



The Department of Veterans Affairs

Keeping the Promise to Those Who Have Borne the Battle

August 8, 2017

Executive Summary

Reading the headlines and listening to certain lawmakers, it's easy to think that the Veterans Health Administration is broken beyond repair. AFGE took a hard look beyond the headlines and researched the unbiased facts about the VHA system and how it delivers care to our veterans. The reality of the VA, it turns out, could not be further from the accepted wisdom.

With its vast network of 160+ medical centers and 1,000+ community-based outpatient clinics across the country, the VA offers its 5.8 million veteran patients the best health care our nation has to offer. Its employees have earned three Nobel prizes and seven Lasker awards. The system consistently outperforms the private sector across an array of metrics in mental and physical health care. They pioneered the first liver transplant, invented the cardiac pacemaker, developed the nicotine patch, and engineered bionic ankle-foot prosthesis, among countless other innovations. It is also the only nationwide health care provider with fully-integrated electronic records, meaning veterans can seamlessly access care everywhere from Atlanta, Georgia to Anchorage, Alaska.

The VA is one-of-a-kind in its ability to treat its patients' unique needs, specializing in veteran-centric treatments and services otherwise unavailable in the private sector. Its model treats veterans as whole patients, dedicating a full health care team to each veteran to heal both body and mind together. The VA pioneered ground-breaking treatments for traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress – ailments far more common among veterans than the general population. Already these treatments are paying massive dividends, as suicide rates among veterans using the VA declined 20 percent between 2000-2010, compared to a 40 percent surge for veterans receiving their care elsewhere. It is also the world's largest provider of spinal cord treatment and research.

Since receiving desperately-needed funding from The Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014, it has only gotten better. Since 2014, the VA has hired nearly 14,000 more health care workers and opened up 3.9 million more square feet of clinical space, which has resulted in 20 million additional provider hours of care for veterans. They are completing 97 percent of appointments within the clinically indicated or veteran's preferred date, and veterans have reported a 90 percent satisfaction rate with getting an appointment when they wanted. But with an additional 40,000 health care positions remaining vacant, more work must be done to properly staff the system.

Veterans returning home from overseas deserve world-class health care and medical treatments for their sacrifice. The VA is the only system in the world that can offer all of that and more to our veterans. It is not just another hospital system, but a community of veterans that brings together generations of servicemen and women from all wars, with all injuries, and all walks of life. It is the cornerstone of America's solemn promise to "care for he who shall have borne the battle." It is up to us all to keep that promise.

Improving Veterans' Access to VA Benefits and Services

Since the beginning of 2014, the VA has added 3.9 million more square feet of clinical space.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 11\)](#)

“We activated 2.2 million square feet in FY 2015, adding to more than 1.7 million square feet of clinical space activated in FY 2014.”

In March 2017, 96.82 percent of appointments were completed within 30 days of the clinically indicated or veteran’s preferred date.

[Statement of the Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D. for Presentation before the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs \(Page 9\)](#)

“In March 2017, 96.82 percent of appointments, 5.15 million appointments, were completed within 30 days of the clinically-indicated or veteran’s-preferred date.”

The VA is realigning itself to create one system for all veterans across the country through their service networks and a single, easy-to-use website for veterans.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Pages 7-8\)](#)

“We are realigning VA to facilitate internal coordination and collaboration among business lines—from nine disjointed, disparate organizational boundaries and organizational structures to a single framework. That means down-sizing from 21 service networks to 18 that are aligned in five districts and defined by state boundaries, except in California. This realignment means opportunities for local level integration, and it promotes consistently effective customer service. Veterans from Florida to California, Puerto Rico to Maine, Alaska and Guam, and all parts in between, will see one VA.”

Creation of Vets.gov, “a modern, mobile-first, cloud-based website that replace numerous other websites and website logins with a single, easy to navigate location.”

The VA has increased clinic work by 10 percent since 2013, totaling around 20 million additional provider hours of care.

[David Shulkin Presentation to Commission on Care – March 23, 2016 \(Slide 12\)](#)

“The VA has increased its total clinic work (direct patient care) by 10% over the last 2 years (2013-2015) as measured by private sector standard (relative value units). This increase translates to roughly 20 million additional provider hours of care for our veterans.”

Between March 2015 and March 2016, the VA completed more than 57 million appointments. A 1.6 million year-over-year increase.

[The Quality of Medication Treatment for Mental Disorders in the Department of Veterans Affairs and in Private-Sector Plans](#)

“VA completed over 57 million appointments between March 2015 and March 2016, 1.6 million more than the prior year.”

From July 1, 2015 – June 30, 2016, the VA completed more than 57.8 million appointments – a 1.1 million increase from same time period in 2014-2015.

[The Joint Commission Releases Results of Surveys of the VA Health Care System](#)

“Nationally, VA completed more than 57.85 million appointments from July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016. This represents an increase of 1.1 million more appointments than were completed during the same time period in 2014/2015.”

In an effort to improve access for veterans, currently there are 39 VA facilities that offer same-day access to primary and mental health care.

[The Joint Commission Releases Results of Surveys of the VA Health Care System](#)

“VA is moving to incorporate same-day access to primary care and mental health services for Veterans when it is medically necessary. At present, 39 VA facilities offer same-day appointments.”

677,000 veterans completed 2 million telehealth visits in 2015.

[The Joint Commission Releases Results of Surveys of the VA Health Care System](#)

“In FY 2015, 677,000 Veterans completed more than 2 million telehealth visits, providing enhanced access to care.”

The VA has developed – and is currently piloting – a mobile app called the Veteran Appointment Request App that allows veterans to view, schedule, and cancel appointments. Veterans can also track the status of current appointments and review upcoming appointments. All veterans will have access in 2017.

[The Joint Commission Releases Results of Surveys of the VA Health Care System](#)

“A new smart phone app called the Veteran Appointment Request App has been developed and is currently being piloted. This app allows Veterans to view, schedule and cancel primary care and mental health appointments as well as track the status of the appointment request and review upcoming appointments. VA expects to make the app available to all Veterans by early 2017.”

In an effort to better track appointments, and ensure that veterans are receiving timely access to care, the VA is renovating their website to allow veterans to check wait times in real time anywhere in the country.

[The Joint Commission Releases Results of Surveys of the VA Health Care System](#)

“Website enhancements are underway that will allow Veterans to check wait times in real time wherever they live – this includes a new, easy-to-use scheduling software program. The new program is being piloted and is expected to reduce scheduling errors and enhance VA’s ability to measure and track supply, demand and usage.”

Veterans’ Health Care Expertise and Awards

VHA researches have been recognized with three Nobel prizes and seven Lasker awards.

[Commission on Care Interim Report – December 4, 2015 \(Pages 3-4\)](#)

“VHA is not simply a health care provider but also an institution with major responsibilities for the education of the nation’s health workforce, for the conduct of medical research, and for providing emergency response services to the nation. The Commission recognizes the VA health system has had many accomplishments and made many contributions to U.S. medicine. VHA researchers have been recognized with three Nobel prizes and seven Lasker awards and have been responsible for vital clinical breakthroughs.”

In 2015 the VA’s Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy received J.D. Power’s highest customer satisfaction score for the sixth year in a row.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 2\)](#)

“For the sixth year in a row, VA’s Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy received J.D. Power’s highest customer satisfaction score among the Nation’s public and private mail-order pharmacies.”

The VA serves approximately 6.6 million unique patients a year, including 5.8 million veterans. They do so utilizing 160+ medical centers, and 1,000+ affiliated health care sites that annually process 92 million outpatient visits, 707,000 inpatient admissions, and 271 million prescriptions filled.

[Commission on Care Interim Report – December 4, 2015 \(Page 2\)](#)

“It serves approximately 6.6 million unique patients, of whom 5.8 million are veterans, at more than 160 medical centers and more than 1,000 affiliated health care sites across the United States. Services provided encompass more than 92 million outpatient visits, 707,000 inpatient admissions, and 271 million prescriptions filled each year. With more than 290,000 staff members, including 24,000 physicians and 63,000 nurses, VHA employs one out of every nine civilian federal employees. VHA augments its staff with more than 760,000 volunteers. As the largest single provider of health care professional training in the country, VHA rotates more than 120,000 trainees through the system each year.”

When asked “How would you improve the VA health care system to better serve veterans?”, 92 percent of veterans said they would like the VA to “fix deficiencies,” compared to only 1 percent who said they wanted a “Universal health care card.”

[Our Care 2017: A Report Evaluating Veterans Health Care by the Veterans of Foreign Wars – March 2017 \(Page 3\)](#)

“When asked how they would improve their health care system, veterans overwhelmingly reported that they believe VA must fix current deficiencies; that VA is already improving; or that there is nothing to improve in VA when compared to private sector health care.”

80 percent of veterans do not want a voucher system.

[Vet Voice Foundation Survey – November 6, 2015 \(Page 1\)](#)

“Veterans share a core value that after the promise of health care and their service, veterans deserve their health care to be fully paid for, not vouchers which may not cover all the costs. Sixty-eight percent of veterans strongly agree with this (80% agree overall). The agreement that health care is a promise extends strongly across demographics. This is not a debate; this is a core value.”

Using VetLink, the VA’s kiosk-based software that collects real-time customer satisfaction information, 90 percent of respondents were either “completely satisfied” or “satisfied” with getting an appointment when they wanted.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 11\)](#)

“Since September 2015, VHA has analyzed preliminary data from VetLink, our kiosk-based software that allows us to collect real-time customer satisfaction information. In all three separate VetLink surveys to date—related to nearly half-a-million [476,672] appointments—Veterans told us that about 90 percent of the time, they are either ‘completely satisfied’ or ‘satisfied’ with getting the appointment when they wanted it.”

Veterans’ Affairs Health Care Innovations

The VA is the largest single provider of care in the country for chronic Hepatitis C virus infections.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 23\)](#)

“VA is the largest single provider of care in the Nation for chronic HCV, and over the next five years, VA will strive to provide treatment to all Veterans with HCV who are treatment candidates.”

The VA has tested treatment that shows promise in warding off Alzheimer’s, and can assist with PTSD.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 36\)](#)

“VA investigators tested an insulin nasal spray that shows great promise in warding off Alzheimer’s disease and found that prazosin (a well-tested generic drug used to treat high blood pressure and prostate problems) can help improve sleep and lessen nightmares for those with post-traumatic stress disorder.”

The VA is leveraging its Million Veteran Program to support several Precision Medical Initiatives.
[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 37\)](#)

“Beyond VA’s support of more than 2,200 continuing research projects, VA will leverage our Million Veteran Program (MVP)—already one of the world’s largest databases of genetic information—to support several Precision Medicine Initiatives.”

The VA pioneered the first liver transplant, invented the cardiac pacemaker, developed the nicotine patch, found that a daily dose of aspirin reduces heart attack deaths, engineered bionic ankle-foot prosthesis, and showed the effectiveness of vaccinating against shingles.

[Commission on Care Interim Report – December 4, 2015 \(Page 4\)](#)

“These accomplishments include pioneering the first liver transplant, inventing the implantable cardiac pacemaker, developing the nicotine patch, demonstrating that a daily aspirin dose reduces heart attack death, engineering bionic ankle-foot prosthesis, and showing the effectiveness of a vaccine against shingles. VHA is recognized for high-quality clinical preventive services and has been recognized for innovation such as development of its electronic health record system, quality management approach, and health care ethics program.”

65 percent of all doctors practicing in the U.S. received all or part of their residency training in VA health care facilities.

[The VA Isn’t Broken, Yet \(Page 3\)](#)

“Today, an estimated 65 percent of all doctors practicing in the United States have received all or part of their residency training in VA facilities”

The VA fully integrated mental health and substance abuse specialists, something not seen outside of the VA. The unique form of treating body and mind together is crucial since 25 percent of VA patients suffer from chronic mental illnesses, and 16 percent struggle with addiction.

[The VA Isn’t Broken, Yet \(Pages 6-7\)](#)

“The VA also fully integrated mental health professionals and substance abuse specialists into its medical home teams. This practice of treating body and mind together is virtually unknown outside of the VA because insurers, including Medicare and Medicaid managed care organizations, won’t pay for it. But the innovation was crucial in treating the VA’s patient population, 25 percent of whom suffer from chronic mental illness and 16 percent of whom struggle with addiction.”

The VA’s Million Veteran Program (MVP) is the largest genomic database in the world.

[Million Veteran Program is Now Largest Genomic Database in the World](#)

“The Department of Veterans Affairs’ Million Veteran Program (MVP) has reached an important milestone when an Army Veteran from Montgomery, Alabama, became the 500,000th to voluntarily enroll in the research database program – making MVP the largest genomic database in the world.”

The VA now offers health care benefits for Veterans who may have been exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides during their service.

[Health Care for Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange](#)

“VA offers health care benefits for Veterans who may have been exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service.”

The VA treats more than 26,000 people with spinal cord injuries and related disorders each year. It is the largest health care system in the world providing spinal cord care.

[Office of Research and Development: Spinal Cord Injuries](#)

“VA treats more than 26,000 people with SCIs and related disorders each year, making the department the largest health care system in the world providing spinal cord care.”

The VA has created a Polytrauma System of Care that balances access and expertise for veterans. The specialized traumatic brain injury and polytrauma care is done with expertise necessary to manage veterans' rehabilitation, medical, surgical, and mental health needs.

[Polytrauma/TBI System of Care](#)

"VA's Polytrauma System of Care (PSC) is an integrated network of specialized rehabilitation programs dedicated to serving Veterans and Service Members with both combat and civilian related Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and polytrauma. Services available through PCS include: interdisciplinary evaluation and treatment, development of a comprehensive plan of care, case management, patient and family education and training, psychosocial support, and application of advanced rehabilitation treatments and prosthetic technologies."

Sustained Progress in Ending Veteran Homelessness

A January 2016 estimate of unsheltered homeless found there were slightly more than 13,000 unsheltered homeless veterans living on the streets, a 56 percent decrease from 2010.

[Obama Administration Announces Nearly 50-Percent Decline in Veteran Homelessness](#)

"Through HUD's annual Point-in-Time (PIT) estimate of America's homeless population, communities across the country reported that fewer than 40,000 veterans were experiencing homelessness on a given night in January 2016. The January 2016 estimate found just over 13,000 unsheltered homeless veterans living on their streets, a 56-percent decrease since 2010."

Between January 2015 and January 2016, there was a 17 percent decrease in veteran homelessness – a quadruple decline from 2014 to 2015.

[Obama Administration Announces Nearly 50-Percent Decline in Veteran Homelessness](#)

"U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) today announced the number of veterans experiencing homelessness in the United States has been cut nearly in half since 2010. The data revealed a 17-percent decrease in veteran homelessness between January 2015 and January 2016—quadruple the previous year's annual decline—and a 47-percent decrease since 2010."

In 2015, the VA prevented 36,000 veterans and their family members, including 6,555 children, from becoming homeless.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 12\)](#)

"In FY 2015 alone, VA provided services to more than 365,000 homeless or at-risk Veterans in VHA's homeless programs. Nearly 65,000 Veterans obtained permanent housing through VHA Homeless Programs interventions, and more than 36,000 Veterans and their family members, including 6,555 children, were prevented from becoming homeless."

Veteran unemployment has dropped from 6 percent in 2014, to 4.3 percent in August 2016, which is lower than the general populace's unemployment rate.

[By the Numbers: Another Year of Progress for Veterans & Dept of Labor Veteran Unemployment Update](#)

"The unemployment rate for all veterans has consistently been below the unemployment rate for non-veterans. The total veteran unemployment rate was 4.6 percent, compared to the nonveteran unemployment rate (for individuals 18 years and older) of 5.2 percent."

Since 2010 the VA has prevented 360,000 veterans and their families from becoming homeless.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 13\)](#)

“Since 2010, more than 360,000 Veterans and their family members have been permanently housed, rapidly rehoused, or prevented from falling into homelessness.”

Veterans Health Administration vs. Private Sector Care

In 2014 a study comparing mental health care in the VA to the private sector, the VA outperformed the private sector by more than 30%.

[The Quality of Medication Treatment for Mental Disorders in the Department of Veterans Affairs and in Private-Sector Plans](#)

“In every case, VA performance was superior to that of the private sector by more than 30 percent.”

70 percent of veterans who commit suicide each day did not receive their care at the VA.

[Statement of the Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D. for Presentation before the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs \(Page 13\)](#)

“We know that 14 of the 20 Veterans who on average commit suicide each day did not, for various reasons, receive care within VA.”

Rates of suicide increased by 40 percent among veterans who didn’t use the VA, but declined 20 percent among those who did between 2000-2010

[Changes in Suicide Mortality for Veterans and Nonveterans by Gender and History of VHA Service Use, 2000–2010](#)

“Between 2000 and 2010, rates of suicide increased by 40 percent among veterans who didn’t use the VA, but declined by 20 percent among those who did.”

Veterans wait an average of 6.5 days from their preferred date of care to see a primary care doctor, compared to 19.5 days for non-VA patients.

[The VA Isn’t Broken, Yet \(Page 7\) & Physician Appointment Wait Times and Medicaid and Medicare Acceptance Rates, Merrit Hawkins Survey 2014 \(Page 6\)](#)

“Across facilities, veterans waited an average of just six and half days from their preferred date of care to see a primary care doctor.”

“Across these markets, the average wait time for an appointment with a family physician was 19.5 days”

According to the American Psychological Association, when measured by objective standards of mental health care treatment, the “VA performance was superior to that of the private sector by more than 30 percent.”

[The Quality of Medication Treatment for Mental Disorders in the Department of Veterans Affairs and in Private-Sector Plans](#)

“In April, the American Psychological Association reported that as measured by objective standards of mental health care treatment, ‘VA performance was superior to that of the private sector by more than 30%.’”

According to the RAND Corporation, 87 percent of surveyed civilian providers of mental health care are not prepared to treat veterans.

[Community-Based Mental Health Providers Need More Preparation to Better Care for Veterans](#)

“In another report by Rand on the readiness and cultural competency of civilian mental health providers to treat veterans, they found that, ‘...only 13 percent of surveyed civilian providers met all the readiness criteria.’”

According to the Congressional Budget Office, the VA offers healthcare that is 20 percent less expensive than Medicare – which as noted by the CBO is itself lower than typical insurance rates.

[Dissent Letter from Commissioner Michael Blecker – June 29, 2016](#)

“The CBO concluded that the best information available shows that overall VHA costs are about 20% lower than Medicare, which is itself lower than typical insurance rates.”

According to independent research by RAND Corporations 2015 evaluation and 2016 summary, as well as according to a review of 60 independent scientific publications, the VA outperforms non-VA health care in adherence to recommended preventative care guidelines, treatment guidelines, and outpatient processes and outcomes.

[Health Professionals, Unions, Urge Congress Not to “Risk Our Veterans’ Health Care”](#)

“The current VHA system provides healthcare that is as good as, and more often superior to, non-VA care. It outperforms non-VA care on adherence to recommended preventative care guidelines, adherence to recommended treatment guidelines, outpatient processes and outpatient outcomes.”

According to the Commission on Care’s Final Report, creating and implementing a new VHA system would cost the federal government \$11 billion more than the VA’s 2017 budget.

[Health Professionals, Unions, Urge Congress Not to “Risk Our Veterans’ Health Care”](#)

“The Final Report estimates the cost of creating and implementing a new VHA Care System to range from \$65 billion to \$85 billion in 2019, with a middle estimate of \$76 billion (p. 32). That’s \$11 billion more than the FY 2017 VHA medical care budget.”

Commission on Care – Findings and Reactions

The creation of the proposed “VHA Care System” by the Commission on Care would “threaten the survival of our nation’s veteran-centered health care system as a choice for the millions of veterans who rely on it,” according to Commissioner Blecker.

[Dissent Letter from Commissioner Michael Blecker – June 29, 2016](#)

“However I cannot agree to the Commission’s first and most significant recommendation, establishment of a proposed “VHA Care System.” Given the design of this proposed new delivery model, the adoption of this proposal would threaten the survival of our nation’s veteran-centered health care system as a choice for the millions of veterans who rely on it. Although this is only one of many recommendations in the Report, this single recommendation risks undermining rather than strengthening our veteran centered health care system, and I cannot agree to it.”

Commission on Care member Michael Blecker said he abstained from signing the Commission’s final report because he “thought it would hurt veterans.” And that “the recommendation that redesigns the Veterans Health Care Delivery System by outsourcing the choice of primary care providers will do just that.”

[Dissent Letter from Commissioner Michael Blecker – June 29, 2016](#)

“In raising these concerns, I speak as a Commissioner, a veteran, and a lifelong advocate for community based veteran support services. I was working with veterans in need when the VHA was not the comprehensive, integrated, wrap-around provider of veteran-centered health care that it is now, and I do not want to see us move backward. When I joined the Commission I stated at one of our public meetings that I would not sign the report if I thought it would hurt veterans. The recommendation that redesigns the Veterans Health Care Delivery System by outsourcing the choice of primary care providers will do just that – hurt veterans. The bottom line is that the Commission has adopted a dangerous idea.”

The Commission on Care did not draw on the facts available to them in determining the future of the VA. This goes against the mandate from the Commission that all recommendations would be “data-driven.”

[Dissent Letter from Commissioner Michael Blecker – June 29, 2016](#)

The “VHA Care System” design was not based on the facts before the Commission. The Commission agreed at the outset that our recommendations would be data-driven. But I see no evidence that the proposed “VHA Care System” design is supported by or drew on the facts available to the Commission.

According to Commissioner Michael Blecker, despite overwhelming evidence that the Commission on Care saw that highlighted how the VA offered superior care, they never explained how relying on lower-quality options would improve veterans’ care. They did not take into account that veterans want more care from the VA, not less.

[Dissent Letter from Commissioner Michael Blecker – June 29, 2016](#)

“The Commission never explains why expanding reliance on lower-quality health care options will improve veteran health care. Veterans want more VHA care, not less.”

According to Commissioner Phillip Longman, the U.S. health care system kills nearly 250,000 Americans each year through a combination of overtreatment, under-treatment, and mistreatment.

[A Conversation About the Commission on Care and the Future of the VA \(Page 4\)](#)

“We had people on the commission who were simply unaware, or in denial about, how contact with the U.S. health care system kills a quarter of million Americans a year through a combination of overtreatment, under-treatment, and mistreatment.”

The new corporate-style governing board proposed by the Commission on Care would be shielded from oversight by not being subject to the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA).

[Commission on Care Final Report – June 30, 2016 \(Page 11\)](#)

“The Commission also recommends the governing board not be subject to the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA).”

In their Final Report, the Commission on Care noted that the Veterans Health Administration offers health care that is superior to that of the private sector.

[Commission on Care Final Report – June 30, 2016](#)

“The recommendations in this report acknowledge that although VHA provides health care that is in many ways comparable or better in clinical quality to that generally available in the private sector”

10 groups of health professionals and unions cosigned a position paper highlighting the dangers of privatizing veterans’ health care. Those groups include: the American Federation of Government Employees, the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders, the Association of VA Social Workers, the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs, the National Federation of Federal Employees, the Veterans Affairs Physician Assistant Association, the National Association of Government Employees, National Nurses United, the American Psychological Association, and the National Association of Social Workers.

[Health Professionals, Unions, Urge Congress Not to “Risk Our Veterans’ Health Care”](#)

“In response to the Commission on Care’s final report calling for an overhaul of the VA healthcare system, federal unions and health professionals have co-authored a position paper detailing the dangers posed by the Commission’s recommendations. Signed by the American Federation of Government Employees, the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders, the Association of VA Social Workers, the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs, the National Federation of Federal Employees, the Veterans Affairs Physician Assistant Association, the National Association of Government Employees, National Nurses United, the American Psychological Association, and the National Association of Social Workers”

Recruiting a Workforce Worthy of Our Veterans

Since 2014, the VA has hired an additional 13,940 health care staff (4.7 percent increase).

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 11\)](#)

“We increased net VHA staffing. VHA hired 41,113 employees, for a net increase of 13,940 health care staff, a 4.7 percent increase overall. That increase included 1,337 physicians and 3,612 nurses, and we filled several critical leadership positions, including the Under Secretary of Health.”

The VA has named the Department’s first Chief Veteran Experience Officer, and have staffed offices to improve VA services.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 7\)](#)

“VA named the Department’s first Chief Veteran Experience Officer and began staffing the office that will work with the field to establish customer service standards, spread best practices, and train our employees on advanced business skills.”

VA Gains in the Elimination of Backlogs

As of April 2017, the Veterans Health Administration has reduced the Electronic Wait list by more than 33,000 – a 60.2 percent reduction from the June 2014 high of 56,271.

[Statement of the Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D. for Presentation before the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs \(Page 9\)](#)

“As of April 15, 2017, VHA has reduced and the Electronic Wait List from 56,271 entries to 22,383 entries, a 60.2 percent reduction between June 2014 and April 2017.”

In 2015, the VA drove down the disability compensation and pension claims backlog by 87 percent, the most claims ever completed in a single year.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 13\)](#)

“In FY 2015, VA decided a record-breaking 1.4 million disability compensation and pension claims for Veterans and their survivors—the highest in VA history for a single year. As of December 31, 2015, VA had driven down the disability claims backlog to 75,480, from a peak of over 611,000 in March 2013.”

There have been two national Access Stand Down days where the VA fully staffed every VA health care facility and reviewed 82 percent and then 93 percent of Level One, stat, consults that were open more than 30 days.

[Witness Testimony of The Honorable Robert A. McDonald, Secretary U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – February 10, 2016 \(Page 10\)](#) & [National ‘Access Stand Down’ Successful](#)

“In the first Access Stand Down, VHA reviewed nearly 55,800 of the more than 56,000 Level One, stat, consults that were open more than 30 days (as of November 6, 2015), a herculean effort. Of those 55,800 urgent open consults reviewed, 82 percent (45,849) were scheduled or closed by the end of that first Stand Down.”

“As part of a large-scale and immediate effort to assess the urgent health care needs of Veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs conducted a second “Access Stand Down” February 27. That countrywide, one-day event resulted in VA reviewing the records of more than 80,000 Veterans to get those waiting for urgent care off wait lists. Newly released results of the Access Stand Down show that 93 percent of Veterans waiting for urgent care have been contacted, with many receiving earlier appointments.”