

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** To update the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy on public affairs (PA) to include external engagement and internal communications.
- 2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CHANGES OR SUMMARY OF CONTENT:** This directive rescinds and replaces MP-1, Part I, Chapter 4 (1988). It establishes the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA) as functional and policy lead for VA's Department-level external and internal information programs, and the Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs as the Chief Communications Officer (CCO) for the Department. It updates and clarifies policy, roles, and responsibilities relating to public affairs in the Department to include Administration and Staff Office communications offices. It updates communications capabilities to include digital and online public engagement.
- 3. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** Strategic Planning and National Veterans Outreach, Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA).
- 4. RELATED DIRECTIVE OR HANDBOOK:** VA Handbook 8500, VA Public Affairs Program.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** MP-1, Part I, Chapter 4, 1988.

CERTIFIED BY:

**BY DIRECTION OF THE SECRETARY
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS:**

/s/
Melissa S. Glynn, Ph.D.
Assistant Secretary for
Enterprise Integration

/s/
James E. Hutton
Assistant Secretary for
Public and Intergovernmental Affairs

DISTRIBUTION: Electronic only

Public Affairs Policy

1. **PURPOSE.** To update the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) policy on public affairs (PA) to include external engagement and internal communications.

2. **POLICY.**

a. **General**

- (1) The primary authority for establishing VA public affairs policy and program objectives rests with Secretary of Veterans Affairs.
- (2) It is VA policy that the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA) is the functional and policy lead for VA's Department-level external and internal information programs (e.g. media relations, internal communications and digital media) for the Administrations and Staff Offices. OPIA provides guidance on interpretation of the Secretary's communications objectives and related goals internally throughout the Department, and externally with Federal Government partners and with state, local, tribal, domestic and international partners.
- (3) VA's Administrations and Staff Offices execute their respective initiatives and activities under their respective authorities at the field level (Veterans Health Administration (VHA) network, Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA) Regional Office (RO), National Cemetery Administration (NCA) support network)), but OPIA oversees the functional and policy communications for Department-wide matters as outlined in this directive.
- (4) This policy is effective Department-wide and shall not be superseded by any VA Administration or Staff Office communications or organizational public affairs policy or directive.

b. **Governing Principles**

- (1) The Department's PA program shall contribute to the Secretary's objectives by proactively, accurately, quickly and succinctly communicating information to Veterans, their families and survivors, VA employees and key stakeholders about VA activities, programs, services and benefits.
- (2) Consistent with the Department's commitment to accountability and transparent operations, PA activities will be governed by the philosophy of active public engagement that fosters "maximum release with minimum delay" of publicly releasable information about VA activities, programs, services and benefits.
- (3) PA and engagement activities shall take advantage of digital media technological advances, and best practices within the communications

industry to provide timely, useful products in simple, plain language to include Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 508 Compliance).

- (4) Necessary consideration of the Privacy Act and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) rules should facilitate, not hinder, and release of public information in as timely a manner as possible.
- (5) Whether a VA leader, employee or public affairs specialist, VA personnel must ensure official discussions with the news media and external stakeholders reflect current approved Departmental policy and releasable (appropriately staffed and cleared) information. All VA employees should exercise appropriate diligence to not speculate or offer personal opinion that may be reported by the news media as Departmental statements or policy.

c. Authority for Release of Public Information.

- (1) The Secretary has authority to release information to the public. The Secretary, via additional policy decision or published guidance memoranda, can delegate the authority to release public information to appropriate Administrations or Staff Offices.
- (2) The Secretary reserves the right to retain release authority on issues he/she deems appropriate. The Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (ASPIA) will receive guidance on such issues from the Secretary and inform Administrations and Staff Offices as appropriate.
- (3) Release authority for media responses, press releases, and media advisories to national media outlets on national-level issues is delegated to ASPIA and designated OPIA spokespersons as appropriate (unless reserved to the Secretary per paragraph 2c(2) in this directive).
- (4) Subordinate VA organizations at the regional and local level are authorized and encouraged to clear and release timely and accurate information that is wholly within the mission and scope of their authority and is not restricted by the provisions of 2c(2) and 2c(3) of this directive, or any other VA directive or handbook, to local media and key stakeholders as appropriate. Administrations and Staff Offices shall inform and coordinate with the Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (OSVA) and ASPIA on major policy announcements, significant communications plans, and activities before public release.
- (5) Local and regional directors/leaders will inform OPIA, through either Office of Public Affairs (OPA) regional Public Affairs office channels or their administration's communications support team office in VA Central Office (VACO) as soon as possible, when national news media requests are received, or situations concerning their organizations exist that have the potential for negative national exposure.

- (6) Local VA leaders or employees requested to comment by news media or key stakeholders on identified national policy or controversial issues regarding VA must coordinate the request through appropriate public affairs channels to the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Office of Public Affairs (DAS-OPA) for further coordination.

d. Media Requests for the Secretary, Deputy Secretary and Other Key Officials

- (1) All media requests to interview the Secretary and Deputy Secretary will be referred immediately and directly to the DAS-OPA and the Press Secretary for further staffing and decision. No public affairs personnel will speculate on or provide an opinion or viewpoint to media regarding the likelihood or a timeline of request approval or denial.
- (2) Media requests for interviews with Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries, or Other Key Officials in the Administrations or Staff Offices are at the discretion of those officials unless overruled by the Secretary. Administrations and Staff Offices will at minimum notify and coordinate the requests with the DAS-OPA and/or Press Secretary.

e. Privacy/HIPAA Sensitivities

- (1) VA has a legal responsibility to safeguard the personal information of Veterans, their families and survivors. News media requests involving specific information regarding a Veteran's health care or benefits will require a Privacy Act waiver signed by the Veteran or legally designated family member before VA provides a response; depending on the information at issue (e.g., information covered under 38 U.S.C. § 7332), a more specific designation may be required.
- (2) Granting of a Privacy Waiver (VA Form 3288) cannot be used to compel any VA employee to talk to a member of the press regarding a Veteran.
- (3) The records of mental health patients may not be released to the press if clinicians determine that exposure of the information is not in the Veteran's interests. In these cases, the determination of a health care professional overrides the patient's waiver of privacy.

f. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

- (1) FOIA (5 U.S.C. § 552, as amended), generally provides any person with the statutory right, enforceable in court, to obtain access to Government information in executive branch agency records. This right to access is limited when such information is protected from disclosure by one of FOIA's nine statutory exemptions. It is the policy of the Department to release information not exempt under FOIA as quickly as possible in keeping with paragraph 2b(2) of this directive.

(2) FOIA and Veteran information. The public has access to certain military service and Veteran status information without the Veteran's authorization or that of the next-of-kin (the un-remarried widow or widower, son, daughter, father, mother, brother or sister) of deceased Veterans. Examples of information which may be available from Federal (non-archival) Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF) via the military services and VA records without an unwarranted invasion of privacy include:

- (a) Branch of Service
- (b) Final Rank
- (c) Military Salary*
- (d) Assignments and Geographical Locations
- (e) Source of Commission*
- (f) Military Education Level
- (g) Promotion Sequence Number*
- (h) Awards and decorations.
- (i) Official Photograph*
- (j) Place of entrance and separation

NOTE: Items labeled with an asterisk (*) are rarely available in the records VA maintains.

(3) If the Veteran is deceased:

- (a) Place of birth
- (b) Date and geographical location of death
- (c) Place of burial
- (d) Amount of last Veterans Benefits compensation payment received

(4) FOIA and VA Employee Official Personnel Folders (OPF). Most information in a Federal (non-archival) OPF is not releasable to the general public without the written consent of the individual whose record is involved. FOIA does allow, however, for certain information to be released without the individual's consent. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has determined that the following information can be released to the public:

- (a) Name

- (b) Past and present positions
- (c) Past and present titles
- (d) Past and present salaries
- (e) Past and present grades
- (f) Past and present job locations

g. Accuracy and Timeliness

- (1) Administrations and Staff Offices are responsible for ensuring the accuracy of any information requested by and provided to OPIA for release to the news media and key stakeholders.
- (2) Media Deadlines. For routine queries regarding readily available and publicly releasable information, VA organizations and their public affairs officers should work with the appropriate program office to obtain accurate information and release that information to news media as soon as possible.
- (3) For queries from major national media outlets or issues likely to result in significant news interest, VA public affairs personnel at all levels will coordinate proposed responses with the appropriate Administration or Staff Office, Office of General Counsel (OGC), Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs (OCLA) or other VACO elements, as appropriate.

3. RESPONSIBILITIES.

a. Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall:

- (1) Provide direction and guidance to the Department on communicating his/her priorities and policy decisions, and information on benefits and services to Veterans, their families and survivors, VA workforce and key stakeholders.
- (2) Serve as release authority for information provided to Veterans, VA workforce, and key stakeholders, and delegate release authority as appropriate to Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries for policies and programs under their statutory authority, and to ASPIA for release of information to the media and external stakeholders.

b. Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key VA Officials shall:

- (1) Provide timely and accurate support to OPIA to include access to program directors, managers and subject matter experts in responding to queries from the news media and for interviews with media outlets as appropriate.
- (2) Inform the Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (OSVA) and ASPIA on

major public policy announcements, significant plans and activities, and national media requests for coordination before public release or engagement.

- (3) Report national media queries and queries on sensitive issues likely to rise to national attention to the Office of Media Relations (OMR) and Press Secretary for evaluation and staffing before response back to the media.
- (4) Publish and maintain publicly accessible web and social media sites in accordance with VA's Web Governance procedures in VA Directive and Handbook 6102. Administrations, Staff Offices and program offices must also maintain websites in compliance with other relevant policies, including Section 508, Federal Section 508, Federal "Plain Language" requirements, and current VA graphics standards.
- (5) Provide OMR with an updated list of PAO contacts semi-annually.

c. Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs.

(1) Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (ASPIA) shall:

- (a) Serve as Chief Communications Officer (CCO) for the Department and exercise primary responsibility for the implementation and management of VA public affairs and engagement policy outlined in this directive and VA Handbook 8500.
- (b) Provide interpretation of the Secretary's public engagement and communications objectives to Administrations and Staff Offices.
- (c) Publish objectives for use in planning strategies for Veteran-focused activities to support the Secretary's public communications and outreach goals.
- (d) Coordinate public affairs (PA) and outreach policy matters within the Department and with other Federal agencies.
- (e) Ensure maximum distribution of timely and accurate publicly available information about VA's activities, programs, services and benefits to Veterans, their families, survivors, and caregivers.
- (f) Establish liaison and coordination procedures with the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs (OCLA) to synchronize the release of public information and submission of the biennial Outreach Report to Congress.
- (g) Ensure OPIA provides PA and Outreach training programs to maintain communications best practices and capabilities to support the Department.
- (h) Provide direct communications advice and support to Under Secretaries and VA Central Office (VACO) Assistant Secretaries as required.

(2) Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS), Office Public Affairs (DAS-OPA) shall:

- (a) Serve as the senior public affairs officer (PAO) for VA.
- (b) Serve as VA chief media spokesperson in absence of a press secretary.
- (c) Direct the daily activities of the Office of Public Affairs (OPA), to include all regional offices.
- (d) Execute department-level external PA initiatives and leads VA in embracing public outreach, media and key stakeholder engagement as an important tool to communicate with Veterans and help them receive the benefits and care they have earned.
- (e) Provide functional oversight for PA operations conducted by the Department on day-to-day basis for media relations and digital/social engagement planning and support. These functions include: media relations (e.g. response to query, media availabilities and media engagement), release of public information, (e.g. press releases, fact sheets, and related materials, digital and social media stories), and release of digital (web) content that educates and inform Veterans and key stakeholders.
- (f) Coordinate with the ASPIA, Administrations, and Staff Offices on the development and implementation of department-level messages, plans, and processes that align with the Secretary's priorities for the release of public information for the Department.
- (g) Serve as the VA functional and policy lead for the development and outreach and engagement training procedures and products to provide a baseline of PA capability for the Department's PA workforce. Assist in the professional development of the Department's communications professionals through national and regional training events.
- (h) Coordinate PA external to the VA and with other Federal departments and agencies.
- (i) Publish PA communications objectives for use in planning communications strategies for Veterans activities to support the Secretary's communication goals, as necessary.
- (j) Develop public information, media relations, external web/Internet governance, social media governance, external print, and external video policy guidance, plans, and programs to support VA objectives in coordination with the Administrations and Staff Offices.

- (k) Ensure maximum distribution of useful, publicly available information about VA's programs and services to Veterans, their families and their survivors and caregivers.
- (l) Provide personnel as required to work with the VA Integrated Operations Center (IOC) to provide PA support for contingency planning, national level exercises, and disaster response.
- (m) Establish liaison and coordination procedures with OCLA to synchronize and de-conflict public release of information as appropriate to the public and Congress.

(3) Press Secretary shall:

- (a) Serve as the VA's chief media spokesperson .
- (b) Coordinate media responses and the response to media query process for the Department with Administrations and key Staff Offices.
- (c) Provide personal advice and support to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary and Administration/Staff Office senior leadership regarding media interviews and public forums that will produce national media coverage.

(4) Director, Office of Media Relations (OMR) shall:

- (a) Serve as the Department's functional lead, principal liaison and primary point of contact between Administrations and Staff Offices and OPIA leadership for media relations and media liaison processes and operations.
- (b) Manage the press release and public statement concurrence process, to include staffing and quality control of written products and media responses.
- (c) Provide strategic advice and information to the DAS-OPA and press secretary on media relations matters and issues.

(5) Executive Director for Intergovernmental Affairs (ED-IGA) shall:

- (a) Serve as the Department's principal liaison between state, local, insular, tribal and international governments, faith-based initiatives, and their respective Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs).
- (b) Provide coordination between State, County, and Municipal leaders for the implementation of major nationwide Veterans support programs (such as the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program).

- (c) Serve as the designated primary point of contact with the Executive Branch's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and other Federal executive agencies for outreach and coordination on Veterans issues.
- (d) Provide strategic advice, guidance, and information to the Secretary, Office of the Secretary, Under Secretaries for Health, Benefits, and Memorial Affairs.

(6) Executive Director, Strategic Planning and National Veterans Outreach (ED-NVO) shall:

- (a) Serve as the VA's policy and coordination lead for VA Outreach and ending Veterans Homelessness outreach activities and provide policy oversight of VACO Staff Office and Administration outreach and advertising activities to assist VA in meeting its statutory and affirmative obligations to educate and inform Veterans, their families and survivors about their care and benefits.
- (b) Develop national-level outreach plans, capabilities and products that support the Secretary's goals and objectives to assure the trust and confidence of Veterans, their families, the American public, and to further inform Veterans and key stakeholders about VA benefits.
- (c) Provide oversight, consultation and recommendations to all department outreach and major advertising plans and programs to ensure alignment with the Secretary's stated priorities and departmental objectives.
- (d) Compile, staff and submit the biennial Outreach Report and all designated Congressionally Tracked Reports (CTRs) concerning Veterans outreach to Congress.

(7) Director, OPA Field Operations shall:

- (a) Ensure OPA's regional offices report national media contacts to OMR and press secretary as appropriate.
- (b) Establish procedures for the regional offices to report regional media contacts and ongoing queries in staffing as part of the daily reporting process to OPA.
- (c) Establish procedures and policies for the regional offices to provide advice and counsel to facility and regional administration PAOs as appropriate to assist in answering media queries.
- (d) Establish and maintain a public affairs training program for facility and regional PAOs to establish a baseline capability for support to facility/regional directors and local key stakeholders and share communications best practices.

- (e) Serve as Project Manager (PM) for the OPIA-sponsored annual VA National Training Academy for departmental communications professionals and leaders.

(8) Director, Digital Media Engagement (DME) shall:

- (a) Under the direction of the DAS-OPA, implement the Secretary's digital and social media engagement strategy.
- (b) Serve as functional lead for department-level digital media engagement; establish procedures and policies and coordinate departmental digital media engagement processes and initiatives with VA Administration and VACO Staff Office digital media efforts.
- (c) Serve on the VA Web Governance Board (WGB) and ensure coordination and implementation of enterprise external web strategies to educate and inform Veterans and their survivors, and key stakeholders about care and benefits, and public information regarding VA.
- (d) Serve as Project Manager (PM) for the OPIA-sponsored annual VA National Training Academy for departmental digital engagement training for communications professionals and leaders.

(9) Director, Internal Communications shall:

- (a) Serve as functional lead for department-level internal communications engagement; establish procedures and policies and coordinate departmental internal communication processes and initiatives with VA administration and VACO staff internal communications efforts.
- (b) Establish and maintain appropriate VA intranet platforms in accordance with VA Directive and Handbook 6102 to facilitate the Secretary's communications to employees, and to facilitate VA Administrations and Staff Offices' capabilities to highlight the accomplishments and positive stories regarding their organizations and employees.
- (c) Serve as Project Manager (PM) for the OPIA-sponsored annual VA National Training Academy to provide internal communications instruction to departmental communications professionals and leaders.

d. Administration/VACO Staff Office PAOs shall:

- (1) Report national media queries and queries on sensitive issues likely to rise to national attention to OMR and Press Secretary for evaluation and staffing before response back to the media.
- (2) Coordinate with OMR personnel to provide requested subject matter experts for media interviews in a timely manner, and, when cleared by press

secretary or DAS-OPA, provide responses to media queries in accordance with media deadlines.

- (3) Provide guidance to network/regional office and facility public affairs offices and ensure facility and regional PAOs report media contacts daily to their OPA regional office for awareness and additional support, if required.

e. **Regional/Network/Facility Directors (VHA, VBA, NCA)** shall:

- (1) Be responsible for their facility's public affairs program and performance.
- (2) Shall, through their respective local public affairs offices, inform and advise their supporting OPA Regional Office of media queries for awareness, and if required, further staffing.

4. DEFINITIONS.

- a. **Functional Oversight.** For this directive, “functional oversight” of public engagement activities is defined as OPIA’s execution of its role as the Secretary’s designated policy lead for the development of communications messages, plans, training, and processes to manage the Secretary’s department-level (enterprise-level) engagement programs.
- b. **National Issue.** For this directive and subsidiary guidance, “national issue” refers to an issue likely to rise to the attention of national news outlets or deemed appropriate by the Secretary for national level (VA Central Office) response. It is not intended to refer to the routine local administration of the national benefits packages, access to medical care, or common issues related to those related health or financial benefits.
- c. **National Media.** National media are defined as network television (to include local affiliates if national interest is likely), national news magazines, or metropolitan newspapers with national distribution such as the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, to include their online/digital media components.

5. REFERENCES.

- a. [Medical Records Confidentiality](#) – 38 U.S.C. § 7332
- b. [Confidentiality of Medical Quality Assurance Records](#) – 38 U.S.C. § 5705
- c. [Confidential Nature of Claims](#) – 38 U.S.C. § 5701
- d. [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act](#) (HIPAA) – 45 CFR Parts 160 and 164

- e. [Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\) – 5 U.S.C. § 55](#)
- f. [VHA Handbook 1605.01, Privacy and Release of Information](#)
- g. [VA Directive and Handbook 6102, Internet/Intranet Services](#)
- h. Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Public Law 93–112) [Section 508 Compliance](#)