

Convention Highlights

Tuesday, July 22, 2014
Business Session

Acting Secretary Details VA Problems, Offers Solutions

Sloan Gibson, acting VA secretary, provided a detailed overview of his department's recent troubles and how VA will fix them. The emergency, which claimed his predecessor Eric Shinseki on May 15, is "the most serious crisis in more than a generation," he said. But it also handed the nation's largest health care system "its greatest opportunity to enhance care for veterans in its history."

He identified three groups of problems that must be fixed. From a business standpoint, VA's scheduling practices were "improper" and remain antiquated. Its leadership failed to hold employees accountable for their performances. And a lack of resources, specifically clinicians, information technology and physical space, hinders VA's ability to treat more veterans.

Gibson noted some immediate actions he has directed to get more veterans seen by physicians. Since he has taken over, VA has contacted some 160,000 vets and provided more than 570,000 referrals for private care, which is 100,000 more compared to last year. He said these referrals could lead to more than 700,000 additional appointments in the private sector.

To get more vets into VA facilities, Gibson said operating hours are being extended, mobile medical units are being deployed and more clinicians are being hired. Furthermore, VFW and other veterans service organizations will be consulted as VA develops a "comprehensive, state-of-the-art, commercial, off-the-shelf" scheduling system.

VA will hire an outside agency to conduct an independent audit of VA's scheduling practices beginning Oct. 1 this year. In addition, Gibson has directed every VA medical center and Veterans Integrated Systems Network (VISN) director to visit each VA facility in his or her region to ensure scheduling practices are appropriate.

Gibson garnered the biggest applause of his speech when he announced VA had eliminated the "14-day access measure" from employee performance reviews. The scandal started with allegations of VA employees at the Phoenix system falsifying records to show that patients were waiting less time than they actually were. In turn, the employees received performance bonuses. Gibson said some 13,000 employee performance plans had been amended.

He also has frozen hiring at VA's central office, VISN headquarters and suspended all VHA senior executive performance awards for 2014. "Where there is evidence of willful misconduct, we will hold those people accountable," he said.

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After his investigation at Phoenix, part of 12 VA medical center visits in six weeks, Gibson attributed the problems to mismanagement, leadership failures and chronic underfunding. But in San Antonio, he said he saw “excellence.” He noted that the difference was leadership. “But for leadership, that could have been Phoenix,” he said.

Gibson also said he wants more input and feedback from “rank-and-file” employees who should be encouraged to speak up about problems without fear of retribution. “Retaliating against whistleblowers is against the law,” he said. “We will follow the law.”

On the issue of the claims backlog, he said vets still wait too long for a decision, and that the accuracy of some of those decisions has been called into question. “Clearly, we have more work to do,” he said, “faster, more accurate decisions, documented with credible reporting.”

Concluding, he praised VFW’s annual demands for more VA funding and warnings that shortfalls could lead to the problems VA is currently experiencing. Gibson recommended to Congress that VA receive an additional \$17.6 billion over the next three years to hire some 10,000 clinicians, improve computer technology and fund private care visits until VA can meet its current demand.

Merging POW/MIA Functions

Michael D. Lumpkin, assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low intensity conflict, briefed attendees on his new job of consolidating three agencies. They conduct the searches, recoveries and identifications of the remains of U.S. troops missing from all wars.

Lumpkin, a former SEAL, said “change is well under way,” and hopes to have the as-yet-unnamed command operational by Jan. 1, 2015, and fully functional by year-end. This will be accomplished by unifying the mission, evaluating processes and aligning people properly. Accountability, authority and responsibility are key guiding principles.

He noted that the *Defense Authorization Act of 2015* will contain language creating the new command, which will merge the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office at the Pentagon, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii and the Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory in San Antonio. He also said that consolidation with “secretary-level oversight” will remove “bureaucratic barriers” that previously existed between the agencies.

The new command will offer a single database of all missing personnel and a single medical examiner in charge of all identification and scientific operations. Lumpkin also said he wants to increase the number of remains recovered and improve communication with the families of those missing. “They are our customers,” he said. “It is one of our top priorities.”

Lumpkin also wants to increase collaboration with private entities, such as VFW. He noted that VFW “is the only VSO to visit Vietnam every year since 1992” to observe recovery operations. Lumpkin also praised VFW’s annual trips to Russia and China to pressure those countries to provide additional information pertaining to U.S. unaccounted for. “We welcome VFW’s input and cooperation,” he said. “You can help by staying engaged as an active partner.”

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SVA Creates List of Colleges to Avoid

D. Wayne Robinson, president and CEO of Student Veterans of America (SVA), updated VFW members on his organization. On July 21, SVA, which boasts more than 1,000 chapters, released a statement warning student vets about which colleges and universities they should avoid. Robinson said this list was developed after numerous complaints about colleges planning to close that were heavily recruiting on military bases. "We cannot sit idly by and not say anything," Robinson said. "Our 'not-recommended' list will call attention to these campuses so that student veterans can make informed decisions on how to best use their benefits." Referring to VFW members as SVA's "big brothers and sisters," Robinson asked for VFW's continued support.

Recognizing Outstanding Service

Mike DeRosa, Burger King franchise owner, was awarded the *James E. Van Zandt Citizenship Award* for spearheading a campaign that has garnered more than \$2.6 million from Burger King customers for VFW's *Unmet Needs* program. DeRosa first approached VFW in 2007 with the idea of asking customers to donate \$1 for *Unmet Needs*. As the president of two companies that operate 13 Burger King restaurants in Wisconsin, DeRosa mobilized other Burger Kings across the country to get involved. In 2013, a total of 44 franchise owners representing 891 restaurants in 23 states gave nearly \$500,000 donated by their customers.

Receiving the *National Citizenship Education Teacher Awards* were Shirley Harmon Helton, Jeff Gephart and Tom Clark. Helton, a fifth-grade teacher at Fairlawn Elementary Magnet School in Fort Pierce, Fla., has students send care packages and letters to soldiers overseas. She also has her students host a cookout, and the proceeds are used to purchase items for the care packages. Helton also encourages her students to promote good citizenship through a program called *Banish Bullying*.

Gephart, a history teacher at Holloman Middle School on Holloman Air Force Base, N.M., has organized the Veterans Day program and parade on base. He is known for challenging his students to think about how the past affects the future. A teacher for 14 years, Gephart teaches students to value freedom.

Clark, a teacher at Lake Central High School in Saint John, Ind., created the Gold Star Honor Roll Project with his students. Started in 1986, the project includes the profiles of more than 1,350 Indianans killed in war from WWII through Afghanistan.

Air Force Lt. Col. Tim Davis accepted the VFW Commander-in-Chief *Gold Medal and Citation* on behalf of the 920th Rescue Wing headquartered at Patrick Air Force Base, Fla., which has saved more than 3,000 lives. Davis, a 28-year combat rescue pilot, noted that the 920th has made 1,221 combat rescues as the Air Force Reserve's first and only rescue squadron.

For his outstanding recruiting efforts, VFW Department of Missouri Service Officer Dennis Flynn was awarded the VFW Commander-in-Chief *Gold Medal and Citation*. A member of Post 2866 in St. Charles, Mo., Flynn recruited 508 veterans in the 2013-14 year.

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Allen “Gunner” Kent received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation* for his eight years of service as adjutant general at VFW National Headquarters. He retired in 2013. Kent was VFW commander-in-chief in 1994-95.

John J. McNeill, Jr., also received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation* for his 20 years of dedicated service working at the VFW Washington Office and VFW National Headquarters. McNeill retired as assistant adjutant general in 2013.

Past VFW Commander-in-Chief and current VFW Adjutant General John Hamilton received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation*.

Various Speakers

Michael DiYeso, president and CEO of Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, Pa., announced the *Medal of Honor Legacy* program for educators. It offers teachers a chance to stay at Freedoms Foundation and talk with Medal of Honor recipients, hear guest lecturers and visit historic sites in Philadelphia, giving them plenty to take back to their classrooms. DiYeso also mentioned the partnership with VFW’s Voice of Democracy program under which Department winners attend Freedoms Foundation events each June.

John Herrling, executive director of the campaign for the National Army Museum, provided attendees with an update on fundraising progress, while thanking VFW for its \$500,000 pledge. Herrling said four words can be used to describe how the museum wants to transform its visitors: energize, educate, honor and inspire. The campaign needs another \$30 million before it can break ground in late 2015.

A representative from Humana presented VFW with \$25,000, the result of a lot of steps taken in St. Louis. Convention attendees were encouraged to pick up a pedometer at the Humana booth. After returning the pedometers, Humana employees tallied total steps taken and made good on the monetary pledge. Some 1,700 pedometers were issued and 8 million steps logged.

Representatives from VFW’s National Home for Children gave an overview of activities and introduced the 2014 Buddy Poppy Child, Grant Gentges.

Al Lugo, a life member of Post 4781 in Ocala, Fla., discussed the benefits of VFW Veterans Village, a retirement home reserved exclusively for VFW and Ladies Auxiliary members.

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