

**Statement of
The Honorable Jonathan B. Perlin
Deputy Under Secretary for Health
Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the
Subcommittee on Health
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, on
VA's Responses to Information Provided by DoD
about Project SHAD Veterans**

October 9, 2002

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee today about the activities of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in response to the information that has been provided to us by the Department of Defense (DoD) about veterans involved in testing of biological and chemical weapons. I am here today to talk about the 5,000 veterans who have been identified as Project 112 participants. I also want to tell you about the wide range of outreach activities to veterans, educational programs for VA health care providers, and health care services that VA has implemented for those veterans who participated in tests conducted by the U.S. Army's Deseret Test Center, including Project SHAD.

Deseret Test Center Project 112 and Project SHAD

According to the Department of Defense, Project SHAD, which stands for Shipboard Hazard and Defense, was a portion Project 112, which was a chemical and biological warfare test program of the Deseret Test Center. DoD conducted these tests between 1962 and 1973. Project SHAD itself was a series of tests apparently designed to determine potential vulnerabilities of U.S. warships to attacks with chemical or biological warfare agents. Other Project 112 tests involved similar tests conducted on land rather than aboard ships.

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

about these tests were classified and that general access to that material was not possible. However, DoD offered to provide such information on a case-by-case basis.

In May 2000, VA's Under Secretary for Benefits received a congressional inquiry requesting assistance for veterans involved in Project SHAD tests. A VA/DoD workgroup was subsequently established, which met for the first time in October 2000. Since then, DoD and VA have held a series of meetings to ensure that VA would have full access to the information needed to provide appropriate health care and benefits for veterans involved in these tests. In July 2002, DoD committed to provide VA with all medically relevant data, as well as a complete roster of participants involved in tests under the aegis of Project 112 in the 1960's and 1970's.

As a result of their ongoing investigations, DoD has begun providing to VA the names and service numbers of veterans of Project 112, including Project SHAD participants. As a consequence, VA has initiated a significant outreach program to SHAD veterans and to the VA health-care providers they may see. This program has expanded as we have received more information from DoD about veterans involved in tests conducted by the Desert Test Center and about possible chemical and biological exposures.

VA Outreach Efforts to SHAD Veterans

As of today, VA has been notified of approximately 5,000 veteran participants in 12 declassified and two classified Project 112 tests. VA has implemented a process for identifying and locating these veterans. Identification is accomplished using a variety of sources, including VA's Beneficiary Identification and Records Locator Subsystem (BIRLS), its Compensation & Pension (C&P) Master Record file, the National Cemetery Administration's database, and the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. VA has been able to obtain addresses of some of these veterans by matching records with the Internal Revenue Service.

In May 2002, VA mailed outreach letters to 622 SHAD veterans, and on August 15, mailed outreach letters to an additional 777 veterans. The outreach letters provided them information about their participation in Project 112 and the possible health effects related to the chemical and biological warfare agents used in those tests.

Most recently, in September, DoD provided VA with the names and service numbers of about 2,100 more veterans who were participants in tests just declassified last week. VA is currently matching these data against its BIRLS and C&P Master Record files to identify these individuals.

Efforts to find current addresses for SHAD veterans is ongoing, but for those whom VA has not yet been able to locate, we have established a SHAD Help line (at 1-800-749-8387), an Internet web-site (at www.VA.GOV/SHAD), and an e-mail address (SHADHELPLINE@VBA.VA.GOV). Through the week ending September 27, 2002, VA has received 417 calls on its toll-free SHAD Help line.

Outreach to VA Health Care Providers

VA has provided relevant information about Project SHAD to VA health care providers through Information Letters from the Under Secretary for Health. The Information Letters provide VA health care personnel with background information on Project SHAD, as well as 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. They also include recommendations for reviewing the medical and military exposure history of Project 112 veterans. The first Information Letter was released on December 1, 2000. The most recent Information Letter – the third in this series – is dated August 26, 2002. It is entitled “Possible Occupational Health Exposures of Veterans Involved in Project SHAD Tests,” and is based on additional information obtained from DoD. This information has also been made available on VA’s SHAD web site at www.va.gov/SHAD,

In addition to Information Letters, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has engaged in an extensive outreach effort to ensure that every VA medical center knows about SHAD veterans and their potential hazardous exposures during Project 112. VA medical center directors and health care personnel have been regularly apprised of Project SHAD through a series of national telephone hotline conference calls beginning October 20, 2000. VA environmental health physicians also have been kept informed of Project SHAD developments through regular conference calls. Furthermore, a Directive issued last month requires that enrolled SHAD veterans be clinically evaluated by knowledgeable health care providers when those veterans present for care. VA will

continue to provide up-to-date information on Project 112 to its health care providers to ensure that these veterans receive optimal health care. Lastly, 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.

Health Care and Benefits Status of Identified SHAD Veterans

VA prepared a preliminary report on the health and disability status of the initial Project SHAD veterans identified for us by DoD in follow-up to the July 10, 2002 hearing. A report dated August 5, 2002, entitled "VA Health Care and Compensation for Project SHAD Veterans" was provided to the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs on August 9, 2002. It also included information on compensation claims previously filed by Project SHAD participants. The report stated 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. The full report is available on our website at www.va.gov/SHAD. As of September 30, 2002, VA had compensation claims pending decision for 53 veterans alleging disabilities due to exposure to agents and substances while participating in Project 112.

Of the 1,399 veterans who received notification letters in May and August, 31 have newly enrolled for VA health care. Available data indicate that Project SHAD veterans sought health care from VA during FY2002 at a rate comparable to the overall population of military veterans. About 30 percent of Project SHAD veterans known to us as of August have used VA services since 1970.

It has not been necessary to establish a special clinical program for Project 112 veterans. In this regard, VA's progressive development of its medical record system increasingly permits patient health information to be studied. VHA can now track health care utilization by special groups of veterans, such as the veterans who participated in Project SHAD. The use of these standard health care databases provides several important advantages in evaluating the health of Project SHAD veterans over specialized clinical programs, such as those used 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 care utilization of veterans every time they obtain care from VA, not just on the one occasion that they elect to have a registry examination. This practice 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.

Evaluating Health Status of All SHAD Veterans

On September 30, 2002, VA entered into a three million dollar contract with the Institute of Medicine, Medical Follow-up Agency of the National Academy of Sciences to fully evaluate the long-term health status of Project SHAD participants. They will conduct, over the next three years, a formal epidemiological study of Project SHAD participants in comparison with veterans who did not participate in Project SHAD. 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. This project may be expanded, if needed, as we learn the identity and military exposures of additional Project 112 participants. Although it will take time to conduct a valid epidemiological study, high quality medical care is being provided right now for each Project 112 veteran who chooses to come to the VA health care system.

VA welcomes DoD's accelerated schedule for providing relevant information about Project 112 and the veterans who were involved in these tests. We understand that it is problematic to locate and declassify records that are 30 to 40 years old, and we appreciate DoD's efforts in this regard. We also look forward to receiving this information as quickly as possible so that we can address the health concerns of these veterans and properly adjudicate their benefit claims.

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