

**STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)**

**BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

May 6, 2021

Good morning, Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Mann, and Members of the Subcommittee. With me today are Dr. Anne Marie Duncan, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Resolution Management, Diversity and Inclusion (ORMDI), and Ms. Ryan Pugh, Director, Workforce Analysis, Office of Resolution Management, Diversity and Inclusion. Thank you for inviting us here today to present our views on conscious inclusion, diversity, equity, and access (IDEA). VA's strategic goal is to build on the principles of conscious IDEA into our mission, readiness, and customer service.

We can achieve our mission only by embracing the incredible diversity that defines our Veteran population and all of America and leveraging our employees' talents and passions through conscious inclusion, diversity, equity and access. VA is committed to advancing equity in the workplace and finding the right tools to enable all employees to reach their full potential. We are committed to these principles and will work with leaders and employees across the enterprise to embed conscious IDEA in everything we do.

SECVA Task Force on Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (IDEA)

On January 20, 2021, President Biden signed an Executive Order (EO) titled: "Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government." The EO requires agencies to accomplish an equity assessment within 200 days of publication. This EO which calls for an equity assessment of policies, procedures and services provided for external-facing Federal Government benefits and services has also placed renewed focus at VA to conduct enterprise-wide diversity and inclusion training. Secretary McDonough directed the VA Chief of Staff to charter a 120-day task force on inclusion, diversity, equity, and access, which commenced on April 1st, 2021. This initiative involves VA subject matter experts from across the Department charged with setting VA's strategy to execute the intent of this Executive Order. Core to VA's strategy is human-centered design (HCD) and other experiential insights to understand our diverse and underserved populations so that the Department may translate those insights into tangible tools and actions to fulfil the spirit and intent of the Executive Order. VA faces a set of strategic opportunities to include: (1) designing a holistic and integrated VA mission on diversity, inclusion, equity and access; (2) reviewing existing policies; (3) using data to refine best practices; and (4) creating a sense of unity across the agency initiatives.

Beyond the Glass Door Enterprise Engagements

The Department uses an enterprise-wide approach to address instances of discrimination, intolerance, harassment, and other unwanted and disruptive behavior. ORMDI has engaged with leaders at the facilities referenced in your letter to Secretary McDonough, dated March 10, 2021, and has seen measurable improvement. Specifically, the Kansas City VA Medical Center (KCVAMC) appointed 12 special emphasis program managers and is in the process of hiring a diversity and inclusion officer. The special emphasis program managers review policies, practices, and procedures to help eliminate any that discriminate against minorities, women, and people with disabilities and report findings to the medical center director. We are taking a similar enterprise approach and ORMDI is working with VA Medical Centers referenced in the letter, including Dublin, Milwaukee and Bedford.

Diversity in the Numbers

VA wants to have a competent workforce that looks like America and the veterans that have bravely served our country. Of note, VA employee representation exceeds the Relevant Civilian Labor Force (RCLF) across several racial minority categories, with more than double the representation of Black employees (25.4%) compared to the RCLF (12.1%) and greater representation for Asian, Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander and Native American Alaskan Natives than the RCLF. As noted in your letter, one area where VA still has work to do is in improving Hispanic representation, where our workforce is under-represented by approximately half of the RCLF, with VA at 7.1% compared to the RCLF of 14.8%. White employees make up 56.4% of the VA workforce compared to the RCLF of 66.2%. Currently, 2.5% of the entire VA workforce has a targeted disability, and 10.3% has a non-targeted disability. Another critical goal for VA is to increase representation of minority racial categories and those with disabilities in GS-11 to Senior Executive Service positions. VA is also working to ensure greater representation in Senior Executive Service positions among women and racial minorities. Secretary McDonough has ordered a top-down review of department policies to ensure VA has a welcoming and inclusive environment. Each Administration and VA Central Office is reviewing all regulations, directives, policies and procedures and determine whether they promote equity and inclusion and do not discriminate against LGBT Veterans, families, caregivers, survivors or employees; and that any discriminatory items or procedures identified are eliminated or amended, with the changes documented and managed through appropriate employee training and management metrics. In addition, the experience of LGBT beneficiaries and employees is being measured and their perspectives included in the development of guidance. Any barriers identified will be addressed.

Expansion of Technical Assistance Reviews (TARS) and Barrier Analysis

VA's strategic approach to internal diversity and inclusion is centered on providing support internally to the VA workforce. The IDEA Task Force will review and identify resources needed to conduct additional technical assistance reviews (TAR). In the post pandemic era, VA began development of virtual technical assistance reviews (V-TARs) to assist facilities in attaining a model Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) program. In January 2021, VA initiated a Barrier Analysis working group to investigate

triggers indicating that workplace policies, procedures or practices were having a negative impact on one or more protected EEO groups, with a focus towards identifying the root causes of those anomalies so that they can be addressed and eliminated, if possible. The Task Force will identify steps needed to increase the number of TARs performed annually as well as the throughput of the Barrier Analysis Workgroup.

Strengthen Work with Employees and Stakeholders

We can achieve our mission only by embracing the incredible diversity that defines our Veteran population, VA and all of America, in order to leverage everyone's skills, talents and passions and move towards greater equity and inclusion. I commit to these principles and will ensure that we embody these principles in everything we do. To that end, we will continue working towards and including strategies that leverage our close connection with internal and external VA partners, including but not limited to: Labor Unions; Veterans Service Organizations; the African American Federal Executive Association; the American Indian Science and Engineering Society; the Asian American Government Executive Network; Blacks in Government; historically Black colleges and universities, minority serving institutions, and tribal colleges and universities; the Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives; Disabled American Veterans; Federally Employed Women; the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Special Emphasis Group; White Ribbon USA, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities; Hispanic Serving Health Professional Schools; National VA Chaplain Service; Office of Tribal Government Relations; VA Advisory Committees and the White House Initiatives on Diversity Issues.

Equal Employment Opportunity

VA is committed to ensuring EEO, being more proactive in preventing unlawful harassment, including the prevention of sexual harassment and constructively resolving workplace disputes through alternative dispute resolution. These efforts will assist in sustaining a high-performing organization committed to serving and honoring our Veterans. We will vigorously enforce all applicable Federal EEO laws and regulations to ensure equal opportunity in the workplace for all VA employees.

VA Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention, Response and Recourse

VA is committed to a culture rooted in our mission and core values with zero-tolerance for harassing, disruptive, abusive, or violent behavior. VA honors the unique lived experiences of those we serve by actively empowering Veterans to collaborate in building a VA culture that is safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming for all. Secretary McDonough has directed Acting Deputy Secretary Clancy to charter a VA Task Force on Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention, Response and Recourse. The task force goals include the following: (1) preventing incidents of sexual assault and harassment by cultivating an inclusive culture throughout the organization; (2) employing trauma-informed interventions and responses to support victims of harassment, discrimination, sexual assault and interpersonal violence; and (3) forming coalitions to raise awareness, combat sexual harassment and assault, and support survivors.

Additionally, to promulgate a call to action for all VA employees, volunteers, contractors and the Veterans we serve, we will demonstrate allyship through emotional intelligence, active listening, advocating for underrepresented groups, and addressing bias, discrimination and uncivil behavior. Everyone should feel welcomed and safe when doing business with VA.

The Business Case for Diversity

Diversity is one of the defining strengths of America and the diversity of our workforce is one of our greatest strengths in accomplishing the Department's mission to serve all of our veterans from all backgrounds. Diversity fosters innovative solutions to some of our most challenging issues and enhances decision-making by providing a broader range of perspectives. We must continue to focus on creating a culture of inclusion that values everyone in order for every employee to reach their full potential and feel engaged. A diverse and inclusive culture is strongly linked to VA's core values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence (I CARE). Our 2021 Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan outlines our accomplishments and provides the foundation for VA to build on to continue to build a more inclusive, diverse, and civil workforce.

The Conscious Inclusion Imperative

An inclusive environment ensures equitable access to resources and opportunities for all. It also enables individuals and groups to feel safe, respected, comfortable, engaged, motivated, and valued for who they are and for their contributions toward organizational goals. The Center for Creative Leadership found that diverse teams are more creative, perform better in problem-solving, and result in better decision-making than homogeneous teams. Similarly, the Diversity Research Network found that gender diversity results in more effective group processes in people-oriented performance environments (2002). The caveat to this research was that diversity alone was not sufficient to achieve the performance advantages. Absent the facilitating conditions that integrate diverse perspectives and empower the corresponding diversity of thought into the organization, the aforementioned outcomes were reversed. This is the inclusion imperative and diversity without inclusion will not work. Diversity is being invited to the game; inclusion is having an opportunity to play and use your talents to help your team win.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defines inclusion as a culture that connects each employee to the organization; encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness; and leverages diversity throughout the organizations that all individuals are able to participate and contribute to their full potential. To achieve inclusion, VA must look internally at its organizational culture and replace institutional processes that impede optimum participation by employees with the drivers of inclusion which include the following: fairness (equal opportunity); openness (transparent communications and information sharing); cooperativeness; supportiveness (integration of differences); comfort; and empowerment (autonomy).

The Business Case for Employee Engagement

In VA's 2018-2024 Strategic Plan, Management Objective 4.2, the Department recognizes "that the ability to deliver world-class customer experience is strongly dependent on high levels of employee engagement" by empowering and enabling a diverse workforce. OPM defines employee engagement as: "The employee's sense of purpose that is evident in their display of dedication, persistence, and effort in their work or overall attachment to their organization and its mission."

Studies show that employee engagement is a core driver of performance as well as lower rates of turnover, complaints, accidents, and absenteeism. Engaged employees are as follows: (1) twice as likely to stay in their current jobs; (2) two-and-a-half times more likely to feel they can make a difference; and (3) three times as likely to report being satisfied in their jobs.

Executive Order 13985 on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government

Systemic barriers that underserved communities face many times negatively impact Veterans. In order to overcome many of these barriers, VA must tap into its vast diversity and use it as a major source of strength. The implementation of the IDEA Task Force will ensure the execution of the requirements outlined in Executive Order 13985 and any other subsequent and relevant executive orders. VA has begun to: (1) Examine and develop VA's strategic mission, goals and objectives on IDEA; (2) Conduct a whole-of-VA review of policies, programming, training and strategic communications for workforce and Veterans' initiatives; (3) Identify opportunities to leverage data to inform and operationalize IDEA; and (4) Develop institutional access points for underserved communities to establish strategic partnerships with VA. From workforce-facing to strategic partnerships, grant programs, combatting inequity, to outreach—the task force will help us better understand the various partners that exist in the ecosystem.

Additionally, when we add to that effort with data to inform and operationalize, it is possible to create a more institutionalized approach that benefits Veterans, our workforce, contractors, caregivers and survivors to include the following:

- Support for VA's special observance programs to bring diverse and cultural awareness to the workplace;
- A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBTQ+) special emphasis program and employee workgroup under the auspices of the VA Diversity and Inclusion Council (DIVAC);
- A modified exit survey to include questions on discrimination, harassment and disability status;
- Addition of voluntary, confidential LGBT self-identification to the VA All Employee Survey to identify potential barriers to full inclusion of LGBTQ+ employees;
- Updated compensation and pension claims forms to allow Veterans to properly self-identify, and gender-identify;

- Update our handbook and policies on providing reasonable accommodations to employees and applicants with disabilities, and
- Continued regular meetings with DIVAC.

A Thorough Review of Policies, Programs and Procedures to Remove Barriers to Underserved Communities

Each IDEA action team partner is responsible for leading their organization's efforts to review existing policies, procedures, guidelines, reports, and identifying the following with pain points and insights to: (1) Potential barriers that underserved communities and individuals may face to enrollment in and access to benefits and services in Federal programs; (2) Potential barriers that underserved communities and individuals may face in taking advantage of agency procurement and contracting opportunities; (3) Whether new policies, regulations or guidance documents may be necessary to advance equity in agency actions and programs; and (4) The operational status and level of institutional resources available to offices or divisions within the agency that are responsible for advancing civil rights or whose mandates specifically include serving underrepresented or disadvantaged communities.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is Listening and Employing a Human-Centered Design to Journey Map the Experience

The Veterans Experience Office (VEO) used HCD methods to identify and research the moments that matter throughout employees' entire work experience at VA—from recruitment to retirement or resignation. VEO interviewed more than 150 employees across different jobs, locations, workplaces and levels of experience and used the data to create a "journey map" to capture a broad set of shared moments many employees encounter. The research showed employees' journeys vary greatly, especially when performing, growing, and adapting their roles. The journey map identified 30 moments that matter during a VA employee's career. The map was used to target deep dives in the two specific areas of onboarding and career development. Subsequent deep dives are intended to develop tangible solutions and to institute measurement to gather real time employee experience data around these moments. The journey maps identify bright spots and pain points to achieve a shared understanding of a problem or barrier and drive action around developing tangible solutions to improve the overall experience, advance racial equity and better support underserved populations

Since 2015, VA has sponsored at least one customer experience Agency Priority Goal (APG) per APG cycle. To continue the organizational commitment to and focus on experience as a core business discipline and key measure of VA performance, VA is in the process of selecting APGs for the fiscal year 2022-23 cycle, one of which seeks to measure trust among underserved Veteran populations through quantitative and qualitative data. Additionally, VA has already completed HCD research and a journey map for women Veterans' health care and is in the process of finalizing HCD research

and a journey map of the women Veterans' benefits experience. VA also began HCD research relating to the experiences of Native American Veterans.

ORMDI recently rolled out a new Digital Listening Initiative. Though machine learning and natural language processing we pick up on key words like race, LGBTQ+, gender, harassment and others to identify trends and conversations relevant to VA and ORMDI specifically with protected categories of discrimination. Through this initiative we found the following: (1) different Communities talk about the same topic differently and digital listening allows us to identify the audience and tailor the appropriate engagement; (2) through digital listening we analyze conversations collected from services like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and other public discussion forums; and (3) who's talking about race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, assault and other like categories. When we pick up something on a public chatter site we will review the content and determine if it needs to be escalated to Police Services, EEO office, HR, Suicide Prevention, etc.

It is a Complete Team Effort Across the Enterprise

Leadership at every level receives regular briefings, monthly or quarterly, on activities and initiatives designed to remove barriers and to ensure consistent delivery of benefits through all of the business streams and across the organization.

Conclusion

Our performance of VA's mission is amplified by our commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity and access – traits and characteristics that make people unique as well as behaviors and social norms that ensure people feel valued, welcome and comfortable. Our core I-CARE values – Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence – define our culture and reinforce our devotion to those we serve. Our core values provide a baseline for the standards of behavior expected of all VA employees.

To enable VA to sustain respect and collaboration amongst our multicultural workforce to serve a multicultural Veteran community and Nation, I stand with the members of the VA workforce, my colleagues across the Federal government, the Administration, and with members of Congress to: (1) conquer our natural biases by advancing cultural competence and humility; (2) embrace the business case for diversity, inclusion, and civil treatment of others; (3) foster employee engagement; and (4) inspire conscious inclusion, diversity, equity and access in everything we do. Through these strategies, we can be an organization committed to equity, humanity and justice for our employees and those we serve.

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