

Statement of Robert J. Epley

Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Policy and Program Management Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services

Subcommittee on Personnel
October 10, 2002

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide health care information and benefits to veterans who participated in tests conducted by the U.S. Army's Deseret Test Center, including Project SHAD.

Project SHAD/Deseret Test Center Project 112

Project SHAD, an acronym for Shipboard Hazard and Defense, was part of the Deseret Test Center chemical and biological warfare test program known as Project 112, which was conducted by the Department of Defense during the 1960s and 1970s. SHAD encompassed a series of tests designed to identify U.S. warships' vulnerabilities to attacks involving chemical or biological warfare agents. Other Project 112 tests involved similar land-based tests.

VA first learned of SHAD when a veteran filed a claim for service connection for disabilities that he felt were related to his participation in Project SHAD. In two meetings held with DoD in late 1997, VA was advised that all relevant records about these

tests were classified and general access to that material was not possible, but that it could be provided on a case-by-case basis.

In May 2000, VA's Under Secretary for Benefits responded to a Congressional inquiry requesting assistance for veterans involved in Project SHAD. A VA/DoD workgroup was subsequently established and met for the first time in October 2000. Since that time, DoD and VA have worked together collaboratively to assess the possible health impact of participation in Project 112. DoD has committed to provide VA with all medically relevant data and a complete roster of participants involved in tests conducted by the Deseret Test Center in the 1960s and 1970s.

August 5, 2002 Report

On July 10, 2002, VA's Under Secretary for Benefits, Daniel Cooper, testified before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Under Secretary Cooper stated that DoD had provided VA with information on twelve SHAD tests and that VA had initiated a significant outreach program to locate and contact veterans. At that time, VA had mailed outreach letters to 622 veterans who participated in the initial three Project SHAD tests declassified by DoD for whom social security numbers and addresses had been obtained.

DoD continues to release the names and service numbers of veterans of Project 112. As new names are received, VA initiates an exhaustive process to locate these veterans and to provide them with information about their participation in Project 112

and about possible health effects related to the chemical and biological warfare agents used in those tests. For SHAD veterans VA had been unable to identify, Under Secretary Cooper advised the Committee that we had established a SHAD Helpline (at 1-800-749-8387), Internet web-site (at www.VA.GOV/SHAD), and an e-mail address (at SHADHELPLINE@VBA.VA.GOV).

During the July 10 hearing, Senator Arlen Specter, the Ranking Member, asked VA to send the committee a report about the health and disability status of veterans who participated in Project SHAD. A report dated August 5, 2002, entitled "VA Health Care and Compensation for Project SHAD Veterans" was provided to the Senate and the House Committees on Veterans' Affairs, on August 9, 2002, and subsequently provided to your Subcommittee. By that time, DoD had provided VA with the names of participants for two additional SHAD tests that had not yet been declassified.

This brought the total number of names of SHAD participants DoD provided VA to approximately 2,900 veterans who participated in the twelve declassified and two classified tests. In addition to the statistical data VA provided the committee regarding compensation claims previously filed by Project SHAD participants, VA reported that eleven of the 622 veterans who had been mailed outreach letters in May 2002, subsequently enrolled for VA health care for the first time. VA also reported that as of August 1, 2002, there were compensation claims pending decisions for 28 veterans alleging disabilities due to exposure to agents and substances while participating in Project SHAD.

Activities Subsequent to the Report of August 5, 2002
Working with the Internal Revenue Service, VA was able to obtain addresses of some participants in the remaining group of nine declassified tests. We had not obtained these participants' social security numbers at the time of the July 10 hearing. On August 15, 2002, VA mailed outreach letters to 777 veterans who participated in the nine subsequent declassified tests and to participants in the initial three tests who DoD identified being involved in multiple tests. Before finalizing the language in that outreach letter, VA received helpful input from the Vietnam Veterans of America, which we incorporated in the final letter.

Relevant medical and other background information about Project SHAD has been provided to VA medical staff through regular publication of information letters from VA's Under Secretary for Health. The information letters provide VA health care personnel with background information on Project SHAD, along with information about the potential short- and long-term health effects of the specific chemical and biological agents that DoD tells us were used in these tests. On August 26, 2002, Under Secretary for Health's Information Letter (IL 10-2002-016), "Possible Occupational Health Exposures of Veterans Involved in Project SHAD Tests" the third information letter in this series was issued, based on additional information obtained from DoD. This information has been made available on our SHAD web site at www.va.gov/SHAD, which contains the information letter and other

relevant information.

In addition to information letters, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has engaged in an extensive outreach effort to ensure that VA medical centers know about SHAD veterans and their potential hazardous exposures during Project 112. VA hospital directors have been regularly apprised of Project SHAD through hotline calls, as have VA health care personnel involved in deployment health problems. A directive has been issued by VHA that makes facility directors responsible for ensuring that enrolled SHAD veterans requesting care are clinically evaluated by knowledgeable health care providers. Additionally, as suggested by the Vietnam Veterans of America, the VA and DoD web sites, which provide information on Project 112, have been linked to provide ready access to health data among VA and DoD health care personnel and veterans.

To date, relatively few Project 112 veterans have sought care from VA in response to the recently released information. Among 1,399 Project 112 veterans who have received a notification letter since May 2002, inviting them to receive a clinical evaluation from VA if they have any health concerns, 31 veterans have newly enrolled for VA health care. VA will continue to provide up-to-date information on Project 112 to its health care providers in order to ensure that these veterans receive optimal health care.

VA is engaged in a comprehensive process to augment its medical

record system and to connect computerized health databases into a coherent network. Because of progress in integrating VA's computerized health databases, VHA can now track health care utilization by special groups of veterans such as the veterans who participated in Project SHAD. For evaluating the health of Project SHAD veterans who come to VA for health care, the use of these standard health care databases provide several important advantages over special clinical programs, which have been used in the past to evaluate particular cohorts of veterans, such as Vietnam and Gulf War veterans. The use of VA's health databases allows VA to evaluate the health utilization of veterans every time they obtain care in the VA, not just on the one occasion that they elect to have a registry examination. This will provide a much broader and longer-term assessment of the health status of these veterans because many veterans return frequently for VA health care, and because veterans are often seen in different clinics or even different parts of the country for specialized health care.

In September 2002, DoD provided VA with the names and service numbers of about 2,100 additional veterans who were participants in tests just recently declassified. VA is currently matching this data against its Beneficiary Identification and Records Locator Subsystem (BIRLS) and Compensation & Pension Master Record file to identify and extract data for these individuals, to include social security numbers where available. To date, DoD has provided VA with the names of about 5,000 individual participants of Project 112.

On September 30, 2002, VA entered into a three million dollar contract with the Medical Follow-up Agency of the National Academy of Sciences to conduct, over the next three years, a formal epidemiological study of mortality and morbidity among SHAD participants in comparison with veterans who did not participate in Project SHAD. In contrast to a special clinical program, which cannot provide scientific data about the health risks of this group, this independent, epidemiological study will give us the clearest possible picture of the health status of SHAD veterans and tell us whether their health was harmed by participation in SHAD tests. The study will compare the current health of veterans who participated in the SHAD tests more than 30 years ago with the health of veterans from the same era who served on ships not involved with the testing. The study will also compare the mortality rates of the two groups.

We are looking to multiple sources to identify Project 112 veterans and determine their social security numbers, as recommended by veterans service organizations. For example, on September 26, 2002, the names and service numbers for Project 112 veterans whom we had not been able to identify were matched against the National Cemetery Administration's database. The match produced social security numbers for 58 veterans and the date of death for 24. VA is also working with the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis to review personnel and medical files for veterans for whom we have been unsuccessful in

finding social security numbers. The social security numbers will be used to obtain addresses and initiate outreach to more Project 112 veterans.

Through the week ending September 27, 2002, VA has received 417 calls on its toll-free SHAD Helpline. As of September 30, 2002, VA had compensation claims pending decisions for 53 veterans alleging disabilities due to exposure to agents and substances while participating in Project 112. Just as the number of compensation claims has increased, so has the number of veterans recently enrolled for VA health care. As noted earlier in my testimony, since May 1, 2002, thirty-one veterans who received outreach letters alerting them of possible adverse exposures, have newly enrolled for VA health care for the first time. High quality medical care can be provided right now for each SHAD veteran who seeks a clinical evaluation in the VA.

DoD Working with VA

As I previously stated, DoD has committed to provide VA with all medically relevant data and complete rosters of participants involved in tests conducted by the Desert Test Center. They've stepped up efforts to complete the declassification process as quickly as possible and have committed to sharing all information with VA by June 2003. In fact, VA just recently received Fact Sheets for 27 additional tests.

DoD and VA personnel meet regularly to discuss the status of the declassification process. The working relationship between the two Departments continues to improve. In addition to

stepping up the declassification process, DoD has helped VA by designing, building, and updating a computerized roster of Project 112 veterans for VA's use. DoD has also agreed to allow VA to include its toll-free phone number in future outreach letters so that veterans who need help verifying participation in Project 112 or who have questions about the tests themselves, can communicate directly with DoD representatives.

We appreciate DoD's efforts. We understand that it's problematic to locate and declassify records that are 30 - 40 years old. We also understand that, according to DoD's testimony here today, these records cannot be casually declassified because many of the same agents still remain a threat to our military men and women.

While we cannot change what happened in the past, in the future, VA can better serve the nation's veterans if complete medical evidence exists whenever servicemembers are deployed to areas that may place their health at risk. VA, therefore, supports DoD's efforts to collect greater health and exposure data during hazardous deployments.

In conclusion, VA welcomes DoD's accelerated schedule for providing relevant information about Project 112 and the veterans who were involved in these tests to us. VA looks forward to receiving information on the remaining tests as quickly as possible so that we can assist veterans in addressing their health care needs and properly adjudicating their benefit claims.

This concludes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.