

**STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

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Good Afternoon Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke, 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. I am accompanied by Mr. Lloyd Thrower, Deputy Chief Information Officer, Account Manager for Benefits, Office of Information and Technology. VA continues our deliberate efforts to achieve our strategic goal of transforming the VR&E program, delineated in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, and remains focused on understanding the needs of our current to future Veteran population and enhancing our service delivery to these Veterans. My testimony today will provide an overview of the VR&E program with a performance summary and a discussion of VR&E's performance metrics, programs, and initiatives.

VR&E Program Overview

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) VR&E Service assists Servicemembers and Veterans with service-connected disabilities and barriers to employment to prepare for, find, and maintain suitable employment. For Veterans with service-connected disabilities so severe that they cannot immediately consider employment, independent living (IL) services are offered to improve their ability to live as independently as possible. VR&E employs nearly 1,000 professional vocational rehabilitation counselors and delivers services through a network of nearly 350 office locations. VR&E's service delivery model supports Veterans where they are located, and currently includes operations at 56 Regional Offices (ROs), the National Capital

Region Benefits Office, approximately 142 VR&E out-based offices, 71 military installations for the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES), and 95 VetSuccess On Campus (VSOC) schools/sites.

VA's VR&E team in Washington, D.C., and staff across the country are committed to and engaged in multiple transformational initiatives. VA's intent remains to increase program efficiencies through improved business processes, with continual refinement of our performance metrics and ongoing technology enhancements, all to provide the optimal support for over 132,000 Veterans participating in the VR&E program in FY 2017.

VA remains focused on the goal of assisting Veterans with service-connected disabilities in achieving employment and living independently. VR&E has seen an overall increase in applications as more adjudicated compensation claims result in more potentially eligible VR&E clients with service-connected disabilities and barriers to employment. VR&E Chapter 31 applicants grew 33 percent from FY 2013 to FY 2017, with a corresponding increase of 17 percent in Chapter 31 VR&E participants. VR&E processed 107,200 new Chapter 31 claims in FY 2017, with an average of 54 days to process entitlement determination. While most Veterans are in the program, on average, five or more years, in FY 2017 VR&E counselors achieved over 15,000 positive outcomes including assisting more than 12,000 Veterans to achieve their rehabilitation goals and a 6.5 percent increase in employment rehabilitations from FY 2016.

While the VR&E workload has grown, the counselor caseload has slowly declined as we achieve more positive outcomes, resolve older cases, and strive for active Veteran participation in the program. Currently, VR&E has a rolling average of 133 Veterans per counselor, down from 140 Veterans per counselor at the end of FY 2016. However, there are other VR&E staff members who work directly with the counselors assisting Veterans in reaching their rehabilitation goals. Recently, VBA executed an organizational review focused on VR&E's staffing levels nationwide. One of the primary directives was to standardize operations across all ROs in accordance with the population they serve. As part of this review, we looked at the combination of counselors and other staff members to ensure a balanced workload approach.

VR&E is actively looking at multiple methods, including utilizing technology, to enhance the time counselors are able to engage Veterans. We are conducting an ongoing time study that consists of systematic observation, analysis, and measurement of the separate steps in the performance of a specific job. This is done for the purpose of establishing a standard time for each performance, with the ultimate goal of improving internal processes and procedures. This study will capture the work accomplished by VR&E staff and will define what VR&E-specific work is being completed, how much time it takes to complete that work, and determine an average time for each job duty.

VR&E Program Data

In FY 2017, VR&E counselors achieved 15,528 positive outcomes, up 8 percent from FY 2016. These included successfully rehabilitating 12,128 Veterans with service-connected disabilities, with 10,461 achieving rehabilitation into suitable employment, and an additional 778 Veterans completing their rehabilitation plan and electing to pursue further education rather than seek immediate employment. The remaining 889 were Veterans with disabilities so severe that they could not currently pursue employment, and achieved rehabilitation after they were able to gain greater independence through the delivery of IL services. VR&E counselors also achieved 3,400 Maximum Rehabilitation Gains.

With our team of 79 assigned VSOC counselors, VR&E continues to leverage our partnership with 95 schools across the country to provide educational and vocational counseling and other on-site services to a current target population of approximately 78,000 Veteran students. In FY 2017, VR&E's VSOC counselors assisted over 43,000 Veteran students and eligible dependents, including over 14,000 new contacts. VR&E has eight new jointly signed VSOC/school Memorandums of Understanding and we are working to expand to these new sites within the next year.

VR&E also closely collaborates with the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide VR&E services to Active Duty, Reserve, and National Guard Servicemembers through IDDES. VR&E has nearly 145 IDDES counselors located at 71 military installations, and provides early intervention counseling and other available services to IDDES and other

wounded, ill, and injured Servicemembers. In collaboration with the U.S. Army's Warrior Transition Command, staff members are jointly visiting select IDES sites to improve the referral process and services at military installations. VA appreciates the Committee's long-term support for wounded, ill and injured Servicemembers.

The VR&E program continues to provide educational and career counseling under Chapter 36 to transitioning Servicemembers, Veterans, and beneficiaries who are eligible for VA educational benefits. VR&E continues to provide more comprehensive and updated information about Chapter 36 counseling and services that was also incorporated into the recent update to the Interagency-led (e.g. DoD, VA, DOL) Transition Assistance Program curriculum.

VR&E Longitudinal Study

VR&E Service has continued tracking Veteran cohorts in the congressionally mandated 20-year Longitudinal Study. This study of Veterans who began their VR&E programs in FY 2010, 2012, and 2014, has provided a wealth of information including detailed analysis of cohort trends and Veteran satisfaction with VR&E services. From last year's iteration of the study, VR&E found that the majority of participants from all cohorts reported moderate-to-high program satisfaction (nearly 90 percent); women make up a larger percentage of the program participants (17–20 percent) than in the overall Veteran population; and on average, cohort members have a service-connected disability rating of about 60 percent. The study at this juncture also reveals that almost one quarter of participants in each cohort have a primary rating of post-traumatic stress disorder; more than 80 percent of the Veterans who achieved rehabilitation from an employment plan were employed at the time of the survey; and more than 90 percent were employed within the past 12 months. The study further indicates that Veterans who successfully complete the VR&E program report more positive economic outcomes including higher employment rates, annual earnings, and home ownership compared to those Veterans who discontinued their participation in the VR&E program.

Information Technology and Business Process Improvements

VR&E continues to work on leveraging technology to increase efficiencies and enhance our service delivery model in preparation for the development of a new VR&E Case Management System (VRE-CMS). In collaboration with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), VR&E uses current technology to enhance Veteran services through an online medical referral tracking system and online counseling technology. In FY 2015, VR&E began employing VHA Telehealth technology that uses a secure video teleconference to enable VR&E counselors to remotely meet with and counsel Veterans receiving VR&E services. Initial feedback received from Veterans described the technology as challenging because the platform required the installation of specialized software, the use of a username and password, and did not operate on mobile devices. VR&E is working with VHA to use updated technology, the Pexip application, which will be easier for Veterans to participate in Tele-counseling appointments. VR&E will begin piloting this system in June 2018. The Pexip application is a mobile-friendly device that eliminates the need for Veterans to install specialized software, and provides a secure link between the counselor and Veteran. The ease of use and increased platform accessibility will improve VR&E's responsiveness to Veterans' needs and reduce travel costs and time for both Veterans and employees.

VBA continues to work with the Office of Information and Technology (OI&T) and Multi-Channel Technology (MCT) to find a viable solution to transition VR&E to an electronic case management system. To ensure alignment with program objectives, VBA is conducting a complete evaluation of IT development to date. Currently VBA, OI&T, and MCT are actively conducting a needs assessment and exploring alternatives to determine the most effective and cost-efficient way to deliver a modern, case management system. The intent remains to integrate VR&E with other VA benefit information systems to enhance relationship management and support vocational rehabilitation success. The goals of the new VRE-CMS remain to deliver a paperless service delivery model, better support Veterans on their own terms, ensure consistent efficient service delivery and quality, and modernize the employee experience. Methods to develop and implement this effort will be evaluated once options are presented.

Competency Based Training System (CBTS) for VR&E Counselors

VR&E piloted and is now planning a national deployment of the Competency Based Training System in FY 2019. This system will deliver empirically researched and industry benchmarked competency assessments to counselors online. This supports VBA's goal to improve the employee and Veteran experience by targeting training to the individual employee's needs and enabling employees to provide the highest level of counseling and employment services.

Remote entitlement

In an effort to increase the use of Tele-Counseling, the VR&E Service undertook a new pilot in April 2017 with the St. Petersburg, Florida RO to allow the use during the initial entitlement determination with the VR&E applicant. The initial results of the pilot indicate a great benefit to the applicant with a time savings, on average, of two hours because the applicant does not have to travel to meet face-to-face with the counselor. Based on the success of this pilot, remote entitlement was extended to an additional five ROs in April 2018, with a national rollout expected by the end of FY 2018.

Other VR&E Initiatives using Innovative Approaches

VR&E is also continuing to leverage and expand the use of national VR&E contract services to reduce the overall burden on the counselor staff and enable positive outcomes. VR&E continues to seek other technology and process innovations to improve service delivery to Veterans. We recently provided all counselors access to the Joint Legacy Viewer that provides bi-directional access to Veteran and DoD medical records. In the coming weeks, VR&E will implement Dragon software to our counselors. Dragon is a dictation software that will help to increase the efficiency of counselors as they perform daily and routine tasks.

In an effort to reduce the overall no-show rate for appointments, VR&E is also leveraging technology to implement a process where Veterans are reminded of upcoming appointments through a text message on their mobile device. VR&E Service continues to work to transform the Quality Assurance (QA) program. In an effort to

better track trends in performance and identify specific training needs, we revised this QA review instrument and worked with a statistician to ensure a valid and reliable sampling of cases are reviewed.

Concluding Remarks

The VR&E Service, our leaders, and our teammates in the field will continue to further accelerate our VR&E Transformation. VR&E will continue to assess and improve the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to a most deserving population: Veterans who have incurred a service-connected disability. Through the development of a new VR&E Case Management System, program performance measures that focus on Veteran outcomes, clear accounting of both Veteran progress and employment outcomes, and technology initiatives such as enhanced VR&E Tele-counseling, we continue to strive towards both substantially improving and materially enhancing the VR&E program. We also continue to develop and field comprehensive training, conduct significant oversight, and focus on efforts to enhance both service delivery and the actual services we provide Veterans in the VR&E program.

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