

## STRATEGIC GOAL 4

*Contribute to the public health, emergency preparedness, socioeconomic well being and history of the Nation*

### *Secretary's Priorities:*

- **Focus medical research on military associated issues, particularly rehabilitation, spinal cord injury/paralysis, and biomedical concerns.**
- **Improve the Nation's response in the event of a National emergency or natural disaster by providing timely and effective contingency medical support.**
- **Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as national shrines dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.**

VA supports the public health of the Nation as a whole by conducting medical research, offering medical education and training, and serving as a resource in the event of a national emergency or natural disaster. VA supports the socioeconomic well being of the Nation through the provision of education, vocational rehabilitation, and home loan programs. VA preserves the memory and sense of patriotism of the Nation by maintaining our national cemeteries as national shrines, and hosting patriotic and commemorative events.

Two key performance measures enable us to gauge progress toward achieving this strategic goal:

- Institutional Review Board (IRB) compliance with National Committee for Quality Assurance accreditation and maintenance, as appropriate, of Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC) or Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) accreditation or certification
- Appearance of national cemeteries

### *Secretary's Priority*

**Focus medical research on military associated issues, particularly rehabilitation, spinal cord injury/paralysis, and biomedical concerns.**

### *Performance Goal*

- **Perform at 33 percent compliance of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) accreditation and maintenance, as appropriate, of Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC) or Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) accreditation or certification.**

Under the direction of the Office of Research and Development (ORD), VA's research portfolio of more than 2,400 projects has resulted in numerous discoveries that have improved the quality of health care for veterans and the American public. Virtually all VA research projects are directed toward health conditions relevant to the veteran population. While all VA research is relevant to veterans, the Designated Research Areas are of particular importance to VHA's veteran patient population. The Designated Research Areas include aging, chronic disease, mental illness, substance abuse, sensory loss, trauma-related illness, health systems, special populations, and military occupations/environmental exposures.

<b>Designated Research Area</b>	<b>Number of Projects Conducted in 2001</b>
Aging	470
Chronic Disease	1,538
Mental Illness	169
Substance Abuse	146
Sensory Loss	74
Trauma-Related Illness	199
Health Systems	218
Special Populations	104
Military Occupations and Environmental Exposures	137

Two new Centers of Excellence were established to develop new therapies for veterans with spinal cord injury. The Center at the Bronx VAMC will explore the use of pharmaceuticals to treat the secondary disabilities of spinal cord injury, and the Center at the Miami VAMC will study pain management, recovery of motor and sensory function, and other issues important to spinal cord injury patients.

The FY 2001 goal for NCQA accreditation of VA Human Subjects Protection Programs was not achieved. Two test site visits were made in the second quarter, four full-scale pilot site visits were completed in the third quarter, and one accreditation site visit was conducted in the fourth quarter. The final accreditation decision from that visit is pending.

The implementation of the NCQA accreditation process for VHA research programs was delayed due to a delay in a contract award. In addition, once standards were being developed with NCQA, the Institute of Medicine became aware of this initiative and asked if VHA would collaborate to develop national standards for accreditation that could be used for all research programs across the nation (not just within VHA). This additional component further delayed the first accreditation surveys.

All 80 Veterinary Medical Units within the VA Research Program are accredited by the AAALAC (100 percent of goal).

NRC licensure is required for all facilities that utilize radioactive materials and/or radiation-producing devices for research or clinical purposes. Oversight of these licensing activities is the responsibility of VA's National Health Physics Program (NHPP), a component of the Office of Patient Care Services. All VA facilities requiring licensure are appropriately licensed by the NRC (100 percent of goal).

Since all standards are now developed and accreditation surveys are underway, we expect to meet the performance goal in 2002.

### Means and Strategies

VA complies with federal regulations that have established a system in which responsibility for protecting human subjects is assigned to three separate groups. First, investigators are responsible for conducting research in accordance with regulations. Second, institutions maintain oversight mechanisms, including local committees known as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). IRBs are responsible for reviewing both research proposals and ongoing research. Third, agencies like VA are responsible for ensuring that their IRBs comply with applicable regulations and that they provide sufficient space and staff to accomplish their obligations.

The Department requires that each VA medical center (VAMC) engaged in research with human subjects establish its own IRB or secure the services of another IRB at an affiliated university. ORD establishes the policies that promote the ethical conduct of research and manages the NCQA contract. The Office of Research Compliance and Assurance (ORCA) manages matters relating to the effectiveness of research protections, promotion of

the ethical conduct of research, and the investigation of allegations of research impropriety.

Within VHA, Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) must demonstrate full compliance with appropriate regulations in the following ways:

- Quarterly report re-accreditation reviews. Each VISN director is required to submit a quarterly report listing appropriate accreditation agencies for the Network's research programs, including dates of such review and conclusions of those reviews.
- NCQA reviews. VISN directors are also required to report whether the Network is scheduled for an NCQA review and supply the dates of such review as well.
- Network director performance measures. Part of each Network director's annual performance evaluation is based on the completion or outcome of various research compliance measures. This includes information about attainment of all necessary full accreditation and clearly defined plans for any new accreditation.

### External Factors

Several external factors created difficulties that resulted in nonachievement of this performance measure. Three factors impeded full implementation of the Human Subjects Protection Program in FY 2001. An unsuccessful bidder protested the initial award of the accreditation contract to NCQA. The protest was resolved in VA's favor but delayed implementation of the contract for more than 3 months. Secondly, VA was asked by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to assist the Institute of Medicine (IOM) in developing recommendations for a single set of national standards for accreditation of human subjects' protections. This

required a modification of VA's contract with NCQA and also diverted some NCQA services (HHS) to complete this task. IOM ultimately endorsed the standards developed by NCQA for VA as the best available for developing national standards for both Federal and private sector institutions. Availability of a single set of national standards will greatly facilitate accreditation of VA human subjects protection programs in the sizeable minority of cases (approximately 40 percent) where the program is shared between a VA facility and an affiliated academic institution, thereby saving time and expense for VA. Finally, a very large number of comments and suggestions for enhancement of the standards were received in response to public posting of NCQA's draft standards in the second quarter. The VA committee overseeing the development of the standards (composed of representatives from the Office of Research and Development, Office of Research Compliance and Assurances (ORCA), and the Ethics Office) decided that a careful and detailed revision of the standards at the front end would save time in the long run by reducing the need for revisions during the course of the accreditation program. This revision was completed during the third quarter and early fourth quarter, permitting initiation of accreditation visits late in the fourth quarter.

### Crosscutting Activities

VA research is conducted subject to the regulations of many other Federal agencies as well as VA's own internal regulations. For example, human studies funded by pharmaceutical companies and conducted at VA facilities in support of a new drug or device application are subject to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and oversight; studies funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and conducted in VA facilities are subject to Department of Health and Human Services regulations and oversight.

VHA has issued a contract for external accreditation of human subjects programs to the NCQA, an independent, not-for-profit accrediting organization that is nationally renowned for its objective evaluations of health care organizations.

Within VHA, ORD is responsible for developing human studies policy in coordination with other federal research regulatory agencies. ORCA is responsible for enforcement activities with other federal research regulatory agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration and the HHS Office of Human Research Protections. As an example, the FDA has recognized the need to revise its reporting procedures for serious adverse events and has involved ORCA in the development of a clearer set of procedures and guidelines. Also, ORCA officials have met with their counterparts in these agencies and are working collaboratively to develop educational initiatives for investigators and research administrators in the field.

### Data Source and Validation

Each VISN director is required to submit a quarterly report listing appropriate accreditation agencies for the Network's research programs, including dates of such review and conclusions of those reviews. Also, network director performance evaluations include measures related to attaining appropriate accreditations. These accreditations are subject to verification of their validities with the accrediting agency.

### *Secretary's Priority*

- **Improve the Nation's response in the event of a National emergency or natural disaster by providing timely and effective contingency medical support.**

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, VA responded on two levels – in support of the Federal Response Plan (FRP) and at VA Central Office, in support of National Continuity of Government and Continuity of Operations requirements.

Immediately following the second aircraft crash into the World Trade Center, VA's Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) was activated. Alternate sites, serving as command centers, were operational and key personnel were deployed within a few hours.

VA Central Office ensured continuity of operations nationwide, while Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), headquartered in the Bronx and Baltimore, activated command centers. Personnel from VISN 4, in Pennsylvania, supported the response following the downed aircraft in that state. Under the FRP, VA deployed critical care burn nurses to Cornell Medical Center Burn Unit and the Washington Hospital Center Burn Unit.

In New York, VA deployed staff and shared inventory with other emergency health care facilities. VA facilities in New York provided much needed supplies to emergency workers and the National Guard to help them carry out their jobs in the immediate aftermath. VA also provided support to make certain that emergency pharmaceuticals and medical supplies were delivered to New York City in support of the rescue operations. VA continues to provide medical support to the approximately 3,000 members of the National Guard still providing security to the

city and its infrastructure. Since the tragedy, VA outreach teams have staffed family and victim assistance centers around the city and in New Jersey. The Network mental health team is prepared to support the continued emotional needs the event will generate in the months ahead.

On the Saturday following the attacks, staff from VA's National Center for PTSD assisted DoD in its relief efforts at the Pentagon. They provided education for counselors and debriefing and psychoeducational support for relief staff that included Red Cross personnel and DoD Casualty Assistance Officers. They created a Debriefing Facilitators Manual, a computerized self-assessment for the Army Community Support Center staff, and an evaluation questionnaire.

The Department's response was not limited to VHA resources. The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) actively assisted victims and their families in the aftermath. The VA regional offices (VAROs) in New York and Washington provided support at the New York City Family Assistance Center and DoD's Family Assistance Center.

In order to expedite claims related to the attack, processing for these claims was centralized in the Compensation and Pension Service at VA Central Office. We processed 39 claims for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation benefits for active duty deaths. VA has streamlined the claims process as much as possible in an effort to support the families. Working with DoD, we obtained direct on-line access to the Defense Eligibility and Entitlement Records System (DEERS) to obtain

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data on dependents, allowing us to conduct on-site claims processing. Claims for Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI) were processed within 24 hours. We paid 88 insurance death claims. We implemented similar procedures for burial claims and headstone or marker applications.

Within NCA, all VA burials resulting from the tragedy were treated as high priority and requests for weekend burials and extended hours were honored when necessary. NCA immediately provided Presidential Memorial Certificates to the families of over 75 active-duty personnel or veterans killed on September 11.

The Department is closely coordinating with the Homeland Security Council, DoD, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and state and local authorities to be in a sound position to respond to future threats.

Because of the nature of the terrorist attacks, we did not have a key performance measure in place beforehand, but we will have one in place during 2002.

### *Secretary's Priority*

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

### *Performance Goal*

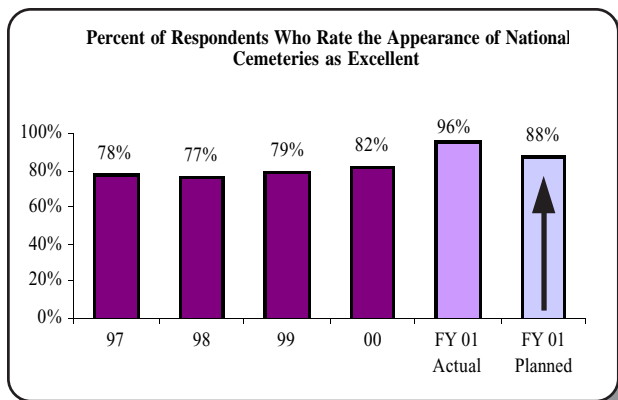
- Increase the percent of respondents who rate national cemetery appearance as excellent to 88 percent by 2001.

Each national cemetery exists as a national shrine, a place of honor and memory that provides an enduring memorial to our Nation's veterans, as well as a dignified and respectful setting for their final resting place. Cemetery appearance goals are set consistent with the high expectations of veterans and the general public. The percentage of respondents who rate national cemetery appearance as excellent increased significantly in FY 2001, and was well above our planned performance goal. For FY 2001 and subsequent years, NCA developed a new customer satisfaction survey process. The measure for cemetery appearance is the percent of respondents who agree that the overall appearance of the national cemetery is excellent.

Our Nation's veterans have earned the appreciation and respect not only of their friends and families but also of the entire country. National cemeteries are enduring testimonials to that appreciation and should be places to which veterans and their families are drawn for dignified burials and lasting memorials. Veterans and their families expect national cemeteries to have well-maintained gravesites, buildings, facilities, and headstones and monuments. In describing one of VA's national cemeteries, a World War II veteran wrote: "The markers are straight and well-aligned, the grass is neatly trimmed around all markers, flags are now at all times flapping in the wind with appropriate flowers to enhance the green grass . . . as a veteran, this care and management is greatly appreciated."

### **Means and Strategies**

To ensure the appearance of national cemeteries meets the standards our Nation expects of its national shrines, VA performs a wide variety of grounds management functions. In FY 2001, headstones were set, aligned, or realigned to maintain uniform height and spacing. Headstones that became soiled were cleaned. In-ground gravesites (casket and cremain) required maintenance to prevent and correct ground sinkage. To preserve columbaria, VA cleaned stains from stone surfaces, maintained the caulking and grouting between the units, and repaired the surrounding walkways. 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.

Cemetery acres that have been developed into burial areas and other areas that are no longer in a natural state required regular maintenance. In FY 2001, VA maintained over 6,800 developed acres and over 2.4 million graves.

To ascertain how our customers and stakeholders perceive the appearance of national cemeteries, VA annually seeks feedback from them through surveys and focus groups. This information is used to determine expectations for cemetery appearance as well as specific improvement opportunities and training needs. For FY 2001, VA developed a nationwide mail-out customer satisfaction survey, an improvement over the previous data collection instrument. The information gathered will be used in the NCA strategic planning process to develop additional strategies for improvement. VA will continue to conduct focus groups to collect data on stakeholder expectations and their level of satisfaction with the appearance of national cemeteries.

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. A study is underway to identify the onetime repairs needed to ensure a dignified and respectful setting appropriate for each national cemetery. Recommendations to address deferred maintenance issues or preventive steps to minimize future maintenance costs will be identified. The study will also include a report on the feasibility of establishing standards of appearance for national cemeteries equal to the finest cemeteries of the world. Varying characteristics of cemeteries, such as cemetery

status (open, cremation only, and closed), as well as geographic and climatic conditions, will be taken into consideration. The contractor's report will be provided in the spring of 2002.

In advance of the completed report, contracts for National Shrine Commitment projects have been awarded and are underway at four national cemeteries: Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery in Texas; Golden Gate National Cemetery in California; Long Island National Cemetery in New York; and Willamette National Cemetery in Oregon. Over 170,000 headstones and markers will be raised and realigned as well as cleaned where needed. In addition, at Willamette National Cemetery, graves in 24 acres will be completely renovated.

Numerous ceremonies and memorial services were held during FY 2001 at national cemeteries to honor those who made the supreme sacrifice. For example, approximately 150 people gathered at Fort Snelling National Cemetery for the dedication of a memorial monument in memory of our Nation's heroes who served during World War I. Veterans, family members, and members of local veterans service organizations gathered at national cemeteries on Pearl Harbor Day to honor the more than 2,400 Americans who gave their lives in service to their country 59 years ago. Thousands honored America's veterans at ceremonies at national cemeteries across the Nation for Memorial Day 2001. VA, veterans service organizations, and other patriotic groups sponsored ceremonies, supported by volunteers including groups of Boy and Girl Scouts, students, families, community associations, veterans groups, and individuals. A monument honoring women veterans was dedicated at Rock Island National Cemetery. The Medal of Honor Memorial at Riverside National Cemetery was rededicated to honor 26 servicemen whose Distinguished Service Crosses were upgraded to Medals of Honor.



"A Promise Made – A Commitment Kept," NCA's new book on Civil War-era national cemeteries, was published. The new book highlights VA's 59 Civil War-era cemeteries that were accepted in the National Register of Historic Places. The book describes each of the cemeteries and highlights features such as notable burials, monuments and memorials, and the Civil War history of each cemetery.

## **External Factors**

Maintaining the grounds, graves, and grave markers of national cemeteries as national shrines is influenced by many different factors. As time goes by, cemeteries experience a variety of environmental changes that may require extensive maintenance. Extremes in weather, such as excessive rain or drought, can result in or exacerbate sunken graves, sunken markers, soiled markers, inferior turf cover, and weathering of columbaria. For example, the 230-pound upright headstones and the 130-pound flat markers tend to settle over time and must be raised and realigned periodically. The frequency of this need varies depending on soil conditions and climate.

## **Crosscutting Activities**

VA continued its partnerships with various VA and other federal and 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 provided for the use of selected prisoners to perform work at national cemeteries. This agreement provided a supplemental source of labor to assist in maintaining the 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 (CWT/VI) program. This program provides veterans the opportunity to

work for pay, regain lost work habits, and learn new work skills while providing a supplemental work force for the national cemeteries. In FY 2001, the California Employment Development Department selected Riverside National Cemetery as one of nine recipients for Employer of the Year honors. Riverside National Cemetery received the award for the staff's accomplishments in support of veterans' employment and the Compensated Work Therapy Program. While in the program at Riverside National Cemetery, veterans receive on-the-job training and some become permanent employees at the cemetery. To date, 15 of the 125 veterans who have gone through the CWT program at the cemetery were hired as temporary employees. Riverside National Cemetery currently employs nine permanent and two temporary employees who successfully transitioned from the CWT program. The staff is proud to have the opportunity to help men and women who have served our Nation develop the skills needed to return to gainful employment.

## **Data Source and Validation**

From FY 1996 through FY 2000, the source of data used to measure the appearance of national cemeteries was the NCA Visitor Comment Card. For FY 2001 and subsequent years, NCA developed a new customer satisfaction survey process. The new survey is an improvement over the previous data collection instrument in that it provides statistically valid performance information at the national and regional (Memorial Service Network) levels and at the cemetery level (for cemeteries having at least 400 interments per year). The annual survey is done via mail; the data are collected from family members and funeral directors who recently received services from a national cemetery. To ensure sensitivity to the grieving process, NCA allows a minimum of 3 months after an interment before including a respondent in the sample population. The survey information provides a gauge to assess maintenance conditions at individual cemeteries as well as the overall system.

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NCA analyzes the information to ensure that we address those issues most important to our customers. This approach provides data from the customer's perspective. These data are critical to developing our objectives and associated measures. VA will continue to conduct focus groups to collect data on stakeholder expectations and their level of satisfaction with the appearance of national cemeteries. VA Central Office staff oversees the data collection process and provides an annual report at the national level. Regional and cemetery level reports are provided for NCA management's use.