

**Statement of Judith Caden
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Before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunities
United States House of Representatives**

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Chairman Boozman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in delivering effective vocational rehabilitation and employment services to eligible veterans with service connected disabilities.

My statement today is divided into three parts. I will begin by discussing the progress we have made on implementing the VR&E Task Force recommendations. Then, as you have requested, I will discuss how we are partnering with the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) to close any gaps in the delivery of employment services and ensure that all veterans with disabilities who want to work are provided the opportunity to do so. I will close my statement with a summary of the state of the VR&E Program and a look to the program's near future.

Update on Task Force Recommendations

Mr. Chairman, on April 1, 2004, Dorcas Hardy, Chairman of the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Task Force, testified before this Committee on the findings and recommendations published in the Task Force's 2004 report, "The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program for the 21st Century Veteran." In response to the more than 100 recommendations submitted by the Task Force, VR&E Service developed a comprehensive implementation plan. To date, 51 recommendations have been implemented. An additional 13 recommendations will be implemented in the next 6 months, and within 12 months, 15 more will be completed. Beyond that point, we plan to implement 18 other recommendations.

Task Force recommendations fall into four major areas of change: Program, Organizational Structure, Work Processes, and Integrating Capacities. I will now describe in more detail, our efforts in each of these areas.

Program Changes

The single most important recommendation, and the cornerstone of the Task Force's blueprint for redesigning the VR&E Program, is that of the 5-Track

Employment Model. This improved approach to service delivery refocuses the VR&E program on the main goal of employment. It includes five specialized program and service-delivery options for disabled veterans based on informed choice:

- Reemployment of veterans with their previous employers
- Access to rapid employment services with new employers
- Self-employment for veterans
- Long-term (traditional) vocational rehabilitation services, including education
- Independent Living Services with the possibility of employment when appropriate

To prepare for national implementation of the 5-Track Employment Model, VR&E has established Job Resource Labs at four VA Regional Offices where pilot tests of this new employment-focused process are being conducted. All four pilot sites, at Montgomery, St. Louis, Detroit, and Seattle, were operational by February 2005. To date, 68 VR&E field staff from the four pilot sites have been equipped and trained to deliver services under the new model. A new 30-minute orientation video has been developed and distributed to the pilot sites to provide a standardized orientation for program participants and ensure that veterans receive clear, concise, and accurate information about the program, including an overview of the 5-Track Employment Process. Specialized training for the Employment Coordinators at the pilot sites was completed in March 2005. Also, a contract was awarded to Symplicity on March 30, 2005, for a commercial, off-the-shelf, web-based solution to assist in the delivery of effective employment services for use within the Job Resource Labs. Symplicity's Career Services Manager (CSM) provides veterans with on-line training in the following skills: job seeking and interviewing; resume preparation; and researching potential employers and career fields. Additionally, CSM offers the veteran up-to-the-minute job postings, which are electronically forwarded to the veteran's inbox and are accessible from any computer via the Internet.

After collection and analysis of data from the pilot sites, national deployment of the 5-Track Employment Model will begin in FY 2006. Preliminary data from the pilot sites indicate the following:

- 626 veterans have participated in the new standardized VR&E 5-Track system since the first pilot station was deployed in December 2004.
- Of those veterans, 91% indicated the new resources assisted them in making informed decisions and employment plans.

Organizational Structure

Recommended organizational changes focused on VR&E workforce composition and staffing. The Task Force recommended redesigning VR&E's Central Office staff to increase accountability.

We have established clear lines of responsibility and authority for administration of the program and delivery of services. Central Office positions have been designed to focus on independent living services, training and outreach activities, contract management, policy development, and data collection and analysis. The VR&E Quality Assurance Team has been

consolidated and relocated to Nashville, in close proximity to the Compensation and Pension Program's Quality Assurance operations. Performance standards have been put in place for VR&E Officers, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Counseling Psychologists, and Regional Office Directors.

Work Process

Work Process recommendations include the continued use of trained professional contract counselors, improved management of contract services, and improved administration of the Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP).

VR&E has put in place a contract management training program for field staff that requires annual skills updates and certification. We also worked with our counterparts in VA's Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to develop and issue policies on priority medical care and services to veterans participating in the VR&E program.

In January 2005, VR&E distributed to all field stations a quick-reference guide highlighting the VR&E Program. This guide or "quick book" enables field staff to present standardized information about the VR&E program to separating servicemembers. The intended target audience for the book is active-duty servicemembers who have service-connected disabilities or who suspect they have service-connected illnesses or injuries that may qualify for a service-connected disability rating. To further improve DTAP briefings, VR&E developed a standardized PowerPoint presentation with an accompanying briefing script. These newly developed materials, along with our new orientation video, greatly improve the quality and consistency of our outreach briefings for potential program participants.

Integrating Capacities

Among its Integrating Capacities recommendations, the Task Force proposed that VR&E design and implement a centralized training program and seek partnerships to facilitate efficient and effective delivery of services.

VR&E established a training team at Central Office in April 2004. Since then, VR&E has conducted training for Field Managers on policy, procedures, and data analysis. Week-long classes on Independent Living and Self-Employment were conducted during September 2004 at the VBA Training Academy in Baltimore. Contracting Officer and Contracting Officer Technical Representative (COTR) training was provided for VR&E Officers and their designees, and contracting warrants were issued to those who successfully completed the coursework. Satellite broadcasts have been conducted on current issues, such as traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, PTSD, special hiring authorities for Federal employment, the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA), and military sexual trauma. These broadcasts were available to all VR&E field staff and contractors. Week-long Standardized Workload Assistance Training (SWAT) was provided at two field stations to assist new VR&E managers. Addressing our succession planning

needs, we provided training to a new cadre of potential leaders through our Managerial Enhancement Program earlier this month.

In addition to our partnering efforts with the Department of Labor (DOL), which I will discuss in the next section, VR&E has actively sought service delivery assistance from a wide variety of organizations. We have completed memoranda of agreement (MOAs) with such entities as:

- Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services
- YMCA
- Helmets to Hardhats

We also have entered into an MOA with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the membership organization for State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies. This MOA describes the partnership between VR&E and the State VR program. In addition, we have entered into an MOA with Home Depot. Ten veterans with disabilities have been hired to date by the Home Depot.

We are also currently exploring partnering agreements with:

- Army Materiel Command
- Social Security Administration
- Department of Homeland Security

VR&E is also actively participating with other organizations to strengthen our coordination and outreach efforts with the goal of achieving a seamless transition for OIF and OEF veterans. In December 2004, VR&E conducted a briefing for 150 severely disabled servicemembers and their spouses at the Salute to America's Heroes Conference in Orlando, Florida. We are working within such service improvement workgroups as Seamless Transition Committee, National Guard/VA Joint Workgroup, Army Disabled Soldier Support System (DS3) Employment Workgroup, Department of Defense (DOD) Military Severely Injured Joint Operations Center, DOD/DOL Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Steering Committee, and the Marines for Life.

Partnership with Department of Labor

In our efforts to provide quality services to disabled veterans, VR&E has an ongoing partnership with the Department of Labor. "Under the Workforce Investment Act, VR&E has the opportunity to access One-Stop Career Centers nationwide and to broadly serve disabled veterans through that infrastructure." VR&E staff in 57 Regional offices and more than 100 outbased offices work closely with DOL's Disabled Outreach Program Specialists (DVOPs) and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs) to assist job-seeking veterans. There are currently 71 DOL DVOPs and LVERs co-located in 35 VA Regional Offices and 26 outbased locations. Additionally, there are four VR&E personnel co-located in DOL offices in Louisville, Kentucky and St. Petersburg, Florida. DVOPs and LVERs stationed or co-located with us in VR&E field facilities have the opportunity to access the same resources available to VR&E staff. This

access can help to better integrate DVOPs and LVERs into the initial vocational evaluation process and the delivery of employment services.

VR&E has also collaborated with DOL on training for VA Case Managers as well as DVOPs and LVERs. VR&E and DOL jointly produced live satellite broadcasts on USERRA and special hiring authorities for Federal employment. Originally broadcast in February 2004, the USERRA broadcast explained the law and the benefits available for veterans who desire to return to their previous employer to resume the jobs that they left, or a position they would have if they had never left when they went on active duty, or in some cases because of a disability be reemployed with the same employer in a comparable position. The special hiring authorities broadcast aired in July 2004 and included information on the expedited Federal hiring process for certain veterans with disabilities. These broadcasts provided important information for veterans seeking employment, and copies continue to be distributed to VR&E and DOL personnel across the country for use by both staff and employers.

VR&E and DOL continue to participate in joint training ventures. Last year, DOL representatives participated in the annual VR&E Officers' Management Training Conference. The Deputy Assistant Secretary for DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Services (VETS) addressed the VR&E field managers. More recently, DOL staff attended training alongside VR&E staff at the 5-Track pilot sites in Montgomery and Seattle. Joint training ventures such as this help to ensure seamless delivery of services to veterans by both VR&E and DOL.

Additionally, VR&E and DOL have developed a draft memorandum of understanding (MOU) in which they agree to use their partnership to benefit veterans and provide quality employment services. Veterans need employment assistance as they return to civilian life and the VR&E/DOL partnership supports that need. VR&E and DOL meet regularly to discuss progress on present collaborative efforts and future possibilities.

Study of Program Results

In FY 2003, VR&E Service entered into a contract for a longitudinal study of veterans who have been declared rehabilitated upon completing our program. This study will cover the years 1992 to 2002 and provide data in several key areas, such as how many veterans have sustained employment, their current salaries, work stability, educational history prior to disability, length of rehabilitation program, and other demographic information (branch of service, age, etc). The study results, which should be available by the end of FY 2005, are expected to provide VR&E empirical information that can be used to predict participants' potential for successfully completing a program of rehabilitation services.

Conclusion

VR&E's efforts have proven to be steps in the right direction. Through our quality assurance program, we have seen improvements in the quality and accuracy of work performed at field stations in the areas of entitlement determinations, evaluation planning and rehabilitation services, fiscal activity, and program outcomes.

We have seen other quantitative improvements as well that have a direct impact on the quality and timeliness of services to veterans. The average number of days that a veteran spends in "evaluation and planning" status decreased from more than 150 days at the end of February 2004 to less than 120 days in February 2005. In that same period, there was an increase in the number of veterans successfully leaving the program after completing either their employment or independent living goals. The figure was up from 9,636 at the end of February 2004 to 11,810 at the end of February 2005.

The initiatives we have planned for the coming years will continue to have a positive impact on services to veterans. We are planning joint information technology initiatives with the Education Service that will allow VR&E to utilize existing web-based applications for enrollment verification and certification. We are also developing a formal mentoring program for newly selected VR&E and Assistant VR&E Officers. In addition to the one-on-one mentoring relationship with an established VR&E field manager, the newly selected managers will have an opportunity to learn from VR&E Central Office staff.

Mr. Chairman this concludes my statement. At the Subcommittee's request, I have also submitted, for the record, detailed data relative to the program's operations and demographics on program participants. I will be happy to respond to any questions that you or other members of the Subcommittee might have.