

# An Interagency Experience with the *Department of Veterans Affairs*

**by Khanh T. Diep**

The experience of the past decade of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated the value of holistic thinking and problem-solving. Terms such as “team of teams” and “interagency coordination” have become fashionable, as military leaders seek ways to deal with complex challenges that defy one-dimensional solutions. While much professional discourse has focused on this topic within the context of counterinsurgency or national security strategy in general, there are other challenges facing the nation that require a similar, multi-faceted outlook. Recent headlines describe on-going challenges associated with providing benefits to returning veterans, a task that has never been more important. The obstacles to fixing this problem are numerous, and it is beyond the capability of a single agency to find a solution alone. The backlog in benefits claims, although only one of many such issues confronting the federal government, offers a clear illustration of the growing importance of true interagency cooperation and the need to educate military leaders to better facilitate this type of close coordination in the future.

The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSG) Interagency Fellowship is an invaluable program that not only provides professionally broadening experiences to those officers fortunate enough to participate, but also contributes to the synergy between the Department of Defense (DoD) and other agencies of the federal government. The fellowship has three objectives: (1) improve synchronization between the various agencies and the U.S. Army, (2) ensure continued partnership between the Army and those agencies, and (3) enhance interagency operations overall within the U.S. government. Recent conflicts as well as economic trends and other conditions within our country and across the globe portend an increased focus on interagency coordination in the coming decades. Therefore, this year-long fellowship that offers Intermediate Level Education credit is likely to remain an important program in the professional development of the Army’s officer corps.

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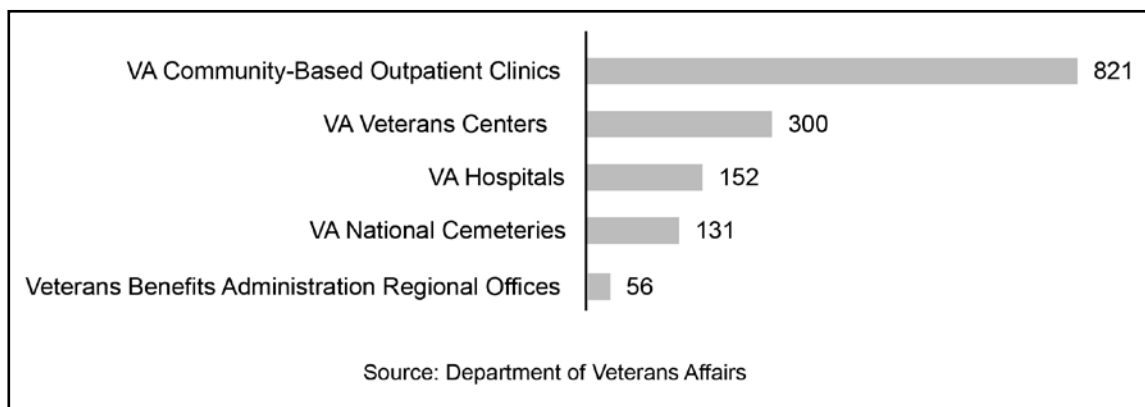
Among approximately 20 federal agencies that are part of the program, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) stands out as a vital player within the human resources arena. VA is the key interagency partner of DoD in ensuring the nation’s current military members and veterans continue to enjoy the benefits they have rightfully earned. This partnership is among the most important the interagency fellowship can help to enhance. An examination of the interagency fellowship experience at VA within the context of the program’s stated objectives provides an illustration of the program’s value in strengthening the department’s connection to the past and present members of the U.S. military. This article provides an informative look into the Department of Veterans Affairs by highlighting its Secretary’s three priorities of enhancing access, reducing veteran homelessness, and reducing the claims backlog. Furthermore, it aims to increase awareness of the healthcare coverage and benefits VA has to offer.

### Overview of the Department of Veterans Affairs

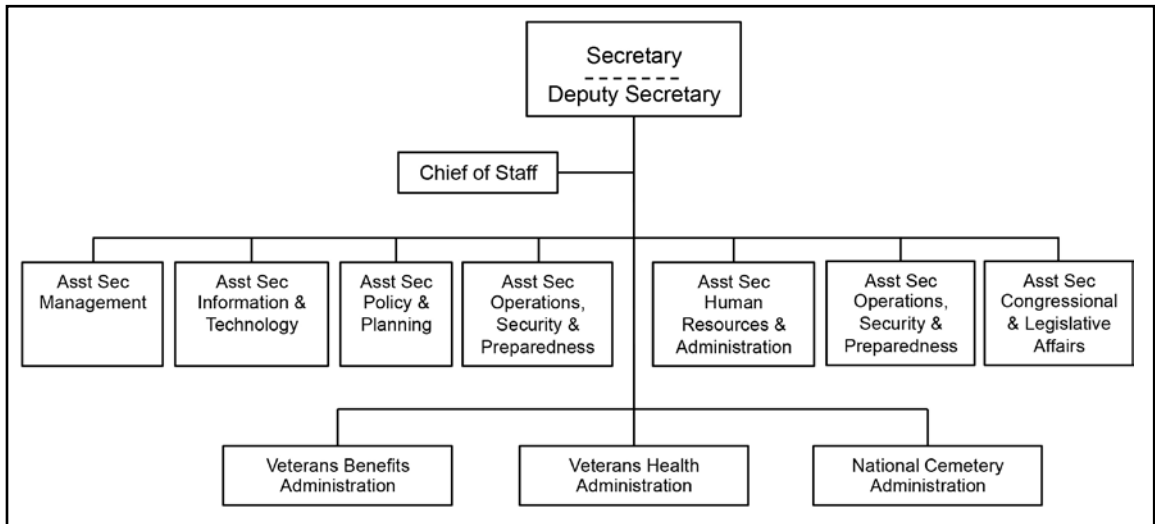
The Veterans Administration was established as an executive department in 1930 when Congress authorized the President to bring together all government activities and initiatives

related to veterans. Not until March 15, 1989, was the Department of Veterans Affairs created to succeed the Veterans Administration. VA is the second-largest of the 15 Cabinet departments and operates nationwide programs for healthcare, financial assistance, and burial benefits. It includes many different programs, each charged with administering different categories of services and benefits to currently-serving military members, as well as those who have left the service with eligibility for specific benefits. The three administrations of VA are the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA). Overall, VA consists of more than 323,000 employees that work in 152 VA hospitals, 821 Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), 300 Vet Centers, 56 VBA regional offices, and 131 national cemeteries located throughout the country (Figure 1).

The organizational chart in Figure 2 (pg. 54) outlines VA’s three administrations and other staff offices that serve as principal staff advisors to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs and oversee or administer programs in their respective areas of responsibilities. VA currently serves over 22.3 million veterans (Figure 3, pg. 54). VHA provides healthcare services to nearly 6.2



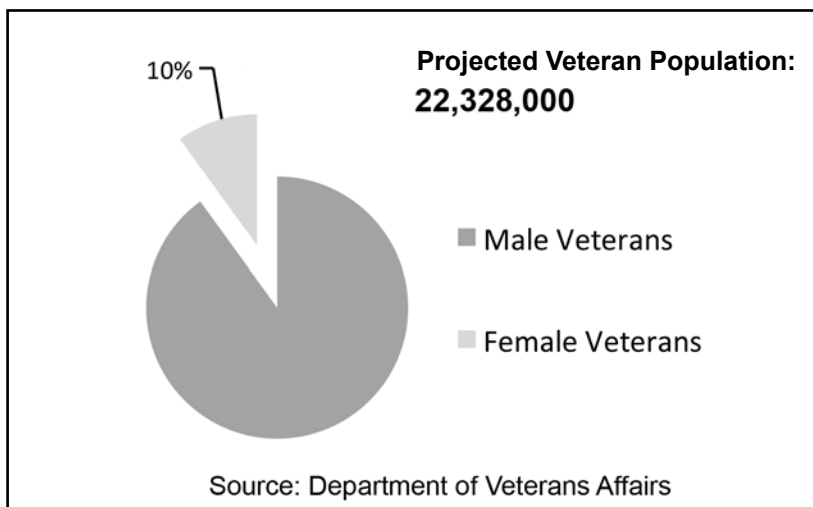
**Figure 1. Number of VA Facilities**



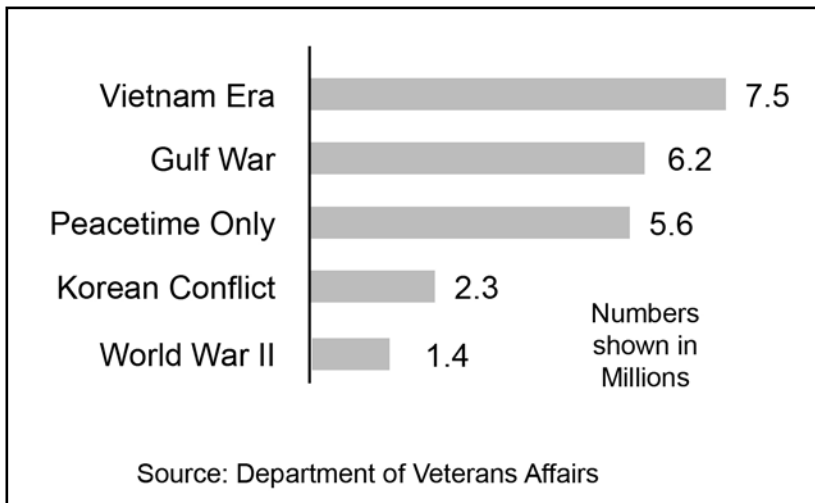
**Figure 2. VA Organization**

million veterans and is the nation's largest integrated healthcare system, with more than 1,700 hospitals, clinics, community living centers, domiciliary care programs, readjustment counseling centers, and other facilities.

Currently, the single largest, period-of-service component of the veteran population is the approximately 7.5 million individuals who served during the Vietnam era. (See Figure 4, pg. 55) VBA provides benefit programs and services that include compensation, education and training, home loans, life insurance, pension, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and other services. In fact, two children of Civil War Veterans still draw VA benefits, and about 184 children and widows of Spanish-American War Veterans still receive VA compensations or pensions. Finally, NCA currently maintains 3.1 million gravesites at 131 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico, as well as in 33 Soldiers' lots and monument sites. Burial and memorial benefits are available



**Figure 3. Veteran Population**



**Figure 4. Veterans by Period of Service Served by the VA**

for eligible service members, veterans, and family members.

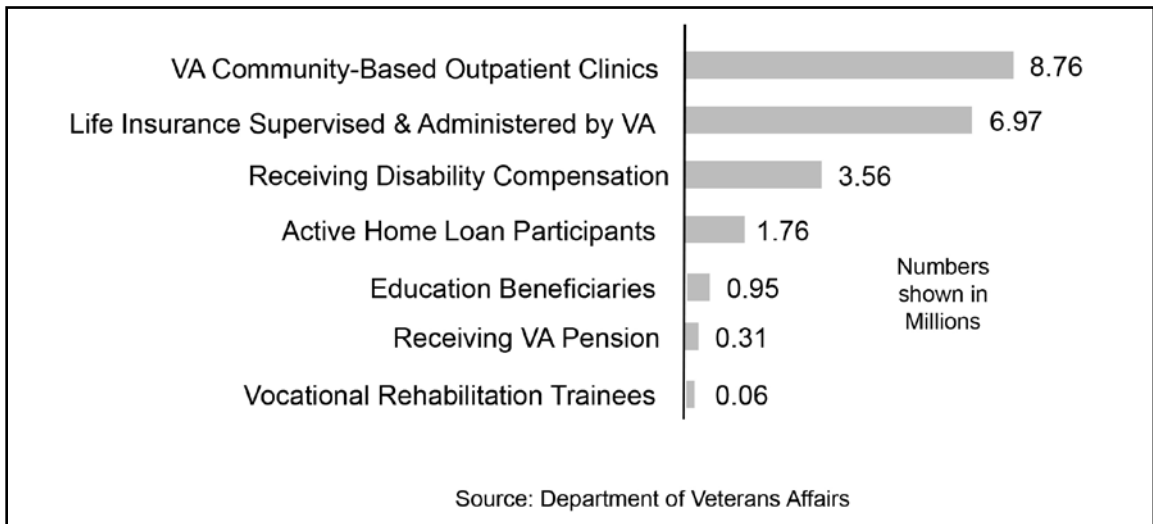
### **Interagency Synchronization: Improving Access and Knowledge of Claims Systems**

The partnership between VA and DoD is indispensable. It is hard to grasp this relationship if one does not truly understand the responsibilities, mission, and scope of VA and its three administrations. Everything from healthcare services to benefits including burials falls within the realm of VA's duties and responsibilities. Every active duty military member along with those in the National Guard and Reserve components who serves at least 90 days on active duty will transition to VA programs once they depart the service. Providing services and benefits to such a large number of potential customers requires efficient systems that are both accessible and readily understood by all. (See Figure 5, pg. 56)

For active duty personnel, healthcare services and benefits for the individual and family members are of paramount importance, and VA is the conduit for accessing them. Various initiatives aim to improve the synchronization between VA and DoD for every military member entering accession. For

instance, recent improvements to the online portal where veterans access benefits ([www.eBenefits.gov](http://www.eBenefits.gov)) allows for easier navigation of the online disability compensation claim submission process. This new format uses interview-style questions and drop-down menus similar to tax-preparation software, instead of the traditional fill-in the blank forms that users often find confusing because of the lack of detail or technical language. To help ensure this tool is readily accessible, Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS) now require new military members to establish an eBenefits account.

Despite recent negative headlines in the news media regarding the backlog in veterans' compensation claims, VA has begun several initiatives to deal with this problem. The Integrated Disability and Evaluation System (IDES) aims to reduce average waiting time for claims from 262 to 54 days after separation. IDES is currently operating at 139 military installations, and VA Military Service Coordinators serve as liaisons for the service member and his/her family throughout the IDES process. Furthermore, the Veterans Benefits Management System, an electronic claims system, will be in use at all 56 VBA regional



**Figure 5. Veteran Use of VA Benefits**

offices by the end of 2013, providing veterans with another online avenue for submitting their claims. Maximizing the use of these online systems is important to the overall speed and efficiency of claims processing. Many do not realize that VA still serves veterans' families going back to the Civil War era, and many claims, once started on paper through the much slower manual processes, will be followed through on paper, thus prolonging the process. The time delay in processing often causes many veterans to re-file, as they believe their claims need to be upgraded or have somehow been lost in the system. This redundant filing creates further backlogs.

In understanding the reasons for the backlog in veterans' benefits processing, the most revealing statistic is that 61 percent of claims in the current inventory are supplemental. These are requests to adjust current claims based on changes in benefits policy, such as the 2009 decision to add conditions incurred from exposure to Agent Orange, or because of new or changed medical conditions, such as an increase in disability compensation. Additionally, nearly eight out of every ten of these supplemental claimants are already receiving monetary benefits from VA. Since supplemental claims

are inherently more complex to begin with, the presence of already existing monetary compensation serves to further complicate and delay the claims process, since it takes even more time to review each request on a case-by-case basis. When combined with redundant filing on the part of claimants, it is easy to see the magnitude of the challenges facing VA in this very important area.

To meet these challenges, VA must maximize its use of the above-described, newly improved systems. To do so, both VA and DoD must continue to educate veterans about how to gain access to services and benefits. Such efforts will serve to make VA a trusted and lifelong partner for the nation's veterans. Within the military itself, leaders must ensure service members understand the systems at their disposal for accessing benefits. Synchronization between VA and DoD is critical to improving interagency operations that affect the veteran population.

### **Partnership: Mobilizing Support for Veterans**

Partnership between VA and DoD has increased over the last several years. The most current White House initiative "Joining

Forces,” a comprehensive effort with DoD, VA, veteran services organizations, private companies, schools, and local communities, connects service members, veterans, and military spouses with VA-provided resources as they seek employment in the civilian sector. VA identified six major areas where it can help by developing programs and providing robust resources to:

- Increase behavioral healthcare services through prevention-based alternatives and integration of community-based services. Specifically, the development of a joint DoD/VA integrated mental health strategy to better determine mental health conditions.
- Build awareness among military families and communities that psychological fitness is as important as physical fitness. With the Department of Health and Human Services and DoD, leverage partnerships with professional associations and academic institutions to ensure military culture is included in core curricula and published standards.
- Eliminate homelessness and promote housing security among veterans and military families. VA has partnered with the Department of Urban Development and other federal agencies to end veteran homelessness by 2015.
- Increase opportunities for federal careers, which include increasing outreach to military spouses in the federal hiring process.
- Increase opportunities for private-sector careers, such as the development of two veteran-owned small business projects: Women Veterans Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship and Operation Endure and Grow.

- Increase access to educational advancement to include continued support of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which is transferable to military spouses and dependents.

As the U.S. continues to recover from the recent economic downturn, programs such as those listed above are examples of what today’s military families and veterans deserve from the nation they have served so well. These initiatives are just the start of the partnership that VA, in coordination with DoD, is in the process of establishing with civilian organizations, private businesses, and local communities.

### **Interagency Operations: Change and Challenges**

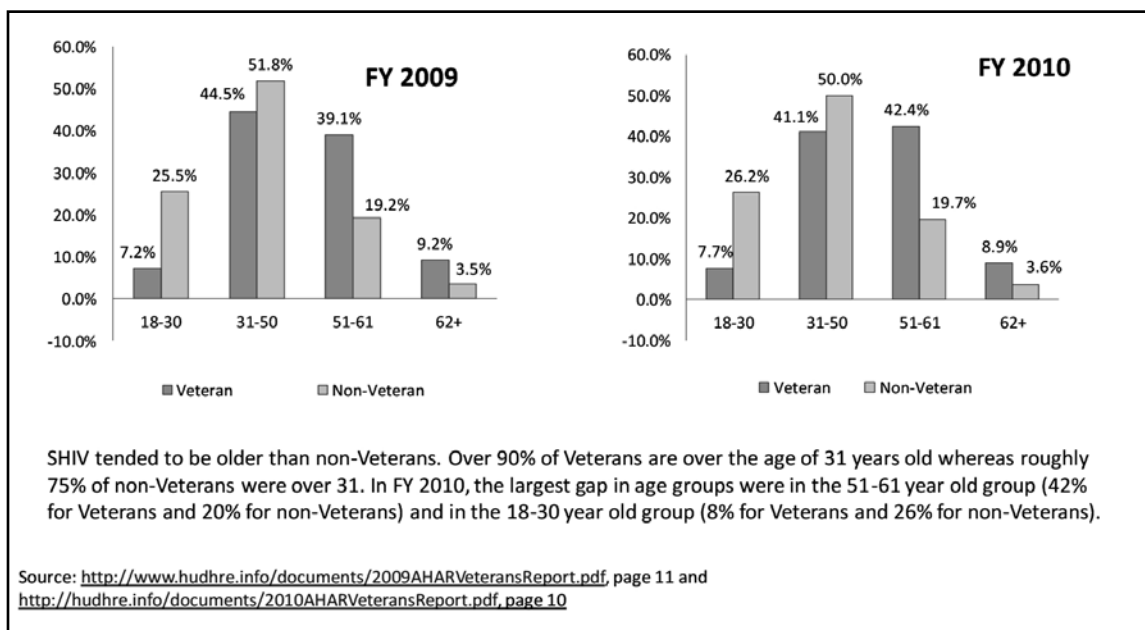
VA is constantly evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of veterans. One of the more recent changes to these needs is a significantly increased population of women veterans. At the end of World War II, women made up only 2.4 percent of the active duty force. Today, women make up approximately 15 percent of the active duty force and 18 percent of the National Guard/ Reserve components.

In the past decade while fighting two major wars, the military has faced unprecedented challenges. Recently, the DoD lifted the ban for women in combat and included openly homosexual men and women within its ranks. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury as a result of multiple deployments have placed additional stress on veterans and the agencies who are tasked with helping them readjust to society. Upon returning home, many transition out of the military only to face a grim job market. In such an environment, it is more important than ever that VA and DoD have a strong capability to link-in with other agencies of the federal government to assist military members through the trials that await them both in and out of uniform.

Both VA and DoD are reaching out in

a coordinated manner to other agencies, such as the Department of Labor (DOL), through programs such as the Warrior Care and Family Support and “Soldier for Life” initiatives. These programs prepare Soldiers, veterans, and families to leave military service “career ready” and find an established network of enablers to connect them to employment, education, and healthcare opportunities. Improving the quality and timeliness of small processes can assist the veteran to successfully reintegrate back into civilian society and receive benefits in a timely manner. One such change is the paperless processing of the DD Form 214, “Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty,” from DoD to stakeholders such as VA, DOL, and other required agencies.

Ending homelessness remains a challenge. Although homeless veterans represent a relatively small share of the total veteran population, less than 1 percent (1 in 150 veterans), veterans are overrepresented among the homeless population. VA provides healthcare and benefits to more than 100,000 homeless veterans each year and continues to engage veterans in outreach, medical care,



**Figure 6. Age Distribution of Sheltered Homeless Individual Veterans and Non-Veterans**

benefits assistance, transitional housing, and case management for veterans in permanent housing.

The charts in Figure 6 used data from the 2009 and 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Reports to Congress. They were sponsored by HUD and VA. A sheltered, homeless, individual veteran is a homeless veteran who uses emergency shelters or transitional housing facilities. This chart illustrates their demographic characteristics and compares them with non-veteran, homeless, individual adults for fiscal years 2009 and 2010. In 2010, veterans account for 10 percent of the total adult population and 16 percent of the homeless adult population. However, veterans comprised 13 percent of sheltered, homeless adults in 2010 and 16 percent of homeless adults at a given point in time.

## **Conclusion: Value of the Interagency Fellowship**

Close interagency cooperation is the key to solving the nation's most pressing foreign and domestic issues. In order to remain a constructive contributor in solving these complex problems, leaders at all levels must be prepared to operate comfortably in collaborative environments where other agencies of the federal government are co-equal (and often senior) partners. Few problems of national significance are solved by one element of national power—or one governmental agency. The scope and complexity of today's problems, both international and domestic, require multi-faceted approaches that synchronize initiatives over time and result in true partnership among agencies with mutually supporting capabilities and shared objectives.

These situations are not limited to the complex battlefields of counterinsurgency campaigns, as evidenced by the challenges associated with eliminating the backlog in VA benefits claims. In this case, DoD and VA are working together to forge real solutions by synchronizing efforts to facilitate the transition of personnel from active duty service, as well as partnering to find better ways of connecting veterans and their families with the services and programs available to them. New dynamics, such as a vast increase in the number of women veterans and rampant homelessness among our veteran population, further magnify the need for effective multiagency solutions. None of this would be possible without the type of teamwork and understanding that arises out of true interagency cooperation.

The CGSC Interagency Fellowship provides just such an opportunity to place military officers in a position to directly participate in developing solutions and building understanding that will allow greater coordination between DoD and other governmental agencies. The objectives of this program are in direct alignment with the requirements of today's complex and challenging world. As the U.S. Army moves into the second decade of the twenty-first century, the synergy of interagency operations will depend, in large part, upon the ability of Army leaders to operate effectively with representatives of organizations outside DoD. There is no better program to prepare those leaders for this task than the U.S. Army CGSC Interagency Fellowship Program. **IAJ**