

**STATEMENT OF DR. MAUREEN MCCARTHY**  
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**BEFORE THE**  
**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
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Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) efforts regarding our Caregiver Support Program.

VA recognizes the crucial role that family caregivers play in helping Veterans recover from injury and illness and in the daily lives of Veterans in the community. VA values the sacrifices caregivers make to help Veterans remain at home. Caregivers are our partners in the care of Veterans, and VA is dedicated to providing them with the support and services they need. The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010, also referred to as the Caregiver Law, has allowed VA to provide unprecedented support and services to approved family caregivers of eligible Veterans. After the law was enacted, VA established a comprehensive National Caregiver Support Program, with a prevention and wellness focus, which includes the use of evidence-based training and support services for family caregivers. In fiscal year (FY) 2014, VA obligated approximately \$350 million for VA's Caregiver Support Program.

The Caregiver Law establishes additional support and services for approved family caregivers of eligible Veterans (including eligible Servicemembers undergoing medical discharge) who were seriously injured in the line of duty on or after September 11, 2001 under the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. Additional services and supports include (1) a stipend paid directly to the designated primary family caregiver, (2) enrollment in VA's Civilian Health and Medical Program (CHAMPVA) for the designated primary family caregiver, if eligible, (3) an expanded

respite care, (4) mental health services, and (5) travel expenses for the eligible family caregiver when receiving initial training and during the eligible Veteran's medical appointments. Required Family Caregiver training is provided as part of the application process through VA's collaboration with Easter Seals.

VA has been accepting applications for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers since May 9, 2011. Since the Program began, 20,109 family caregivers have participated. At the end of FY 2014, there were 17,572 family caregivers participating in the Program. VA has trained more than 22,000 family caregivers of post 9/11 eligible Veterans and provided CHAMPVA coverage to more than 4,800 eligible primary family caregivers who did not have other health care coverage.

In partnership with VA's Office of the Actuary, the Caregiver Support Program reviewed the health care utilization of approximately 9,000 Veterans participating in the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for 6 months prior to participation and for the first 6 months of their participation. Inpatient hospital admissions decreased by 30 percent. When a Veteran was hospitalized, their length of stay decreased by 2.5 days. While these findings do not take into account other factors that may have contributed to health care utilization, they are exciting and build the foundation for additional evaluation.

### **VA's Caregiver Support Program**

In addition to the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, VA offers a variety of services and resources to caregivers of Veterans of all eras. One valuable resource for caregivers is their local Caregiver Support Coordinator. These individuals serve as the clinical experts on family care giving issues and are experienced social workers, nurses, and psychologists. VA requires each medical center to employ at least one full-time Caregiver Support Coordinator (CSC). They provide support and programming to caregivers, link caregivers to community and VA resources, and respond to referrals from the Caregiver Support Line. At the end of FY 2014, VA was funding 259 full-time CSC positions in the field, with 8 additional temporary positions being funded to meet demand as requested by medical centers.

An important service VA established in February 2011 is the National Caregiver Support Line, which is staffed by licensed social workers. The support line is available to respond to inquiries about caregiver services, as well as serve as a resource and referral center for caregivers, Veterans, and others seeking caregiver information. As of the end of FY 2014, VA's Caregiver Support Line had received 149,654 calls, averaging more than 200 calls each day. Callers represent Veterans of all eras of service, with most calls about Vietnam era Veterans, followed by Veterans who served Post 9/11, World War II Veterans, and Korean conflict era Veterans.

Another highly utilized resource is VA's website dedicated to family caregivers, [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov). It provides caregiver stories, resources, and a zip code locator feature that allows caregivers to identify their local Caregiver Support Coordinator. The site also has a list serve function which currently has more than 42,000 subscribers.

In addition, the Caregiver Support Program launched a Peer Support Mentoring Program in January 2012, to decrease the isolation that many caregivers feel by providing a more formal support mechanism for social networking. The program matches seasoned caregivers with less experienced caregivers to receive guidance, and to share their experiences, wisdom, and skills with one another. At the end of FY 2014, 240 caregivers had participated in this program.

### **Caregiver Training and Education**

In addition to the support services previously mentioned, VA offers a menu of training and education opportunities for caregivers of Veterans of all eras. In January 2013, VA launched Building Better Caregivers in collaboration with the National Council on Aging (NCoA). Building Better Caregivers is an evidence-based online workshop that groups caregivers of Veterans together to learn about problem-solving, dealing with difficult behavior and emotion, and taking care of themselves. At the end of FY 2014, more than 3,000 caregivers had been referred to Building Better Caregivers. In addition, based on feedback from caregiver participants, VA launched an alumni group, allowing alumni of Building Better Caregivers to continue their discussions and on-line relationships with one another. More than 450 caregivers are currently a part of the community.

VA also provides in-person training of caregivers on a variety of topics related to self-care including *Managing Stress, Taking Care of Yourself, Problem Solving and Effective Communication, and Utilizing Technology*. These courses were developed in collaboration with Easter Seals and have been provided to more than 1,200 caregivers of Veterans of all eras across 51 VA sites. In November 2014, more than 500 caregivers were registered to attend classes at more than 30 sites as VA celebrated National Family Caregivers Month.

Beginning in November 2012, VA's Caregiver Support Line began offering Telephone Education Groups to caregivers of Veterans of all eras. In FY 2014, VA offered 29 Telephone Education Groups, with more than 480 caregivers participating in at least one call. After receiving feedback from caregivers regarding the times the calls were offered, VA added a third call to each month, held in the evening, to allow caregivers who work during the day to attend the calls. More than 95 new caregivers were able to join these calls due to the change in time.

VA also provides specialized training services for caregivers that are specific to a diagnosis. Resources for Enhancing All Caregivers Health for Veterans, otherwise known as REACH VA, is a national program run out of the Memphis VA Caregiver Center, located at the Memphis VA Medical Center (VAMC). It is an evidence-based, skills-building intervention, including individual sessions with an option for telephone support group meetings designed to provide support, education, and skills-building to eligible caregivers of Veterans with Alzheimer's disease or other related dementias. While REACH VA began as a 12-session intervention, it is currently implemented in four core sessions, with the option for additional sessions based on caregiver need and clinician judgment.

The intensive one-on-one intervention between an eligible caregiver and a VA clinician addresses five main care giving risk areas including: safety; social and emotional support; problem solving; caregiver well-being; and, both caregiver and Veteran health. The intervention focuses on problem solving around behavioral topics, stress and coping techniques, as well as step-by-step strategies to assist caregivers in everyday problems they may encounter. In research on effectiveness, REACH caregivers show significant improvements in reported burden, depression, social support, health care behaviors, caregiving frustrations, and a number of reported

behavioral problems. Caregivers often spend time providing hands-on care, as well as spending time “on duty,” which is defined as time spent providing supervision of the care recipient, time that cannot be spent relaxing, socializing, or doing other household or personal tasks. Caregivers who have participated in REACH report spending one hour less per day providing hands-on care, and two hours less per day of “on duty” time.

Through the end of FY 2014, more than 550 VA clinical staff across the country were trained in REACH VA. At the end of FY 2012, REACH VA was adapted for use with caregivers of Veterans experiencing spinal cord injury or disorder as a pilot program at three VA sites. The Caregiver Support Program is currently funding additional expansion to include amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and multiple sclerosis (MS).

A program called Spouse Telephone Support (STS) is also offered through the Memphis Caregiver Center. VA has long provided support in person and via telephone through the use of support groups to eligible family members who serve as caregivers of Veterans. In October 2011, based on successful outcomes demonstrated by a Department of Defense research study, VA expanded support services by initiating STS. STS is designed to improve resilience, prepare spouses, significant others, and intimate partners to cope with reintegration difficulties, to serve as a support system, and to ease the post-deployment transition. In January of 2015, an adaptation of STS will be available for all caregivers of Veterans.

In October 2014, the Caregiver Support Program expanded its training to caregivers using an on-line platform historically used to train VA staff – VA’s eHealth University or VeHU. In October, a VA subject matter expert provided on-line training on domestic violence and intimate partner violence to more than 180 caregivers. The training is now available at MyVeHU On Demand and can be viewed at any time by caregivers.

### **Public-Private Collaboration**

In addition to the many services and supports that VA provides to Caregivers, VA has collaborated with the Fisher House Foundation, which provides Hero Miles to support family caregivers and eligible Veterans participating in the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. Family members and friends can

use Hero Miles to fly to the Veteran's home to assist in the care of the Veteran, providing a much needed break to the family caregiver. Since launching this collaboration, Hero Miles has provided more than 2,600 flights to support family caregivers and eligible Veterans participating in the Program of Comprehensive Assistance at a cost savings of more than \$4.5 million to caregivers and Veterans.

### **GAO Report Recommendations**

GAO was recently asked to examine VA's implementation of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers. The report examined how the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is implementing the program, including the types of issues that have been identified during the initial implementation of the program. VA agreed with GAO's three recommendations:

- 1) Expedite the process for identifying and implementing an IT system that will enable program officials to monitor workload data;
- 2) Identify solutions to help alleviate VAMCs' workload burden in advance of obtaining a new IT system; and
- 3) Use data from the new IT system once implemented, and other relevant data, to re-assess the program and implement changes as needed.

In response to GAO's first recommendation, VA has identified FY 2015 funding to support not only the development of a new IT solution to support the Caregiver Support Program, but also funding to stabilize the current system, allowing the Program Office to better monitor workload, including data on the status of each application. This will allow the Program Office to identify the best practices of high-performing facilities and target lower performing facilities for improvement. Stabilizing the current IT system will also allow VA to provide accurate data to key stakeholders regarding the status of applications across the country.

Regarding GAO's second recommendation, VHA has been providing the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers for more than 3 years. When the program was first established, VHA made the policy decision to use home visits as the way to monitor the well-being of program participants as is contemplated under the Caregiver Law. Due to feedback from the field, as well as caregivers and Veterans, the Caregiver Support Program Office has established a workgroup of subject

matter experts as well as Caregiver Support Coordinators and VA staff who currently complete home visits to evaluate VA's policy for monitoring the well-being of program participants. The workgroup is currently meeting weekly and we anticipate recommendations from the workgroup by Spring 2015.

Lastly, to address the third recommendation, the Caregiver Support Program Office, in collaboration with VHA's Health Services Research and Development office, has established a Partnered Evaluation Center. This center will review the impact of both the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers and the Program of General Caregiver Services on the health and well-being of both Caregiver and Veteran participants and build on the data received from VA's Office of the Actuary discussed earlier in my statement. VHA anticipates preliminary findings from this study will be available in mid-year of 2015.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, caregiving is truly a labor of love and VA recognizes the crucial role that caregivers play in helping Veterans remain in the communities they defended, surrounded by those they love. VA is dedicated to promoting the health and well-being of caregivers who care for our Nation's Veterans, through education, resources, support, and services. I thank Congress for your support as we work to make things better for all of America's Veterans and their caregivers.

This concludes my testimony. My colleagues and I are prepared to answer questions you or the other Members of the Committee may have.