



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

VA Workers Demonstrate Emergency Preparedness



Despite the ice storm that created heavy ice build-up on trees, walkways, and roads, medical center employees voluntarily worked around the clock in shifts to ensure patient care.

A devastating ice storm in January tested the effectiveness of the emergency preparedness plan of the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center in Muskogee, Oklahoma. When the National Weather Service issued the severe warning for all of Oklahoma, medical center workers quickly activated the Incident Command and Emergency Operations Center. They immediately prepared staffing plans for wards and snow crews and ran checklists for supplies. The storm, which hit the afternoon of January 13, created heavy ice build-up on trees, walkways, and roads, leaving many employees unable to get home. An inpatient rehabilitation unit that had not yet opened was used to house employees and their immediate families.

VA's Nutrition and Food Services provided meals to employees over the weekend, and Canteen Service extended operating hours throughout the week.

When the City of Muskogee needed a shelter, the medical center director authorized the use of the auditorium for veterans and their immediate families without electricity, and for non-veterans with special medical needs. Medical center employees voluntarily worked around the clock in shifts during the entire time the shelter was open. The facility, which was never without either generator or commercial power, had sufficient nursing staff for the 55 to 65 inpatients each day, and both the medical center and its Tulsa Outpatient Clinic saw about 350 patients each day. By January 17, with electricity restored to the majority of the area, most workers were able to return to work, and a few days later, the last veteran left the shelter.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA's Use of FY 2007 Results

Supporting Measure				
PERCENT OF VA LEADERSHIP WHO SELF-CERTIFY THEIR TEAMS "READY TO DEPLOY" TO THEIR COOP SITE				
Performance Trends			Impact on the Veteran	
<p>Ninety percent of VA leadership has certified that their respective teams are ready to deploy to their Continuity of Operations Plan (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. In case of a national disaster, veterans can be assured of continuity of operations.</p>				
<p>How VA Uses the Results Data</p> <p>VA uses the data to determine the need for additional exercises and leadership training. VA requires its leaders to be cognizant of COOP requirements and to gain hands-on experience.</p>				
	2005	2006	2007	ST
■ Results	85%	85%	90%	N/A
■ Targets	N/A	100%	100%	100%

ST = Strategic Target

Additional Performance Information Related to Strategic Objective 4.1

OIG Major Management Challenges

VA's Office of Inspector General did not identify any major management challenges related to this objective.

GAO High-Risk Areas

- Establishing Appropriate and Effective Information-Sharing Mechanisms to Improve Homeland Security: A Governmentwide High-Risk Area (see page 299 for more details)

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

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

Other Important Results

VA developed three valuable new assets -- as a result of lessons learned during Hurricane Katrina -- for deployment during a catastrophe:

- Deployable Medical Unit (DMU)
- Deployable Pharmacy Unit (DPU)
- Response Support Unit (RSU)

The DMU is a self-contained medical unit that can be on site of an emergency within 24-48 hours. It has examination rooms and emergency power generation capability and is able to withstand Category 3 hurricane-force winds.

The DPU permits VA pharmacists to fill commonly prescribed medications during an emergency. The unit is able to obtain patient prescription data via satellite communications with the VA prescription database.

The RSU serves as a platform to assist a VISN to manage an emergency or to support VA personnel deployed as part of a federal response under the Stafford Act.



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 192.



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

VA, MIT, and Brown University Collaborate to Create New Prosthetic Ankle



This ankle foot prosthetic is the first in a new family of artificial limbs that will replicate natural motion by propelling people forward using tendon like springs powered by an electric motor.

Veterans with lower-leg amputations can look forward to having a prosthetic ankle-foot that matches their natural ease of motion, thanks to research funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and conducted by researchers from VA and two of the Nation's top universities.

"Veterans are entitled to the best this Nation has to offer and, at VA, we're constantly redefining the meaning of *best*," said former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson. "This new ankle-foot prosthetic is another example of VA's medical innovations for veterans that will benefit all Americans."

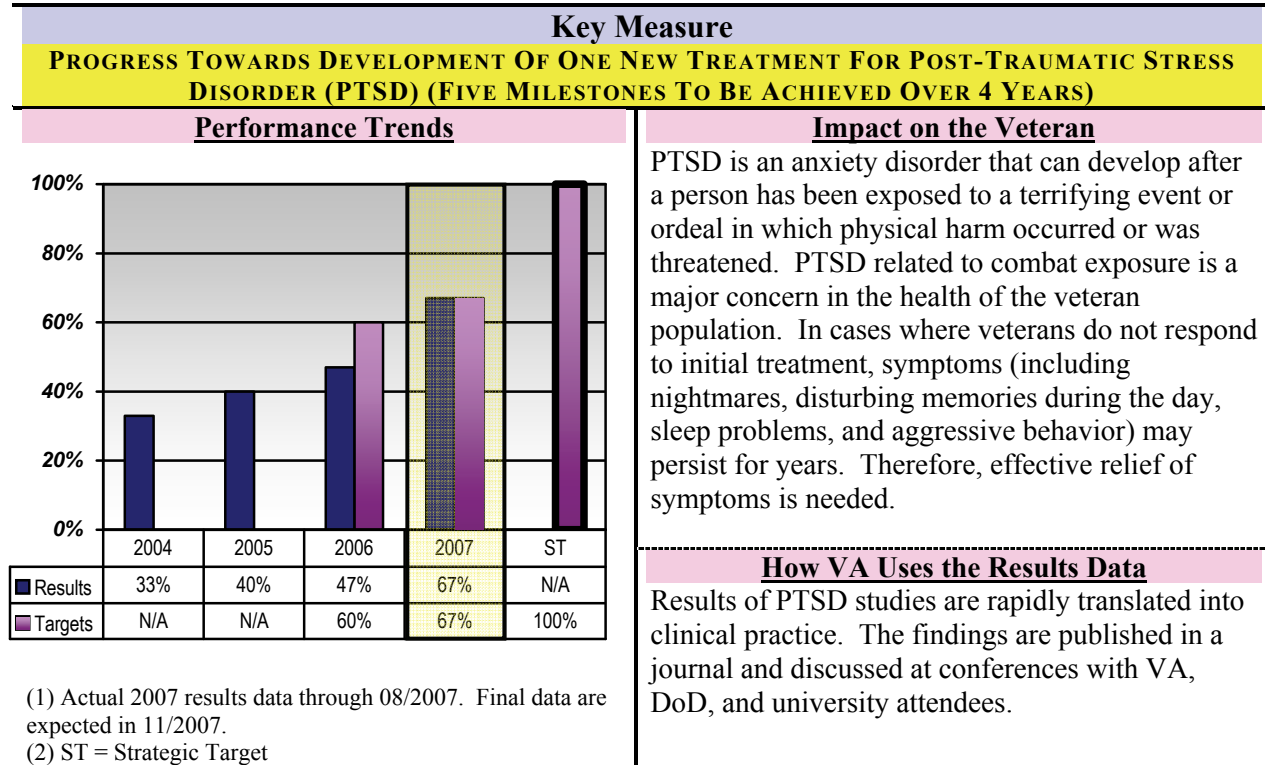
Researchers say the new ankle-foot prosthetic is the first in a new family of artificial limbs. It will replicate natural motion by propelling people forward using tendon-like springs powered by an electric motor.

Through VA-funded research, the Center for Restorative and Regenerative Medicine, a partnership of the Providence VA Medical Center in Rhode Island, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and

Brown University, developed the new prosthesis. The Center's goal is to restore natural function to amputees.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and Use of FY 2007 Results



PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can develop after a person has been exposed to a terrifying event or ordeal in which physical harm occurred or was threatened. PTSD related to combat exposure is a major concern in the health of the veteran population. In cases where veterans do not respond to initial treatment, symptoms (including nightmares, disturbing memories during the day, sleep problems, and aggressive behavior) may persist for years. Therefore, effective relief of symptoms is needed.

How VA Uses the Results Data

Results of PTSD studies are rapidly translated into clinical practice. The findings are published in a journal and discussed at conferences with VA, DoD, and university attendees.

Additional Performance Information Related to Strategic Objective 4.2

OIG Major Management Challenges

- Medical Research (see page 263 for more details)

GAO High-Risk Areas

The Government Accountability Office did not identify any high-risk areas related to this objective.

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 CY 2005, which resulted in a rating of “Moderately Effective.” Please see OMB PART reviews on page 84 for more information.

Program Evaluations

The National Research Advisory Council (NRAC), a federal advisory committee, completed an independent evaluation in September 2007. The NRAC was instructed to consider the appropriateness of the research to the VA healthcare mission; the balance of this research in terms of the burden of disease; and the special responsibilities of VA in the areas of mental health, central nervous system injury, and deployment health. As a result of the review, the NRAC gave the VA Research program an evaluation of “fully successful.”

New Policies, Procedures, or Process Improvements

VA produced and published Web site checklists for human research protections and research privacy; these are available for use by the VA research community in meeting requirements for regulatory and policy compliance.



VA also developed a checklist for research information security to help ensure compliance with VA regulations and policies.

VA implemented new procedures to boost data security. They include a new annual training requirement and annual completion of a data security checklist for each research project by the principal investigator.

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 218.



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

Graduate Medical Education (GME) Enhancement Initiative *Expanding the number of VA Physician Resident Positions to Meet the Needs of VA and the Nation*



The GME Initiative is projected to add approximately 2,000 new physician resident positions over a 5-year period.

Based upon the recommendations of a Federally-chartered advisory committee, VA began an expansion of physician resident positions from 8.5 percent of the U.S. total in 2005-2006 to a target of 10-11 percent by 2011. The overall goals of this ambitious initiative include:

- Expand physician resident positions in specialties of greatest need to veterans.
- Address uneven geographic distribution of residents and improve veterans' access to care.
- Foster innovative models of resident education.
- Propel VA to a greater leadership role in national GME.
- Begin to address physician workforce shortages for VA and the Nation.

This far-reaching plan will add approximately 2,000 positions over a 5-year period. Positions will be awarded competitively. The application

process takes into account the **quality** of existing educational programs and infrastructure, the **needs of new sites of VA care** (e.g., community-based outpatient clinics and new or rapidly-growing facilities in under-served areas), the ability of a site to offer **innovative and transformational educational experiences** to residents, and the **capacity to provide clinical training** to residents (as assessed by a consideration of workload and resources available to a facility).

The first phase of expansion began in July 2007, with yearly increases expected thereafter. Approximately 350 additional positions will be awarded in the second application cycle, which featured an increased emphasis on the development of innovative programs.

Further information about the GME Enhancement Initiative can be obtained from VA's Office of Academic Affiliations Web site at www.va.gov/oa.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and Use of FY 2007 Results

Supporting Measure
MEDICAL RESIDENTS' AND OTHER TRAINEES' SCORES ON A VHA SURVEY ASSESSING THEIR CLINICAL TRAINING EXPERIENCE

		<u>Performance Trends</u>					<u>Impact on the Veteran</u>
		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	<p>In general, for all types of businesses, there is considerable evidence that employee satisfaction positively impacts customer satisfaction.</p> <p>The VA clinical training survey measures the satisfaction of VA clinical trainees who come in contact with veteran patients -- VA's customers. VA is striving to ensure that clinical trainees are satisfied with their VA training as it impacts how veterans view their care.</p>
■ Results		83	84	84	85	86	
■ Targets		82	82	85	85	86	
						ST	89

ST = Strategic Target

How VA Uses the Results Data

The survey results are used by VA medical facilities, Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), and senior leadership to assess the clinical training program.

At the facility level, the survey data are available in enough detail 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.

Additional Performance Information Related to Strategic Objective 4.3

OIG Major Management Challenges and GAO High-Risk Areas

VA's Office of Inspector General did not identify any major management challenges related to this objective. The Government Accountability Office did not identify any high-risk areas related to this objective.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

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



New Policies, Procedures, or Process Improvements

To address a shortage of nurses across the Nation and ensure that veterans continue to receive personalized, world-class care in VA facilities, VA created a new multi-campus Nursing Academy.

A 5-year pilot program will establish partnerships with 12 nursing schools across the country during the next 3 years, beginning with 4 for the 2007-2008 academic year. The VA nursing academy is a virtual organization with central administration in Washington and teaching at competitively selected nursing schools across the country who partner with VA.

Despite the nationwide shortage of nurses, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing has reported that more than 42,000 qualified applicants were turned away from nursing schools in 2006 because of insufficient numbers of faculty, clinical sites, classroom space, and clinical mentors.

“The new partnerships will reinvigorate VA’s nursing academic affiliations and ensure continued quality in clinical education,” said Dr. Michael J. Kussman, VA’s Under Secretary for Health.

Further information about the pilot program can be obtained from VA’s Office of Academic Affiliations Web site at www.va.gov/oaa.

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 192.



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

Accelerating Veteran Entrepreneurial Programs



Deputy Secretary Mansfield (left) and OSDBU Director Scott Denniston (right) present Wayne Gatewood, President and CEO of Quality Support, Inc. (center), with the VetBiz Volunteer of the Year Award.

VA continues to be a leader in contracting with veteran entrepreneurs, having exceeded the statutory Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business Goal in FY 2006. Accomplishments through August 31, 2007 show VA on target to exceed this goal in FY 2007. A critical component of VA's success is outreach to the veteran business community and working with other federal partners.

In June 2007, VA and the U.S. Army Small Business Office, along with other federal partners, co-hosted the 3rd National Veterans Business Conference. This event set a record for attendance with over 1,300 participants. The conference provided participants with multiple forums to come together to discuss and tackle issues affecting the veteran business community.

Also in June 2007, VA, along with the Veterans Entrepreneurship Task Force, conducted the First Veterans' Business Program Accountability Conference to measure federal agency progress in implementing Executive Order 13360, *Providing Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran Businesses to Increase Their Federal Contracting and Subcontracting*. Key officials from six large federal agencies

addressed business owners and advocates about their progress and future plans for improving opportunities for service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. During the conference the Chief of Staff for the U.S. Small Business Administration announced details of the agency's new Patriot Express Loan Program, an initiative for veterans and members of the military community wanting to establish a new business or expand an existing business. Representatives from four major federal contractors addressed corporate buying practices and offered veteran entrepreneurs marketing advice. Work group sessions focused on federal prime contracting procedures, subcontracting barriers, the status of Executive Order 13360 implementation plans, and the need to educate federal officials and business owners.

VA held its 6th annual Champion of Veterans Enterprise Awards Program ceremony to honor individuals and organizations that put veterans and service-disabled veterans first. The most prestigious honor is the Enterprising Veteran Award, which recognizes veterans whose quality performance provides advocates with specific success stories, a critical tool in promoting veteran entrepreneurial programs nationwide. This year's awards were presented by VA Deputy Secretary Gordon H. Mansfield.

VA also implemented the "Veterans First Contracting Program" based on the extraordinary authorities contained in Sections 502 and 503 of Public Law 109-461, the Veterans Benefits, Healthcare and Information Technology Act of 2006. This program will enhance contracting opportunities for service-disabled veteran-owned and veteran-owned small businesses in VA acquisitions.

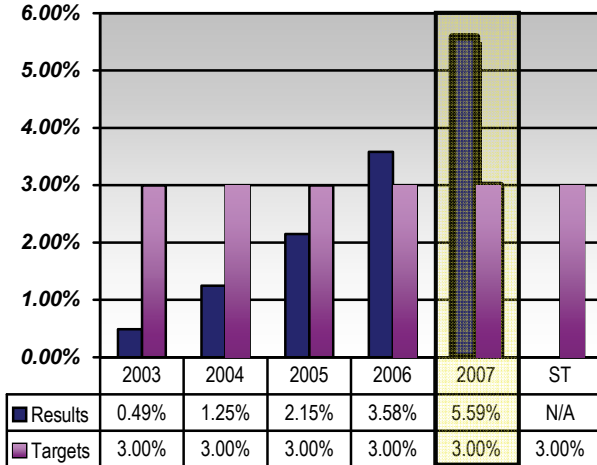


Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA’s Use of FY 2007 Results

Supporting Measure

ATTAINMENT OF STATUTORY MINIMUM GOALS FOR SERVICE-DISABLED VETERAN-OWNED SMALL BUSINESSES EXPRESSED AS A PERCENT OF TOTAL PROCUREMENT DOLLARS

Performance Trends



(1) Actual 2007 results data through 08/2007. Final data are expected in 06/2008.
 (2) ST = Strategic Target

Impact on the Veteran

VA continues to be a leader in contracting with veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses, having exceeded the statutory goal in FY 2006 for contracting with service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. Accomplishments through August 31, 2007 show VA on target to exceed this goal in FY 2007. 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.

How VA Uses the Results Data

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, Healthcare and Information Technology Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-461); and Executive Order 13360, *Providing Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran Businesses to Increase Their Federal Contracting and Subcontracting*, issued in October 2004.

The results also help VA program management identify areas for improvement and assist in targeting training and vendor outreach.

Additional Performance Information Related to Strategic Objective 4.4

OIG Major Management Challenges and GAO High-Risk Areas

VA’s Office of Inspector General did not identify any major management challenges related to this objective. The Government

Accountability Office did not identify any high-risk areas related to this objective.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

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

Program Evaluations

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



New Policies, Procedures, or Process Improvements

VA implemented Sections 502 and 503 of Public Law (P.L.) 109-461, the Veterans Benefits, Healthcare and Information Technology Act of 2006, effective June 20, 2007. This program is known in VA as the “Veterans First Contracting Program.” The law establishes a small business program hierarchy within VA that places service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses (SDVOSBs) and veteran-owned small businesses (VOSBs), first and second respectively, in VA open market acquisitions. P.L. 109-461 provides VA with unprecedented authorities in contracting with veteran businesses. In addition to authority to set aside acquisitions for SDVOSBs, the law also provides VA acquisition professionals with authority to set aside requirements for VOSBs, and under certain circumstances make sole-source contract awards to SDVOSBs and VOSBs up to \$5 million.

The Department participates extensively in procurement conferences, training sessions and one-on-one counseling sessions to train small businesses on VA’s acquisition processes, operations, and opportunities. VA continues to make personnel aware of the Department’s responsibilities to support small business programs through VA’s acquisition program.

Other Important Results

VA’s Center for Veterans Enterprise (CVE) maintains the VetBiz.Gov (www.vetbiz.gov) Web portal for veterans in business, which is a primary resource for exchanging information with veteran business owners, buyers, large prime contractors, and other stakeholders.

CVE also provides assistance to veteran entrepreneurs seeking to expand an existing business or to start a new business. Services available through the CVE include the Vendor Information Pages (VIP) database and verification of veteran business eligibility, business coaching, video marketing, bid

matching, market research reports, and topical news and information. CVE connects veterans with community resources who will help them with their business development needs. In September 2006, the publication *Veterans Business Journal* conducted its first readers' survey. CVE was voted the organization that provides the best support to veterans in business.

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 192.



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

NCA Inaugurates a New Leadership Institute

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) established a new Leadership Institute in 2007. This leadership development program is available to GS 9-12 employees, Wage Grade System Supervisors, and Wage Grade System Team Leaders identified as high potential employees with the motivation to succeed in a leadership position within NCA. Seventeen participants from across NCA, competitively selected for the inaugural class, are demonstrating that they have the desire to learn, work hard, and take on leadership roles; are high performers in their current jobs; and have demonstrated evidence of eight core competencies: Personal Mastery, Interpersonal Effectiveness, Technical Skills, Customer Service, Creative Thinking, Flexibility/Adaptability, Systems Thinking, and Organizational Stewardship.



NCA's Training Center in St. Louis, Missouri, provides traditional and computer training facilities.

The NCA Leadership Institute is the most recent development in NCA's commitment to providing professional training and career development opportunities. NCA's training program is a key component to ensuring the consistent application of NCA's uniform standards for cemetery operations throughout VA's 125 national cemeteries. These standards serve as the basis for NCA's commitment to maintain national cemeteries as national shrines.



Significant Trends, Impacts, and VA's Use of FY 2007 Results

Key Measure																				
PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO RATE NATIONAL CEMETERY APPEARANCE AS EXCELLENT																				
Performance Trends				Impact on the Veteran																
<p>National cemeteries carry expectations of appearance that set them apart from private cemeteries. The 2007 score reflects VA's strong commitment to maintaining 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 – VA's cemeteries reflect this appreciation and respect.</p>																				
<p>How VA Uses the Results Data</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 the Central Office, Memorial Service Network (MSN), and National Cemetery levels who use the data to improve the appearance of national cemeteries.</p>																				
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>■ Results</td> <td>97%</td> <td>98%</td> <td>98%</td> <td>97%</td> <td>97%</td> <td>N/A</td> </tr> <tr> <td>■ Targets</td> <td>98%</td> <td>98%</td> <td>98%</td> <td>99%</td> <td>99%</td> <td>100%</td> </tr> </table>							■ Results	97%	98%	98%	97%	97%	N/A	■ Targets	98%	98%	98%	99%	99%	100%
■ Results	97%	98%	98%	97%	97%	N/A														
■ Targets	98%	98%	98%	99%	99%	100%														

ST = Strategic Target

Additional Performance Information Related to Strategic Objective 4.5

OIG Major Management Challenges and GAO High-Risk Areas

VA's Office of Inspector General did not identify any major management challenges related to this objective. The Government Accountability Office did not identify any high-risk areas related to this objective.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) Evaluation

In relation to this strategic objective, the Administration conducted a PART evaluation of VA's Burial program during CY 2002, which resulted in a rating of "Moderately Effective."

Please see OMB PART reviews on page 84 for more information.

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.



NCA is using the information in this report to address repair and maintenance needs at national cemeteries. Through 2007 NCA has addressed approximately 30 percent of the total repairs identified in this report.

New Policies, Procedures, or Process Improvements

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 six 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.

In 2007 NCA established its Leadership Institute for high potential GS 9-12 employees, Wage Grade System Supervisors, and Wage Grade System Team Leaders. For more information, please see page 175.

NCA is continuing its partnership 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 an 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 2007 NCA implemented a Facility Condition Assessment program as part of its continuing commitment to maintain the appearance of national cemeteries as national shrines. Each national cemetery regularly assesses whether the condition of each building and structure at the cemetery is considered acceptable according to system-wide standard definitions within VA and within federal guidelines identified by the Federal Real Property Council. This information is used both to provide additional focus to NCA management on the condition of cemetery facilities and for the allocation of funds for construction projects. Cemetery facilities are among the most highly visible components of national cemeteries. Maintaining the safety and appearance of cemetery facilities is an important component of maintaining national cemeteries as national shrines.

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 2007, 98 percent of survey respondents (family members and funeral directors who recently received services from a national cemetery) indicated they would recommend the national cemetery to veteran families in their time of need.

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 2007 VA collected data that showed that 69 percent of headstones and/or markers in national cemeteries are at the proper height and alignment; 75 percent of headstones, markers, and niche covers are clean and free of debris or objectionable accumulations; and 83 percent of gravesites in national cemeteries had grades that were level and blended with adjacent grade



levels. In 2007 National Shrine Commitment projects were initiated at 17 national cemeteries. These projects will raise, realign, and clean more than 147,000 headstones and markers and renovate gravesites in more than 60 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 2007 more than 97 percent of survey respondents (family members and funeral directors combined) agreed that the overall appearance of national cemeteries was excellent. This result demonstrates 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 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 MSN that illustrates the diversity of our system in terms of age, size, workload, and climate. To date NCA has completed 35 site visits assessing 59 national cemeteries. Ten visits assessing 15 national cemeteries were conducted in 2007.

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 The Veterans Health Administration, 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 218.