



**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

Office of Public Affairs  
Media Relations

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[www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)

# Fact Sheet

January 2009

## **Facts about the Department of Veterans Affairs**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was established on March 15, 1989, succeeding the Veterans Administration. It is responsible for providing federal benefits to veterans and their families. Headed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, VA is the second-largest of the 15 Cabinet departments and operates nationwide programs for health care, financial assistance and burial benefits.

Of the 23.4 million veterans currently alive, nearly three-quarters served during a war or an official period of conflict. About a quarter of the nation's population is potentially eligible for VA benefits and services because they are veterans, family members or survivors of veterans.

The responsibility to care for veterans, spouses, survivors and dependents can last a long time. Two children of Civil War veterans still draw VA benefits. About 184 children and widows of Spanish-American War veterans still receive VA compensation or pensions.

VA's fiscal year 2009 spending is projected to be approximately \$93.4 billion, including \$40 billion for health care, \$46.9 billion for benefits, and \$230 million for the national cemetery system. This is more than a 7 percent increase from the department's \$87.6 billion budget for fiscal year 2009.

### **Compensation and Pension**

Disability compensation is a payment to veterans who are disabled by injury or disease incurred or aggravated during active military service. Wartime veterans with low incomes who are permanently and totally disabled may be eligible for financial support through VA's pension program.

In fiscal year 2008, VA provided \$38.9 billion in disability compensation, death compensation and pension to 3.7 million people. About 3.2 million veterans received disability compensation or pension from VA. In addition, about 554,700 spouses, children and parents of deceased veterans received VA benefits. Among them are 170,144 survivors of Vietnam-era veterans and 235,000 survivors of World War II veterans.

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### **Education and Training**

Since 1944, when the first GI Bill began, more than 21.8 million veterans, service members and family members have received \$83.6 billion in GI Bill benefits for education and training. The number of GI Bill recipients includes 7.8 million veterans from World War II, 2.4 million from the Korean War and 8.2 million post-Korean and Vietnam-era veterans, plus active duty personnel.

Since the dependents program was enacted in 1956, VA also has assisted in the education of more than 784,000 dependents of veterans whose deaths or total disabilities were service-connected. Since the Vietnam-era, there have been approximately 2.7 million veterans, service members, reservists and National Guardsmen who have participated in the Veterans' Educational Assistance Program (VEAP). VEAP was established in 1977; the Montgomery GI Bill, in 1985.

In 2008, VA helped pay for the education or training of 336,527 veterans and active-duty personnel, 106,092 reservists and National Guardsmen and 80,079 survivors.

### **Medical Care**

Perhaps the most visible of all VA benefits and services is health care. From 54 hospitals in 1930, VA's health care system now includes 153 medical centers, with at least one in each state, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. VA operates more than 1,400 sites of care, including 909 ambulatory care and community-based outpatient clinics, 135 nursing homes, 47 residential rehabilitation treatment programs, 232 Veterans Centers and 108 comprehensive home-care programs. VA health care facilities provide a broad spectrum of medical, surgical and rehabilitative care.

Almost 5.5 million people received care in VA health care facilities in 2008. By the end of fiscal year 2008, 78 percent of all disabled and low-income veterans had enrolled with VA for health care; 65 percent of them were treated by VA. In 2008, VA inpatient facilities treated 773,600 patients. VA's outpatient clinics registered over 60 million visits.

VA manages the largest medical education and health professions training program in the United States. VA facilities are affiliated with 107 medical schools, 55 dental schools and more than 1,200 other schools across the country. Each year, about 90,000 health professionals are trained in VA medical centers. More than half of the physicians practicing in the United States had some of their professional education in the VA health care system.

VA's medical system serves as a backup to the Defense Department during national emergencies and as a federal support organization during major disasters.

In 1996, VA put its health care facilities under 21 networks that provide more medical services to more veterans and family members than at any time during VA's long history.

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VA has experienced unprecedented growth in the medical system workload over the past few years. The number of patients treated increased by 29 percent from 4.2 million in 2001 to nearly 5.5 million in 2008.

To receive VA health care benefits most veterans must enroll. The VA health care system had nearly 7.9 million veterans who were enrolled as of October 2008. When they enroll, they are placed in priority groups or categories that help VA manage health care services within budgetary constraints and ensure quality care for those enrolled.

Some veterans are exempted from having to enroll. People who do not have to enroll include veterans with a service-connected disability of 50 percent or more, veterans who were discharged from the military within one year but have not yet been rated for a VA disability benefit and veterans seeking care for only a service-connected disability. Veterans with service-connected disabilities receive priority access to care for hospitalization and outpatient care. Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) are eligible to receive enhanced health care benefits for five years following their military separation date.

Since 1979, VA's Readjustment Counseling Service has operated Vet Centers, which provide psychological counseling for war-related trauma, community outreach, case management and referral activities, plus supportive social services to veterans and family members. There are 232 Vet Centers.

Since the first Vet Center opened, more than 2 million veterans have been helped. Every year, the Vet Centers serve more than 130,000 veterans and accommodate more than a million visits by veterans and family members.

Vet Centers are open to any veteran who served in the military in a combat theater during wartime or anywhere during a period of armed hostilities. Vet Centers also provide trauma counseling to veterans who were sexually assaulted or harassed while on active duty, and bereavement counseling to the families of service members who die on active duty.

VA provides health care and benefits to more than 100,000 homeless veterans each year. Though the proportion of veterans among the homeless is declining, VA continues to engage veterans in outreach, medical care, benefits assistance, transitional housing, and case management for veterans in permanent housing. VA has made more than 450 grants for transitional housing, service centers and vans for outreach and transportation to state and local governments, tribal governments, non-profit community and faith-based service providers.

Indispensable to providing America's veterans with quality medical care are nearly 127,000 active volunteers in VA's Voluntary Service who donated more than 11 million hours in 2008 to bring companionship and care to hospitalized veterans. These hours equate to 5,519 full time employee-equivalent (FTEE) positions.

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## **Research**

VA research focuses on areas of concern to veterans. VA research has earned an international reputation for excellence in areas such as aging, chronic disease, prosthetics and mental health. Studies conducted within VA help improve medical care not only for the veterans enrolled in VA's health care system, but for the nation at large. Because seven in 10 VA researchers are also clinicians, VA is uniquely positioned to translate research results into improved patient care. VA scientists and clinicians collaborate across many disciplines, resulting in a synergistic flow of inquiry, discovery and innovation between labs and clinics.

VA investigators played key roles in developing the cardiac pacemaker, the CT scan, radioimmunoassay, and improvements in artificial limbs. The first liver transplant in the world was performed by a VA surgeon-researcher. VA clinical trials established the effectiveness of new treatments for tuberculosis, schizophrenia and high blood pressure. The "Seattle Foot" developed in VA has allowed people with amputations to run and jump. VA contributions to medical knowledge have won VA scientists many awards, including the Nobel Prize and the Lasker Award.

Special VA "centers of excellence" conduct leading-edge research in areas of prime importance to veterans, such as neurotrauma, prosthetics, spinal cord injury, hearing and vision loss, alcoholism, stroke, and health care disparities. Through VA's Cooperative Studies Program, researchers conduct multicenter clinical trials to investigate the best therapy for various diseases affecting large numbers of veterans. Examples of current projects include testing whether intensive control of blood sugar can reduce cardiovascular problems for patients with type 2 diabetes; and comparing deep brain stimulation with other treatments for Parkinson's disease.

Deployment health is a major priority for VA research. In addition to studies focused on recent veterans of operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, research continues on issues of special concern to veterans of earlier conflicts, such as the Gulf War and Vietnam War.

## **Home Loan Assistance**

From 1944, when VA began helping veterans purchase homes under the original GI Bill, through December 2007, more than 18.4 million VA home loan guaranties have been issued, with a total value of \$967 billion. VA ended fiscal year 2008 with almost 2.1 million active home loans, reflecting amortized loans totaling \$220.8 billion.

In fiscal year 2007, VA guaranteed 179,000 loans valued at \$36.1 billion. During fiscal year 2008, VA's programs for specially adapted housing helped 550 disabled veterans with grants totaling more than \$24.6 million.

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### **Insurance**

VA operates one of the largest life insurance programs in the world. VA directly administers six life insurance programs. In addition, VA supervises the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance and the Veterans' Group Life Insurance programs. These programs provide \$1.3 trillion in insurance coverage to 4 million veterans, active-duty members, reservists and Guardsmembers, plus 3.1 million spouses and children.

The Traumatic Injury Protection program under Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance provides coverage to active-duty personnel who sustain traumatic brain injuries that result in severe losses. Benefit amounts range from \$25,000 to \$100,000, depending on the loss. This program covers 2.4 million members.

In 2007, the VA life insurance programs returned \$354 million in dividends to 1 million veterans holding some of these VA life insurance policies, and paid an additional \$1.1 billion in death claims.

### **Vocational Rehabilitation**

VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program provides services to enable veterans with service-connected disabilities to achieve optimum independence in daily living, and, to the maximum extent feasible, obtain and maintain employment. During fiscal years 1999 through 2008, 86,983 program participants achieved rehabilitation by obtaining and maintaining suitable employment. Additionally, during that same period, 21,108 participants achieved rehabilitation through maximum independence in daily living.

### **VA's National Cemeteries**

In 1973, the Army transferred 82 national cemeteries to VA, which now manages them through its National Cemetery Administration. Currently, VA maintains 125 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico.

In 2008, VA national cemeteries conducted 103,275 interments. That number is likely to increase as VA opens new national cemeteries near large veteran populations. In 2008, VA provided 360,455 headstones or markers for veterans' graves. Since taking over the veterans cemetery program in 1973, VA has provided more than 10.2 million headstones and markers.

Between 1999 and 2008, VA opened 10 new national cemeteries: Gerald B. H. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery near Albany, N.Y.; Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery near Chicago; Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery; Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery near Cleveland; Fort Sill National Cemetery near Oklahoma City; the National Cemetery of the Alleghenies near Pittsburgh; Great Lakes National Cemetery near Detroit; Georgia National Cemetery, north of Atlanta; Sacramento National Cemetery in California; and South Florida National Cemetery in West Palm Beach, Fla.

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This year, VA plans to open six new national cemeteries near Philadelphia; Jacksonville, Fla.; Sarasota, Fla.; Birmingham, Ala.; Greenville / Columbia, S.C.; and Bakersfield, Calif. By 2009, these six new cemeteries will help VA serve 90 percent of veterans with an open national cemetery or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their homes.

VA administers the Presidential Memorial Certificate program, which provides gold embossed certificates signed by the president to commemorate honorably discharged, deceased veterans. They are sent to the veteran's next of kin and loved ones. VA provided 511,353 certificates in 2008.

VA also administers the State Cemetery Grants Program, which encourages development of state veterans cemeteries. VA provides up to 100 percent of the funds to develop, expand or improve veterans cemeteries operated and maintained by the states. More than \$344 million has been awarded for 72 operational veterans cemeteries in 38 states, Saipan and Guam. In 2008, state cemeteries that received VA grants buried nearly 25,000 eligible veterans and family members.

### **VA Employees**

As of September 30, 2008, VA had 278,565 employees on the rolls. Among all departments and agencies of the federal government, only the Department of Defense has a larger work force. Of the total number of VA employees, 247,113 were in the Veterans Health Administration, 16,135 in the Veterans Benefits Administration, 1,549 in the National Cemetery System, 3,412 in the Veterans Canteen Service and 437 in the Revolving Supply Fund. The rest, 9,919 employees, are in various staff and facilities offices.

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## Chronological History of the Department of Veterans Affairs

- 1930....The Veterans Administration created by Executive Order 5398, signed by President Herbert Hoover on July 21. At that time, there were 54 hospitals, 4.7 million living veterans and 31,600 employees.
- 1933...The Board of Veterans Appeals established.
- 1944....On June 22, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944" (Public Law 346, passed unanimously by the 78th Congress), more commonly known as "The GI Bill of Rights," offering home loan and education benefits to veterans.
- 1946....The Department of Medicine & Surgery established, succeeded in 1989 by the Veterans Health Services and Research Administration, renamed the Veterans Health Administration in 1991.
- 1953....The Department of Veterans Benefits established, succeeded in 1989 by the Veterans Benefits Administration.
- 1973....The National Cemetery System – renamed the National Cemetery Administration in 1998 – created when Congress transferred 82 national cemeteries from the Army to VA. The Army kept Arlington National Cemetery and the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery in Washington, D.C.
- 1988....Legislation to elevate VA to Cabinet status signed by President Reagan.
- 1989....On March 15, VA became the 14th Department in the President's Cabinet.

### Secretaries of Veterans Affairs

Eric K. Shinseki	2009 – Present
James B. Peake	2007 - 2009
R. James Nicholson	2005 – 2007
Anthony J. Principi	2001 – 2005
Togo D. West Jr.	1998 – 2000
Jesse Brown	1993 – 1997
Edward J. Derwinski	1989 – 1992

### Administrators of Veterans Affairs

Edward J. Derwinski	1989
Thomas K. Turnage	1986 – 1989
Harry N. Walters	1982 – 1986
Robert P. Nimmo	1981 – 1982
Max Cleland	1977 – 1981
Richard L. Roudebush	1974 – 1977
Donald E. Johnson	1969 – 1974
William J. Driver	1965 – 1969
John S. Gleason	1961 – 1964
Sumner G. Whittier	1957 – 1961
Harvey V. Higley	1953 – 1957
Carl R. Gray	1948 – 1953
Omar Bradley	1945 – 1948
Frank T. Hines	1930 – 1945