

**STATEMENT OF  
JACK KAMMERER  
DIRECTOR, VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION & EMPLOYMENT  
VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**February 27, 2014**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. As I near the end of the first 90 days as the Director of VR&E Service, I have already seen how VR&E staff in Washington DC, and VR&E staff in the field offices are committed to and engaged in multiple initiatives to extend our outreach capabilities, increase program efficiencies, and enhance our current technologies, all of which will result in better support for Veterans.

Through our VetSuccess on Campus (VSOC) program, we have collaborated with 94 schools across the country to provide educational and vocational counseling and other on-site services to over 80,000 Veteran students. Under the VSOC program, Veterans have the opportunity to succeed through coordinated delivery of on-campus benefits assistance and adjustment counseling to assist Veterans in completing their college education and entering the labor market in viable careers. We also collaborate with the Department of Defense to provide services to Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard Servicemembers through the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). Through our involvement in the IDES program, we have expanded early

intervention counseling and other available services for over 28,000 transitioning Servicemembers at 71 military installations.

We also continue to work with Federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as private-sector employers, to increase Veteran employment utilizing special employer incentives, special hiring authorities, on-the-job training, and non-paid work experience for those Veterans in our program. VR&E Service is currently developing new program performance metrics that will more effectively evaluate the full scope of VR&E work activities at the local, regional, and national levels. VR&E Service is partnering with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to develop video telecounseling for nationwide implementation. VR&E intends to use the same, secure technology currently in use in VHA's telehealth initiative.

My testimony today will provide an overview of the VR&E program, performance summary, discussion of VR&E's case-management information technology system, and information on actions taken to implement the Government Accountability Office's (GAO) recommendations for the VR&E program provided in its January 2014 report.

## **VR&E Program Overview**

The Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA) VR&E program assists Servicemembers and Veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare for, find, and keep suitable employment. For Veterans with service-connected disabilities so severe that they cannot immediately consider employment, the independent living (IL) program offers services to improve their ability to live as independently as possible.

The VR&E program also provides educational/career counseling to transitioning Servicemembers and Veterans that are eligible for VA educational benefits, and children, widows, and spouses of Veterans who have permanent and total service-connected disabilities, as authorized under Title 38, United States Code, Chapter 36. Additionally, VR&E provides vocational and rehabilitation benefits to children born with spina bifida for certain Veterans with service in Vietnam or Korea. VR&E employs nearly 1,000 professional vocational rehabilitation counselors and delivers services through a network of 420 office locations. Our service delivery model works to support Veterans where they are located, and includes operations at 56 regional offices, the National Capital Region Benefits Office, 198 VR&E out-based offices, 71 IDES installations, and 94 VSOC schools/sites.

### **VR&E Program Data**

In fiscal year (FY) 2013, VR&E successfully rehabilitated over 10,000 Veterans with service-connected disabilities. Over 8,500 were rehabilitated into suitable employment, a 6.6 percent increase from FY 2012. The remaining were Veterans with disabilities so severe that they could not currently pursue employment, but were rehabilitated after they were able to gain greater independence through the delivery of IL services. VR&E also had a 14.2 percent increase in applicants in FY 2013, rising from over 72,000 to almost 83,000, demonstrating that our outreach efforts are reaching Servicemembers and Veterans in need of assistance.

## Information Technology

Corporate WINRS (CWINRS) is the VR&E case-management software application (named after the stations that collaborated to develop the original version: **Waco, Indianapolis, Newark, Roanoke, and Seattle**). CWINRS is used to record the adjudication of VR&E claims, rehabilitation planning, provision of services, and the disposition of cases. CWINRS tracks a Veteran's rehabilitation progress through the VR&E program. This includes establishing the Veteran's entitlement to benefits, tracking appointments, and forwarding transactions to the financial management systems for vendor payments. CWINRS utilizes VBA's corporate database to maintain participant information, and interfaces with VBA's Benefits Delivery Network (BDN) and other financial systems to process payment and accounting transactions. Case-specific information for participants in all five rehabilitation tracks available through the VR&E program (re-employment, rapid access to employment, employment through long-term services, self-employment, and independent living) is managed through the CWINRS application.

Current CWINRS enhancements focus on developing a subsistence allowance module, which will eliminate VR&E's reliance on the legacy BDN system and move towards payment through the corporate Financial Accounting System (FAS). The new FAS corporate payment module is being beta tested in eight regional offices, and is currently successfully making subsistence payments to more than 350 Veteran participants in the VR&E program. VR&E Service is finalizing development of this module to enable national deployment.

VR&E Service has also partnered with VHA to develop and pilot an online medical referral tracking system. This system promotes communication between VR&E and VHA and improves the coordination of services to Veterans. The new system was recently piloted at nine sites. We are analyzing data to help us develop a future deployment plan.

VR&E has also built requirements for a new case-management system that will expand upon the functionality in the Veterans Benefits Management System to support the VR&E program, including our VSOC and IDES programs.

### **Update on implementation of GAO recommendations**

GAO made six recommendations in its January 2014 report titled, “VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment: Further Performance and Workload Management Improvements are Needed.” First, GAO recommended that “any revised set of national and regional performance measures for the VR&E program include measures of (a) the proportion of program participants successfully rehabilitated into employment, and (b) the proportion of participants who obtain other benefits from VR&E services.” As described earlier, VR&E is currently engaged in redesigning local, regional, and national performance measures that will include collection of a broader spectrum of performance data to more effectively evaluate program success. As a part of the redesign process, VR&E is investigating all viable options for capturing and reporting on not just positive program outcomes, but also on the outcomes of all program participants. Some measures may most appropriately be gathered at the national level, but all measures

will be designed to align with each other and support effective oversight of the entire program.

GAO's second recommendation was to "develop new measures of long-term employment that go beyond the minimum 60 days of post-placement monitoring that is currently required. In developing measures, consider the feasibility of using results from planned post-closure surveys of Veterans as a data source." VR&E provides comprehensive counseling, as well as training and rehabilitative services, to remove employment barriers that challenge a program participant's ability to both obtain and maintain suitable employment. Unlike many other vocational rehabilitation and training programs, VR&E has the opportunity to work with participants over a multi-year period, including providing training and education, and up to 18 months of employment services focused on ensuring employment readiness and outcomes. Additionally, VR&E counselors use professional judgment in determining when Veterans have adequately adjusted to their employment positions and, in certain circumstances, will follow Veterans beyond the 60-day minimum post-employment period. Currently, VR&E is exploring different mechanisms and processes to follow up with employed Veterans after their formal departure from the VR&E program. A post-outcome case management tool is in development that will facilitate VR&E follow up with Veterans 12 months after case closure to determine if additional services are needed to maintain employment or to sustain maximum independence in daily living. VR&E's ongoing Longitudinal Study is currently tracking three cohorts of Veterans (2010, 2012, 2014) over a 20-year period, and it will provide data to assess the long-term success of participation in the program and post-service outcomes.

GAO's third recommendation was to "conduct nonresponse analysis of the results of VA's ongoing Voice of the Veteran customer satisfaction surveys." While VA's current Voice of the Veteran Continuous Measurement Satisfaction Research Program does not currently include non-response bias analyses, the survey findings are statistically valid. However, contingent on resource availability, VBA will modify the survey contract to include non-response analyses of the results.

Fourth, GAO recommended that VA, "in revisiting VA's formula for allocating VR&E staff among the regional offices, (a) assess the inclusion of factors related to regional office performance and, if warranted, remove them from the formula, and (b) assess the exclusion of any factor related to the number of educational counseling cases in each regional office and, if warranted, add such a factor." VR&E Service works closely with VBA's Office of Field Operations in determining how resources are allocated. VR&E Service is designing the staffing model to account for regional factors impacting performance, and together with the Office of Field Operations, we will revisit the metrics used in the resource allocation model to ensure continued validity and data integrity.

GAO's fifth recommendation was to "collect information on the regional offices' approaches for managing their VR&E workloads, assess the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches, and use the results of this assessment to provide guidance to the offices on potential best practices or options to consider." VR&E Service allows local managers to decide how best to manage their workloads, but agrees that there is merit in collecting and analyzing data and communicating best practices on workload management.

GAO's final recommendation was "to provide additional training to all individual Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) on job placement strategies and workplace accommodations, potentially as part of the effort to develop a competency-based training approach." VR&E Service has provided multiple training activities and curriculums focused on job placement and job accommodations. VR&E conducted Employment Coordinator classroom training in 2012 and deployed Training and Performance Support System modules on Employment Services in June 2013 and Self-Employment in July 2013. VR&E Service also provided field offices with training modules on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and employment training on November 29, 2013. The training includes information about job accommodations for Veterans with TBI and PTSD, and answers common questions regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act as it pertains to TBI and PTSD. Additionally, training on special employer incentives was released on January 29, 2014, and is accessible nationwide to all VR&E staff.

VR&E's Electronic Performance Support System (EPSS) has a section that offers essential guidance to VR&E employees on employment and job accommodations. EPSS is a portal designed to assist local VRCs in performing the essential functions of their job, to include employment-related duties. The employment section of EPSS offers assistance on procedures for identifying Veterans' job-accommodation needs, provides training to counselors to help them work with Veterans on their ability to overcome challenges in obtaining and maintaining employment, and provides VR&E employees appropriate intervention and monitoring strategies to help Veterans adjust to their new position and the workforce. These job



aids are updated continuously based on feedback or changes in law, regulation, and VR&E Service policies.

Efforts are currently underway to update and convert existing training materials into web-based training on job accommodations and employment service delivery to better serve VR&E employees and Veterans.

### **Concluding Remarks**

VR&E Service will continue to assess and improve the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to a most deserving active military and Veteran population: those men and women who have incurred a service-connected disability. We have developed and fielded comprehensive and detailed training, conducted significant oversight, and continue to focus on efforts to enhance both service delivery and the actual services we provide.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer questions from you or any of the other members of the Subcommittee.