toxic exposures, the lack of individual exposure assessment, and the multiple possibilities of health outcomes from exposures has hindered the ability to create ICD codes, a clinical case definition, and policy. However recently, the RACGWVI advisory committee in concert with VA and other stakeholders is demonstrating progress in these critical areas.


Previous recommendations have been initiated or are being followed. The productivity of this committee in overseeing completion of ongoing recommendations is outstanding. Moreover, the VES continue to reach the 1990-91 Gulf War Veteran community. We expect these actions and future recommendations to be fruitful and productive for improving health outcomes and satisfaction for ill Gulf War Veterans.

General Comments:

The Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses committee will continue to provide advice and make recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on proposed research studies, plans, and strategies related to understanding and treating the health consequences of military service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the 1990-91 Gulf War.

Signatures:

KAREN
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DFO's Signature

Date

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Cheryl Lyn Walker, PhD
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Chair's Signature

11/28/2023

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Kenneth Ramos
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Vice-Chair's Signature

11/28/2023

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Program Office Signature (SES or SES Equivalent)

12/4/2023

Date

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MANAGEMENT OFFICE (ACMO)
Annual Operations Plan

January 1, 2024 through December 31, 2024

Committee Name:

Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses (RACGWVI)

Projected Calendar Year 2024 Committee Goals: Identify no more than five specific, measurable, actionable, realistic and time-phased goals for the Federal advisory committee.

1. Hold at least two parent committee meetings to examine current research and identify novel approaches on understanding and treating the health consequences of military service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the 1990-91 Gulf War.
2. Hold two subcommittee "Veteran Engagement Sessions" (VES) to better understand 1990-91 Gulf War Veterans' (GWV) health and quality of life concerns, increase trust and communication with GWV, enhance customer service and reinforce VA's commitment to excellence with the goal of understanding and treating the health consequences of military service in the Southwest Asia theater of operations during the Gulf War.
3. Develop goals to 1) increase attendance and participation of 1990-91 GWV at RACGWVI parent and subcommittee meetings, and 2) increase access to data and biospecimens to the research community. Successful completion of these goals will support the mission of the RACGWVI.
4. Continue outreach to the scientific community to discuss the importance of collaboration, sharing of resources, and guiding new directions for understanding the health consequences of serving in Southwest Asia.
5. Continue to monitor progress on past concurred recommendations while developing new recommendations.
6. Support novel research that delivers strength of evidence to inform care and policy for GWV.

VA Strategic Goals: Identify priorities alignment to Federal advisory committee.

The planned activities of the RACGWVI in 2024 directly align with VA priorities and strategic goals.

The VA FY2022-28 Strategic Plan is guided by VA's four fundamental principles—access, advocacy, outcomes and excellence. VA has set four strategic goals to achieve by 2028:

- **Goal 1:** VA will consistently communicate with its customers and partners to assess and maximize performance, evaluate needs and build long-term relationships and trust;
- **Goal 2:** VA will deliver timely, accessible and high-quality benefits, care and services to meet the unique needs of Veterans and all those the agency serves;
- **Goal 3:** VA will build and maintain trust with Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors—as well as its employees and partners—through proven stewardship, transparency and accountability; and
- **Goal 4:** VA will strive toward excellence in all business operations—including governance, systems, data and management—to improve experiences, satisfaction rates, accountability and security for Veterans.

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RACGWVI committee activities are aimed at **1)** improving long-term trustful and transparent relationships through information sharing and education at open public meetings and **2)** building evidenced based knowledge to improve diagnosis, treatments and quality of life for Gulf War Veterans.

Committee Meetings: Identify the expected number of meetings, meeting timeframe (month), meeting location (*must include city* and no more than three potential locations).

FY24 anticipated meeting timeframes:

- RACGWVI parent meeting, Virtual - February 12-13, 2024
- RACGWVI parent meeting, Denver, CO - August 20-21, 2024
- RACGWVI subcommittee VES, Tampa, FL - April 2024
- RACGWVI subcommittee VES, TBD - June 2024

Committee Activities: Summarize the planned Federal advisory committee activities to include reports, site visits, recruiting, cross committee collaboration, efficiencies (teleconferencing, scheduling, use of Government facilities, etc.).

Membership: Solicit new members as terms expire.

Recommendations: Target to finalize and submit new recommendations for FY24.

RACGWVI subcommittee: Restructure subcommittee with inclusion of cross committee collaborations.

RACGWVI meeting location: Hold committee and subcommittee meetings at VA or VSO facilities. Choose new locations with a robust 1990-91 Gulf War Veteran population.

RACGWVI meeting venues and platforms: Hold hybrid parent and subcommittee meetings to ensure maximum attendance and participation.

RACGWVI training: Provide orientation to new RACGWVI members and ensure the RACGWVI committee is current with required training as outlined by VA Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO) and Office of General Counsel (OGC).

Senior VA leadership Participation: Identify if the Federal advisory committee will request a visit from **SECVA/DEPSECVA/COSVA** in the coming year; during which meeting.

The RACGWVI received a visit from the Deputy SECVA in September 2023. We thrive to welcome VA leadership once per year; however, our two planned parent meetings for FY24 are scheduled outside the Washington DC area. Therefore, we may request a virtual audience with VA leadership.

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General Comments: Identify known management challenges to the Federal advisory committee accomplishing its mission (i.e., leadership, resources, processes, etc.).

The committee believes the most effective way to develop recommendations and for VA to execute those recommendations is to maintain an ongoing dialogue with inter-agency leaders, GWV, caregivers and family members.

We welcome communication with all GWV stakeholders in addition to timely responses and support by the program office and which could substantially improve the Committee's ability to serve its advisory role.

Signatures:

KAREN BLOCK
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Date

Cheryl Lyn Walker, PhD
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Chair Signature

11/28/2023

Date

Kenneth Ramos
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Vice-Chair Signature

11/28/2023

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12/4/2023

Date