



Strategic Goal Four

Contributing to the Nation's Well-Being

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4.1

Emergency Preparedness

Improve the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies, and natural disasters by developing plans and taking actions to ensure continued service to veterans, as well as to support national, state, and local emergency management and homeland security efforts.

Making a Difference for the Veteran

The Secretary's Valor Award

Dedication, selflessness, and heroism took center stage at VA Central Office as Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson recognized the efforts of 73 VA police officers and security staff during hurricanes Katrina and Rita. "Our employees are true heroes," Secretary Nicholson said, as he presented them with the Department's Valor Award. "Their professionalism and bravery during an unprecedented catastrophe allowed us to focus on the well-being of our veterans. Even as they endured personal tragedy, they showed a commitment to their patients that never wavered."



The honorees in front of the White House

The Secretary's Valor Award recognizes employees and citizens for heroic efforts displayed during a major catastrophe. The Valor Award is the highest level of recognition and is given to VA employees who exhibit courage and who put their lives in jeopardy to save others. These employees were nominated because they exhibited great courage by voluntarily risking their personal safety to prevent the loss of human life or government property. As a result of their efforts, VA maintained continuity of care for several hundred acutely ill veterans under difficult conditions.

In addition to exhibiting heroism in catastrophic situations, hundreds of VA police officers across the country are working day to day in VA hospitals to ensure that they are a safe place for our patients, their families, and VA employees.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA’s Use of FY 2006 Results

Performance Trend	2006 Impact on Veterans	How VA Uses The Data										
<p>Supporting Measure Percent of Emergency Planners Who Have Completed Orientation</p> <table border="1"> <caption>Percent of Emergency Planners Who Have Completed Orientation</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Year/Target</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2005</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Result</td> <td>90%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Plan</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strategic Target</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Year/Target	Percentage	2005	100%	2006 Result	90%	2006 Plan	100%	Strategic Target	100%	<p>The decrease in the percent of emergency planners completing orientation was due to personnel turnover at the end of the year. With the exception of the month of December, all emergency planners had received orientation.</p> <p>Continuity of operations (COOP) plans in most VA organizations are fully developed and routinely exercised. The slight reduction in results should not impact the veteran.</p>	<p>VA uses the data to determine contingency planning areas that may need increased attention.</p>
Year/Target	Percentage											
2005	100%											
2006 Result	90%											
2006 Plan	100%											
Strategic Target	100%											
<p>Supporting Measure Percent of VA Leadership Who Self-Certify Their Teams “Ready to Deploy” to their COOP Site</p> <table border="1"> <caption>Percent of VA Leadership Who Self-Certify Their Teams “Ready to Deploy” to their COOP Site</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Year/Target</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2005</td> <td>85%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Result</td> <td>85%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Plan</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strategic Target</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Year/Target	Percentage	2005	85%	2006 Result	85%	2006 Plan	100%	Strategic Target	100%	<p>Most of VA leadership has certified that their teams are ready to deploy to their COOP site. Those who have not done so are in offices undergoing significant reorganizations. However, these organizations still routinely exercise deployment to their COOP site and demonstrate their ability to perform essential functions. Thus, this result should not impact the veteran.</p>	<p>VA uses the data to determine the need for additional exercises and leadership training. VA expects its leaders to be cognizant of COOP requirements and to gain hands-on experience.</p>
Year/Target	Percentage											
2005	85%											
2006 Result	85%											
2006 Plan	100%											
Strategic Target	100%											

Related Performance Information

Major Management Challenges

The following major management challenges have been identified for this strategic objective:

GAO

- Prepare for Biological and Chemical Acts of Terrorism (see page 266 for more details)
- Establishing Appropriate and Effective Information-Sharing Mechanisms to Improve Homeland Security: A Governmentwide High-Risk Area (see page 279 for more details)



Program Evaluations

No independent program evaluations have been conducted recently that specifically address this objective.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

No PART evaluations have been completed that specifically address this objective.

New Policies and Procedures

As a result of lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina across the federal government, the National Response Plan has been revised to improve command and coordination. Under the new Natural Disaster Incident Management Unified Command and Coordination Structure that is employed during a national-level disaster, VA is represented at every level including the White House Homeland Security Council, the Department of Homeland Security National Operations Center, and the Joint Field Office involved in providing federal assistance at the site of the disaster or incident. The Department is positioned to ensure that minimum essential services to our veterans are maintained under all circumstances. VA will assist our Nation's veterans by providing support, along with all other federal partners involved with the National Response Plan, in those areas where our veterans and their families live and work.

Data Quality

VA's data quality improvement efforts including its work on data verification and validation are described in the Assessment of Data Quality on page 166.



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4.2

Medical Research and Development

Advance VA medical research and develop programs that address veterans' needs – with an emphasis on service-connected injuries and illnesses – and contribute to the Nation's knowledge of disease and disability.

Making a Difference for the Veteran

Senior VA Research Scientist Receives “Distinguished Scientist Award” from Hepatitis B Foundation



Raymond Schinazi, Ph.D., one of the Atlanta VA Medical Center's prestigious Senior Career Research Scientists, received the “Distinguished Scientist Award” from the Hepatitis B Foundation during a ceremony on March 25, 2006, in New Hope, Pennsylvania.

Dr. Schinazi was honored with the foundation's highest scientific award in recognition of his extraordinary contributions to the science and discovery of new drugs for the treatment of chronic hepatitis B and his strong commitment to finding a cure for this chronic liver disease.

“The Hepatitis B Foundation is proud to recognize the accomplishments and commitment of Dr. Raymond Schinazi whose work is bringing hope to the 400 million people living with chronic hepatitis B worldwide – a liver disease that infects silently and can progress to fatal cirrhosis and/or liver cancer,” said Timothy M. Block, Ph.D., President of the Hepatitis B Foundation.

“It is estimated that as many as 70% of all people treated for HIV and HBV have been treated by a drug discovered all or in part by Dr. Schinazi, a record not equaled by any other university scientist,” Dr. Block said.

Dr. Schinazi, who is also a Professor of Pediatrics and Director of the Laboratory of Biochemical Pharmacology at Emory University School of Medicine, was one of three celebrated Emory researchers who helped discover a widely-used drug to treat HIV and hepatitis C. In July 2005 their discovery resulted in the single largest payout exceeding \$525 million for intellectual property ever awarded to an American university.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA's Use of FY 2006 Results

Performance Trend	2006 Impact on Veterans	How VA Uses The Data
<p>Key Measure Number of Peer-Reviewed Publications Authored by VA Investigators</p> <p>* Estimated data. Final data are not yet available.</p>	<p>VA's medical research directly impacts the health of veterans. An example of the impact VA research has on the quality of life of veterans and the general population, VA researchers and colleagues found that an experimental vaccine for shingles reduced the incidence by more than half. The results were published in the <u>New England Journal of Medicine</u> in June of 2005. The Food and Drug Administration approved the vaccine in May 2006.</p>	<p>The use of research results to improve health care usually involves publication of significant findings in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Following publication, VA may incorporate the results into VHA Clinical Practice Guidelines.</p>

Related Performance Information

Major Management Challenges

Neither VA's Office of Inspector General nor the Government Accountability Office identified any major management challenges related to this objective.

Program Evaluations

An independent evaluation of the VA Research program was conducted in July 2006 by the National Research Advisory Council (NRAC), a federal advisory committee. The NRAC was instructed to consider the appropriateness of the research conducted to the VA health care mission. It was also to consider the balance of this research between the burden of disease and the special responsibilities of VA in the areas of mental health, central nervous system injury, and deployment health. The VA Research program was rated "Fully successful." The NRAC recommended that VA research should

include an emphasis on genomics research and research in areas of concern for OIF/OEF veterans.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

In relation to this strategic objective, the Administration conducted a PART evaluation of VA's Medical Research and Development program during 2005, which resulted in a rating of "Moderately Effective." Please see OMB PART reviews on page 69 for more information.

New Policies and Procedures

- VA has established Master Clinical Trial Cooperative Research and Development Agreements to provide a template and set the essential terms for negotiating study-specific agreements with major pharmaceutical companies. These agreements will streamline negotiations with companies that support VA clinical research.



- The Department has developed a streamlined process for collecting and analyzing regulatory approval information prior to the release of research funds.
- VA is publicizing clinical trials that veterans can participate in via a Web site:
www.csp.research.med.va.gov

Data Verification and Measure Validation

Verification and validation information for the key measure that supports this objective is provided in the Key Measures Data Table on page 192.



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4.3

Academic Partnerships

Enhance the quality of care to veterans and provide high-quality educational experiences for health profession trainees, created internally in VA and via partnerships with the academic community.

Making a Difference for the Veteran

Interprofessional Fellowship Program in Patient Safety



James A. Haley VA Medical Center in Tampa, Florida

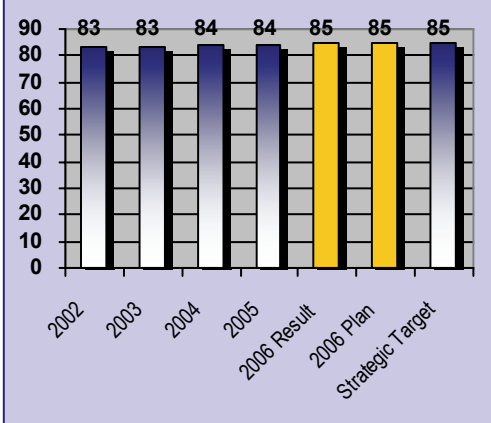
The Patient Safety Center of Inquiry, located at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center in Tampa, Florida, has been approved by the Office of Academic Affiliations as a site for the Interprofessional Fellowship Program in Patient Safety. Two fellows will be funded.

The purpose of this program is to provide post-residency trained physicians and post-doctoral or post-master's degree trained associated health professionals in-depth education in patient safety practice and leadership.

This program takes advantage of the resources of the internationally renowned VHA National Center for Patient Safety both to provide outstanding training opportunities and to contribute to the improvement of patient safety within the VA system, the body of knowledge of research in patient safety, patient safety education to clinicians in training and practice, and the recruitment and retention of patient safety practitioners, officers, managers, researchers, and administrators.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA’s Use of FY 2006 Results

Performance Trend	2006 Impact on Veterans	How VA Uses The Data																
<p>Supporting Measure Medical Residents’ and Other Trainees’ Scores on a VHA Survey Assessing Their Clinical Training Experience</p>  <table border="1"> <caption>Supporting Measure Data</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Year/Category</th> <th>Score</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2002</td> <td>83</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2003</td> <td>83</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2004</td> <td>84</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2005</td> <td>84</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Result</td> <td>85</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Plan</td> <td>85</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strategic Target</td> <td>85</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Year/Category	Score	2002	83	2003	83	2004	84	2005	84	2006 Result	85	2006 Plan	85	Strategic Target	85	<p>In general, for all types of businesses, there is considerable evidence that employee satisfaction impacts customer satisfaction.</p> <p>The VA clinical training survey measures the satisfaction of VA clinical trainees who come in contact with veteran patients, the customers. Clinical trainees who are satisfied with their clinical training can impact how veterans view their care.</p>	<p>The survey results are used by VA medical facilities, VA’s Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), and VA leadership to assess the VA clinical training program.</p> <p>At the facility level, the survey data are available in such granularity that VA program officials are able to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement in clinical training programs. The survey reports on the perceptions of the trainees concerning specific domains (quality of the faculty, learning environment, working environment, physical environment, and personal experience) and provides trend data so that program officials can monitor changes in specific areas over time. In order to maintain VA as a preferred training site for future health care professionals, it is important to know how trainees view VA training versus training in non-VA settings.</p>
Year/Category	Score																	
2002	83																	
2003	83																	
2004	84																	
2005	84																	
2006 Result	85																	
2006 Plan	85																	
Strategic Target	85																	

Related Performance Information

Major Management Challenges

The following major management challenges have been identified for this strategic objective:

OIG

- VA Disbursement Agreements with Affiliated Medical Schools (see page 232 for more details)



Program Evaluations

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs established a Federally Chartered Advisory Committee on Resident Education. The Advisory Committee was charged with examining the philosophy and deployment of VA's residency training positions and undertook a broad assessment of graduate medical education in relationship to veterans' future health-care needs. The Advisory Committee affirmed the critical role that VA plays in providing high-quality graduate medical education from the general perspective of the preparation of the Nation's future physicians and, more specifically, from the perspective of meeting VA health-care delivery needs. The Advisory Committee recommended, "VA should restore and maintain its historic support for 11 percent of total U.S. physician resident positions." The Under Secretary for Health tasked the Chief Academic Affiliations Officer to develop an implementation plan to increase the number of physician resident positions and the proportionate share of total U.S. positions funded by VA.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

The Administration conducted a PART evaluation of VA's Medical Care program during 2003. However, the evaluation did not specifically cover any aspects of the medical education program.

Data Quality

VA's data quality improvement efforts including its work on data verification and validation are described in the Assessment of Data Quality on page 166.



STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4.4

Socioeconomic Well-Being of Veterans

Enhance the socioeconomic well-being of veterans, and thereby the Nation and local communities, through veterans benefits; assistance programs for small, disadvantaged, and veteran-owned businesses; and other community initiatives.

Making a Difference for the Veteran

VA Leads Federal Government in Contracting with Disabled Veterans



Scott Denniston, left, director of VA's Center for Veterans Enterprise, talks with Danny Cobb, a Marine Corps veteran who recently started his own business in Frederick, Maryland, at the center's open house held in March 2006.

Edging closer to its target for contracting with service-disabled, veteran-owned businesses, the Department of Veterans Affairs has bested other federal agencies, according to a report on last year's federal contracting program.

Of 18 federal agencies that procured at least \$1 billion through contracts, VA led in its percentage – 2.15 percent – of total procurement dollars awarded to small businesses run by veterans disabled during military service. VA awarded more than \$200 million to these veteran-owned businesses in fiscal year 2005 – the most recent year for which complete data are available. Through July 2006, VA had awarded 3.68% of its total procurement dollars to service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses.

“VA is committed to helping veterans, not just with health care and other benefits, but in experiencing the opportunities of entrepreneurship,” said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

VA's leadership role in supporting service-disabled, veteran-owned businesses was cited in the Small Business Goaling Report issued by the Small Business Administration in June 2006. According to the report, VA's \$9.8 billion in total acquisitions last year made it the fourth largest purchaser of goods and services within the federal government, behind the Department of Defense, the Department of Energy, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Across the federal government, the report said contracts with service-disabled veterans increased to \$1.9 billion last year, up by 58 percent since 2004.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA's Use of FY 2006 Results

Performance Trend	2006 Impact on Veterans	How VA Uses The Data																
<p>Supporting Measure</p> <p>Attainment of statutory minimum goals for service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses expressed as a percent of total procurement dollars</p> <table border="1"> <caption>Supporting Measure Data</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Year</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2002</td> <td>0.61%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2003</td> <td>0.49%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2004</td> <td>1.25%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2005*</td> <td>2.15%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Result**</td> <td>3.68%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Plan</td> <td>3.00%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strategic Target</td> <td>3.00%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>* Corrected ** Actual data through July 2006. Final data are not yet available.</p>	Year	Percentage	2002	0.61%	2003	0.49%	2004	1.25%	2005*	2.15%	2006 Result**	3.68%	2006 Plan	3.00%	Strategic Target	3.00%	<p>VA continues to be a leader in contracting with veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. Contracting with these firms is a logical extension of the VA mission and contributes to the economic vitality of this important business community. Increased spending also makes entrepreneurship a viable and attractive career option for America's veterans.</p>	<p>These data assist VA leadership, the Congress, the veteran entrepreneurial community, and other stakeholders in gauging the extent of VA compliance and success in implementing the Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-50); the Veterans Benefits Act of 2003; and Executive Order 13360, <i>Providing Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran Businesses to Increase Their Federal Contracting and Subcontracting</i>, issued in October 2004.</p> <p>The results help VA program management identify areas for improvement and assist in identifying training and vendor outreach needs.</p>
Year	Percentage																	
2002	0.61%																	
2003	0.49%																	
2004	1.25%																	
2005*	2.15%																	
2006 Result**	3.68%																	
2006 Plan	3.00%																	
Strategic Target	3.00%																	

Related Performance Information

Major Management Challenges

Neither VA's Office of Inspector General nor the Government Accountability Office identified any major management challenges related to this objective.

Program Evaluations

No independent program evaluations have been conducted recently that specifically address this objective.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

No PART evaluations have been completed that specifically address this objective.

Data Quality

VA's data quality improvement efforts including its work on data verification and validation are described in the Assessment of Data Quality on page 166.



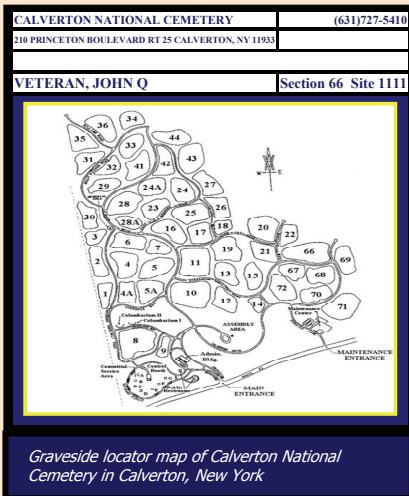
STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4.5

Maintaining National Cemeteries as Shrines

Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as shrines dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.

Making a Difference for the Veteran

VA Adds Maps to Online Nationwide Gravesite Locator



The grave locations of more than 3 million veterans and dependents buried in national cemeteries can be found more easily now because the Department of Veterans Affairs has added maps of burial sections online that can be printed from home computers and at national cemetery kiosks.

The latest improvement builds upon a service begun 2 years ago, in which a VA online feature permits family members to find the cemetery in which their loved one is buried.

“This new map feature makes it easier for families, friends, and researchers to find the exact location of a veteran’s grave in all national cemeteries and some state veterans cemeteries,” said the Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. “It enhances VA’s service

at national cemeteries, already highly regarded, and our commitment to them as national shrines and historic treasures.”

The Nationwide Gravesite Locator (<http://gravelocator.cem.va.gov>), online since April 2004, makes it easier for anyone with Internet access to search for the gravesite locations of deceased family members and friends, and to conduct genealogical research. Making it easier to identify burial locations may bring more visitors to the honored resting places that VA considers national shrines and historic treasures.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA's Use of FY 2006 Results

Performance Trend	2006 Impact on Veterans	How VA Uses The Data																
<p>Key Measure</p> <p>Percent of Respondents Who Rate National Cemetery Appearance as Excellent</p> <table border="1"> <caption>Performance Trend Data</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Year/Category</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2002</td> <td>97%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2003</td> <td>97%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2004</td> <td>98%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2005</td> <td>98%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Result</td> <td>97%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2006 Plan</td> <td>99%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Strategic Target</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Year/Category	Percentage	2002	97%	2003	97%	2004	98%	2005	98%	2006 Result	97%	2006 Plan	99%	Strategic Target	100%	<p>National cemeteries carry expectations of appearance that set them apart from private cemeteries. Our Nation is committed to create and maintain these sites as national shrines. The 2006 score reflects VA's commitment to maintain the appearance of national cemeteries as national shrines so that bereaved family members are comforted when they come to the cemetery for the interment, or later to visit the grave(s) of their loved one(s). Our Nation's veterans have earned the appreciation and respect not only of their friends and families, but also of the entire country and our allies.</p>	<p>VA's annual Survey of Satisfaction with National Cemeteries is the source of data for this key measure. The survey collects data from family members and funeral directors who have recently received services from a national cemetery. These data are shared with NCA managers at VA Central Office, Memorial Service Network, and national cemetery levels who use these data to improve the appearance of national cemeteries.</p>
Year/Category	Percentage																	
2002	97%																	
2003	97%																	
2004	98%																	
2005	98%																	
2006 Result	97%																	
2006 Plan	99%																	
Strategic Target	100%																	

Related Performance Information

Major Management Challenges

Neither VA's Office of Inspector General nor the Government Accountability Office identified any major management challenges related to this objective.

Program Evaluations

The Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, Public Law 106-117, directed VA to contract for an independent study to look at various issues related to the National Shrine Commitment and its focus on cemetery appearance. Volume 3: Cemetery Standards of Appearance was published in March 2002. This

report served as a planning tool and reference guide in the task of reviewing and refining VA's operational standards and measures.

In August 2002, Volume 2: National Shrine Commitment was completed. This report identified the one-time repairs needed to ensure a dignified and respectful setting appropriate for each national cemetery. VA is using the information in this report to address repair and maintenance needs at national cemeteries. Through 2006 NCA has addressed approximately 25 percent of the total repairs identified in this report.



Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

In relation to this strategic objective, the Administration conducted a PART evaluation of VA's Burial program during 2002, which resulted in a rating of "Moderately Effective." Please see OMB PART reviews on page 69 for more information.

New Policies and Procedures

In order to ensure a high-performing, well-trained workforce, VA established the National Cemetery Administration Training Center in 2004. Initially focused on training cemetery directors and assistant directors, the new facility has expanded its classes to train supervisors, foremen, gardeners, cemetery representatives, and contracting officer technical representatives. As the facility continues to expand its classes, training for other employees, such as equipment operators, will be added to the curriculum. As eight more new national cemeteries become operational by the end of this decade, the center's efforts will help ensure consistency in operations throughout the national cemetery system as well as a high-performing workforce and well-trained staff for key positions.

NCA is partnering with the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (NCPTT), an office of the National Park Service (NPS), to conduct a materials conservation and treatment analysis of government-issued marble veteran headstones issued from the 1870s through 1973. Second to VA, NPS has the largest number of national cemeteries, including Gettysburg National Cemetery, under its jurisdiction. Through a 2-year interagency agreement, NCPTT will identify alternatives for cleaning historic headstones based upon criteria such as cost effectiveness and environmentally and historic-resource friendly chemicals.

In 2006 VA improved its Web-based (Internet) Nationwide Gravesite Locator (NGL) system to include a mapping feature that shows the burial

sections of each VA national cemetery and some state veterans cemeteries. This feature enables families, friends, and researchers to more easily find an exact grave location in these cemeteries. The NGL, originally launched in 2004, contains more than 3 million records of veterans and dependents buried in VA's 123 cemeteries since the Civil War. It also has records of some burials in state veterans cemeteries and burials in Arlington National Cemetery from 1999 to the present.

Other Important Results

The willingness to recommend the national cemetery to veteran families during their time of need is an expression of loyalty toward that national cemetery. In 2006, 98 percent of survey respondents (family members and funeral directors who have recently received services from a national cemetery) indicated they would recommend the national cemetery to veteran families in their time of need.

VA has established standards and measures by which NCA can determine the effectiveness and efficiency of its operations. These standards and measures identify performance expectations in key operational processes including interments, grounds maintenance, and headstones and markers.

To ensure the appearance of national cemeteries meets the standards our Nation expects of its national shrines, VA performed a wide variety of grounds management functions including raising, realigning, and cleaning headstones to ensure uniform height and spacing and to improve appearance. The rows of pristine, white headstones that are set at the proper height and correct alignment provide the vista that is the hallmark of many VA national cemeteries. In 2006 VA collected data that showed that 67 percent of headstones and/or markers in national cemeteries are at the proper height and alignment; 77 percent of headstones, markers, and niche covers are clean and free of debris or objectionable accumulations; and 86 percent of



gravesites in national cemeteries had grades that were level and blended with adjacent grade levels. In 2006 VA initiated National Shrine Commitment projects at 11 national cemeteries. These projects will raise, realign, and clean more than 145,000 headstones and markers and renovate gravesites in nearly 65 acres. While attending to these highly visible aspects of our national shrines, VA also maintained roads, drives, parking lots, and walks; painted buildings, fences, and gates; and repaired roofs, walls, and irrigation and electrical systems.

In 2006 more than 97 percent of survey respondents (family members and funeral directors combined) agreed that the overall appearance of national cemeteries was excellent. The response rate solely among family members was slightly higher at nearly 98 percent. Performance on this key initiative is statistically unchanged from the previous year, and the results demonstrate VA's continued commitment to maintaining national cemeteries as shrines dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.

NCA has also established an Organizational Assessment and Improvement Program to identify and prioritize improvement opportunities and to enhance program accountability by providing managers and staff at all levels with one NCA "scorecard." As part of the program, assessment teams conduct site visits to all national cemeteries on a rotating basis to validate performance reporting. NCA schedules 12 visits each year to a representative group of national cemeteries from each Memorial Service Network that illustrates the diversity of our system in terms of age, size, workload, and climate. To date, NCA has completed 25 site visits assessing 43 national cemeteries. Ten visits assessing 16 national cemeteries were conducted in 2006.

VA continued its partnerships with various civic organizations that provide volunteers and other participants to assist in maintaining the

appearance of national cemeteries. For example, an interagency agreement with the Bureau of Prisons provides for the use of selected prisoners to perform work at national cemeteries. Under a joint venture with VHA, national cemeteries provide therapeutic work opportunities to veterans receiving treatment in the Compensated Work Therapy/Veterans Industries program. The national cemeteries are provided a supplemental workforce while giving veterans the opportunity to work for pay, regain lost work habits, and learn new work skills.

Data Verification and Measure Validation

Verification and validation information for the key measure that supports this objective is provided in the Key Measures Data Table on page 192.