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CalVet CONNECT

CalVet Honors African American Veterans

Black History Month

CALVET
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Acting Secretary's Message

I am delighted and honored by Governor Brown's appointment to be our Acting Secretary here at the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) and for the opportunity to serve California's nearly two million Veterans and their families.

I am not a Veteran myself, but as the daughter and spouse of Veterans, my commitment to providing the services all Veterans deserve and are entitled to receive runs deep. I intend to diligently ensure our Golden State Veterans and their families are provided the highest level of services from CalVet.

I am passionate about good government, with a focus on developing human resources, prudent fiscal management, and the creation of outstanding organizational structures that support our core mission – serving the Veterans and their families. I am committed to ensuring CalVet's resources are used creatively, efficiently, effectively and transparently.

While serving as your Acting Secretary, I will:

- Do everything in my power to clear obstacles and distractions that interfere with our primary goal of serving Veterans;
- Help create the best internal structure possible to enhance our ability to provide advocacy and services;
- Work collaboratively with CalVet's partners to assure that the state's Veterans receive information about and can take advantage of the benefits and services available to them;
- Ensure a family-friendly and highly productive working environment for all CalVet employees; and
- Help us become the model state for best practices in serving our Veterans.

CalVet staff and our stakeholders are the keys to our accomplishments. With your cooperation, we will focus in on our mission to provide advocacy and services for California's Veterans.

February is designated National African American History Month – a time we acknowledge and honor the many contributions and accomplishments of our African-American brothers and sisters. In all fields of endeavor, including in their patriotic and selfless military service. Many African-Americans rose above the hatred and discrimination and became some of our nation's most notable and most-admired citizens.

California is proud to be home to more than 173,000 African American Veterans. The contributions of courageous African American men and women in our military and in our nation's history are immeasurable. African Americans served in every major conflict with distinction.

Recognizable groups are Buffalo Soldiers and Tuskegee Airmen. In addition, there are countless heroes within the military ranks: William Carney, a Military Officer with the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry; Cathay Williams, Buffalo Soldiers (she enlisted disguised as a man and only woman known to have served as a Buffalo Soldier); Carl Brashear, first black Master Diver in the Navy and immortalized in the movie "Men of Honor" by Cuba Gooding Jr; plus many hundreds of thousands more.

We are stronger as a nation because of these men and women and we salute and thank you for your service. During the month of February, CalVet's Minority Affairs Division is posting specific examples of our African American Veterans on Facebook.

Finally, I want to take a moment of personal privilege to thank Secretary Peter J. Gravett, an honored Veteran and your recent Secretary, who gifted me with many hours of his time and his wealth of knowledge. I am forever grateful and wish him a wonderful and fun-filled retirement.

Yes, I have big shoes to fill here at CalVet with Secretary Gravett's retirement. I am hopeful you will help me as I begin this journey as your Acting Secretary.

I look forward to working together as a team while we move CalVet forward, break down barriers and improve the lives of the men and women who put their lives on the line for us all.

Sincerely

Acting Secretary
California Department of Veterans Affairs

CalVet Honors African American Veterans, Bids Adieu to Retiring Peter J. Gravett

By Mirtha Villarreal-Younger, CalVet Deputy Secretary for Minority Veterans Affairs

Each February since 1976, our nation celebrates Black (African American) History Month, during which we acknowledge and celebrate the many contributions of African Americans in our Nation's history.

The list of African American heroes is very long and includes: President Barrack Obama, Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, Malcom X., W.E.B. Debois, Josephine Baker, Lena Horne, to name just a few.

Among notable California African-American Veterans leaders who have and continue to impact our Veterans community we find Delphine Metcalf-Foster, Disabled American Veterans; Robert "Bobby" McDonald, Orange County Black Chamber of Commerce, Buffalo Soldier; Hugh Crooks, Past Commander, The American Legion; Patricia Jackson-Kelley, Los Angeles County Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans; and Michael Dolphin, Chief, Los Angeles and Ventura Counties Workforce Division. These leaders possess an unwavering passion and dedication to improving the lives of our Veterans and their families.

This list of admirable individuals would not be complete without the name of Peter J. Gravett, former Secretary, California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet). Gravett, a dedicated individual, broke through color barriers and excelled in his chosen fields of military service, law enforcement, and advocacy for Veterans.

This month CalVet bids farewell to this dedicated and courageous man. Gravett is a reluctant and humble hero, and CalVet has been privileged to have flourished under his leadership these past four years. He is an inspiration and a role model for those who know him. We honor him this month by highlighting just a few of the accomplishments during his admirable career.

Gravett earned an undergraduate degree in criminology from California State University, Long Beach and a Master of Public Administration from the University of Southern California. He earned executive diplomas from the University of Virginia and from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Gravett is also a graduate of the U.S. Army War College and the FBI National Academy.

His career spanned more than half a century. He worked for more than 22 years with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as a uniformed officer in investigations and in support services. He was awarded the LAPD's Medal of Valor for saving the life of a teenage boy who had been attacked by a mob outside the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Gravett retired from the California National Guard as a Major General. He made history several times in the Guard, most notably as the first African American Division commander in the Guard's 350+ year history.

During his tenure at CalVet, Gravett expanded the department's outreach, education, and advocacy in service to California's nearly two million Veterans and their families. We are proud to have had him as our leader and wish him the best in his retirement.

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Governor Appoints Endsley CalVet Acting Secretary

On January 9, 2015, Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. appointed Debbie Endsley as Acting Secretary of the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet). Endsley replaces Peter J. Gravett, who retired in January.

Endsley was a consultant at the California Department of Parks and Recreation in 2012 and at the CalHR Project from 2011 to 2012. Endsley was director at the California Department of Personnel Administration from 2009 to 2011, where she served in several positions from 1998 to 2011, including chief deputy director and chief of the benefits division.

Endsley was a research analyst at the California Public Employees' Retirement System from 1995 to 1998 and an associate budget analyst at the California Department of Rehabilitation from 1988 to 1995, where she was an associate personnel analyst from 1984 to 1988.

Endsley's father, Jerry J. Davis and spouse, Donald W. Endsley are Veterans.

Acting Secretary Endsley had been retired for two years prior to receiving the Governor's Office call when Secretary Gravett announced his retirement. According to Endsley, CalVet was one of the few state departments she wished she had worked for during her 37 year career in public service.

Since her appointment, Endsley began actively reaching out to many of the Veteran's advocacy groups, Legislators and other stakeholders with a statement worth repeating: "the people I've started working with are amazing, mission focused, and dedicated. I hope during my time as Acting Secretary I am able to help move the Agency forward with our fabulous staff."

CalVet Home Loan Program Changes Lives!

The CalVet Home Loan Program helps Veterans and their families buy the homes of their dreams by offering low interest rates, affordable mortgage payments, low costs, and the security of a great-value home protection package. Our program's expanded eligibility requirements may also make home ownership a reality for Golden State Veterans whose family situations are complicated or whose credit scores are less than stellar.

Since CalVet home loan specialists do not work on commission or receive other special compensation for closing a home loan, our Veteran loan seekers and their families can be assured they will receive the best possible home-buying advice and service for the life of the loan.

According to customer service surveys, the CalVet Home Loan customer satisfaction rate is 96% based on service received during the processing of their CalVet loan application. The many thank you notes CalVet receives after loans have closed bear this out. Following are just a few examples.

In December, 2014, a Veteran family came into CalVet and applied for a home loan. After being approved for the loan, the Veteran and his wife sat down with their escrow agent and signed the all necessary CalVet loan documents. Prior to CalVet funding and closing the Veteran's loan, CalVet's rates were reduced from 3.9% to 3.75%. The CalVet loan agent called the Veteran to report the interest rate had dropped and invited the family back to escrow to sign new documents so they could take advantage of the lower interest rate and lower payments. The handwritten note our loan specialist received in return is truly heartwarming:

> ***You went out of your way for us. You didn't have to call us and have us resign the papers . . . . That extra money every month will be going towards our grand kids' schooling. You are a light in the darkness. God bless you and yours!***
>
> ***P.S. You really took care of your Veterans.***

Another family wrote:

> ***I wish there was some way to repay you for helping us. I know it is your job but there is no doubt in my mind that you went way overboard to make sure we got the loan and the house. We are so happy for the house and the great neighborhood we are moving into. I feel so complete now that I can give my family a beautiful home and an area where they can grow up with fantastic schools. Thank you from my heart and soul!***

One letter CalVet received recently came from the father of a family with three children, two of them with special needs. The Veteran's spouse had to quit nursing school to care for the family. Because of this, the Veteran found himself facing financial hardship. Credit problems soon followed. Unable to work with a conventional lender because of his past bad credit, the Veteran came to CalVet in desperation. Now, happily settled in a new home that accommodates their family and its unique needs, the Veteran called to thank CalVet for what he described as a "life changing experience for the whole family."

Contact CalVet today to learn more about the CalVet Home Loan Program and whether you qualify for a CalVet home loan. Call (916) 503-8318 or visit www.calvet.ca.gov/homeloans.

Names of 31 Service Members to be Added to California Vietnam Veterans Memorial

During March, the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial Name Committee will add the names of 31 service members to the California Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Capitol Park in Sacramento.

The names of 10 California Veterans will be added to the state memorial that are already etched into the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., but not on the California memorial. Those Veterans are:

- **Johnny Owen Brooks**
- **Donald Scott Carson**
- **James Douglas Chappell**
- **David McLean Desilets**
- **John Edward Granville**
- **Thomas Randolph McCormick**
- **Richard Monroe Pruett**
- **Robert Michael Swick**
- **Richard John Tortorice**
- **John Henry Van Wyk**

The Committee will also add the names of 21 California Sailors who died while aboard the USS Frank E. Evans when the ship sank during a training exercise in the South China Sea on June 3, 1969. The destroyer's home port was Long Beach, California. Those Sailors are:

- **Andrew James Botto**
- **Robert George Brandon**
- **William Daniel Brown II**
- **Christopher John Carlson**
- **Danny Victor Clute**
- **Joe Eddy Craig**
- **Leon Larry Deal**
- **Steven Frank Espinosa**
- **William Donald Fields**
- **Henry Kenneth Frye**
- **Francis Joseph Garcia**
- **Devere Ray Grissom, Jr.**
- **James William Kerr**
- **Isaac Lyons, Jr.**
- **Andrew Martin Melendrez**
- **Gregory Koichi Ogawa**
- **Craig Allen Pennell**
- **John Raymond Spray**
- **Jon Kenneth Stever**
- **Ronald Arthur Thibodeau**
- **John Thomas Tolar**

All 31 names are set to be unveiled at a ceremony in Sacramento's Capitol Park scheduled for Sunday, March 29, 2015, the day before Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day. Event details will follow. The public is invited. Please save the date.

The Committee is attempting to raise the $9,000 in private donations needed to add the names and is calling on all veterans service organizations, posts, chapters, individual Veterans, Veteran supporters, and businesses to help . To learn how you can make a donation to this effort, go to http://cavbf.org/index.php/make-a-donation. Donations of any amount are greatly appreciated.

The Committee, created when Governor Brown signed AB 287 in 2013, is tasked with adding names of men and women killed during the Vietnam War. The Committee is also charged with reviewing the names of men and women whose deaths after returning from service in Vietnam were determined by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to be service-connected. Under the provisions of the law, written by Assemblymember Jim Frazier, Jr., the Committee must compile a list of names to be added to the memorial by November 1 of each year.

Meet the California Veterans Board

The California Veterans Board serves as an advocate for Veterans affairs identifying needs and working to ensure and enhance the rights and benefits of California Veterans and their dependents. Following are the current Board members:

Charlene Taylor serves as Chairperson and has been a Board member since 2012. Charlene retired in 2013 as a Chief Operating Officer from Kaiser Permanente, Sacramento. She is a Registered Nurse and holds a Master's Degree in Nursing Administration. Charlene was a Lt. Col. the U.S. Air Force, a flight nurse, and a Chief Nurse. She is a member of the Reserve Officers Association and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Hugh E. Crooks, Jr. is Vice-Chairperson and was appointed to the Board in April, 2014. Crooks has held multiple positions, including Operations Manager, Safety Police Chief, Booking Clerk, and Rifleman in the U.S. Army. He is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and a past State Commander of the American Legion.

Caroline Christina Morales was appointed to the Board in April, 2014. She is a Lt. Col. and Commander of the California Army National Guard 40th Brigade Support Battalion and pro bono counsel at the Children's Attorney Project. A member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, Caroline holds a Juris Doctor degree. She is a member of Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion.

Sean Sargeant was appointed to the Board in April, 2014. He is a Deputy Probation Officer for the Orange County Probation Department. Sean served as Master Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corp., is a current Reservist, and is a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Gena Truitt was appointed to the Board member in April, 2014. She is a Case Manager at U.S. Vets. Gena was an assistant and intern for U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer. She served in the U.S. Navy and holds a Master of Social Work degree. She is a member of the American Legion.

John Farrell has been a Board member since 2011. He served in the U.S. Army as a writer and photographer. He is an attorney and was a part-time law instructor. Currently a resident of the Chula Vista Veterans Home, John serves as Chair of their Allied Council and is an officer of AMVETS, Post 700.

Christina (Tina) Lassiter was appointed Executive Officer for the Board in December, 2014. Prior to that, Tina spent 19 years working for the California Senate. She also worked in the private sector for a lobbying firm. Tina has been an aerobics instructor at an Elk Grove gym for the last 16 years.

"New" Discharge Upgrades and PTSD

On September 3, 2014, the Secretary of Defense issued a memorandum providing guidance to the Military Department Boards for Correction of Military/Naval Records (BCM/NR) as they carefully consider each and every petition brought regarding "under other than honorable conditions discharge" upgrade requests by Veterans claiming posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This includes a comprehensive review of all evidence provided by the applicant.

BCM/NR issued policy guidance intended to ease the application process for Veterans seeking redress and to assist the Boards in reaching fair and consistent results in these cases. The guidance also mandates liberal waivers of time limits, ensures timely consideration of petitions, and allows for increased involvement of medical personnel in Board determinations.

For more information, including frequently asked questions, and to apply, visit http://arba.army.pentagon.mil/adrb-ptsd.cfm.

2015 Goal for USDVA Claims Backlog Appears Out of Reach

By Leo Shane III, Staff Writer

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) boasted another dramatic drop in its backlog of benefits claims in 2014, but will need an extra boost in coming months to meet its goal of zeroing out the payout delays by the end of 2015.

The backlog — the number of first-time USDVA benefits claims unresolved for more than four months — sits at around 245,000 cases, according to departmental data. That's down more than 160,000 cases in 2014 and more than 250,000 cases since the start of 2013.

But despite that solid progress, USDVA workers are still not on pace to fully eliminate the backlog by the end of next year, a goal long promised by department officials.

"I think they can get close, but I don't think they can get to zero," said Jackie Maffucci, research director for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "Just looking at the numbers, it's doubtful."

After two years of intense focus from lawmakers and critics, attention on the claims backlog has waned since early 2014. Worries about the thousands of veterans waiting for disability payouts were overtaken by worries about lengthy care delays at USDVA medical centers and data manipulation by department officials, scandals that forced the resignation of former USDVA Secretary Eric Shinseki.

In recent remarks, new USDVA Secretary Bob McDonald has reaffirmed the promise to not only zero out the backlog, but improve the process to prevent future delays in processing claims.

USDVA workers completed more than 1.3 million compensation and pension claims in fiscal 2014, a new record. Over the last two years, officials have used a combination of digital innovations, new software and worker overtime to aggressively whittle down the backlog total.

But the enormity of the workload — Maffucci says she sees no signs of a near-term drop in the number of incoming claims — and the size of a backlog that peaked above 610,000 cases in March 2013 make zero an elusive goal.

"And getting to zero is still important, because it's a promise that was made to veterans," said Maffucci, who tracks the department's progress each week on the IAVA website. "Our members still tell us this is one of their top concerns. Keeping that promise still matters."

As part of their budget agreement in December, lawmakers allotted an extra $40 million in USDVA funds for new backlog-related initiatives, including digital scanning of claims, hiring additional claims processors in regional offices, bolstering new mail and coordination projects.

They also added about $11 million to the USDVA budget request for the Board of Veterans Appeals to address the next disability claims problem: the appeals backlog.

Since the first-time claims backlog began dropping, the number of appeals has risen steadily, from about 245,000 cases in March 2013 to more than 287,000 cases today.

USDVA officials have said that's due to a larger number of cases coming in, not a reflection of first-time claims being shifted into the appeals pile. Still, with appeals cases taking several years to complete, on average, veterans groups have raised concerns about that rising total.

The first-time claims backlog has remained stalled since early November, which mirrors similar holiday slowdowns for USDVA processors in recent years.

The department will need to make more progress in January and February to reach its zero goal by next December.

Posted: 12:10 p.m. EST December 31, 2014. Reprinted with permission.

See related update on our CalVet Strike Teams on **page 14**.

21 Reasons Why USDVA is Heading in the Right Direction for 2015

By Reynaldo Leal

2014 was a roller coaster year for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA). The early months of 2014, saw USDVA chugging upward hacking away at the claims backlog, improving access for mental health care, home loans and providing record benefits to Veterans and their family members. In March, 2014, the Department celebrated 25 years as a cabinet-level agency.

But in May, the Phoenix scandal overshadowed all of those accomplishments. Acting Secretary Sloan Gibson took the helm and immediately ordered for VA to come clean, providing full disclosure to the public about any and all discrepancies it uncovered.

Secretary Bob McDonald continued that level of transparency and began a push to regain the trust of Veterans – visiting with Veterans from coast-to-coast – listening to their needs, their complaints and their ideas for improvement. He orders accountability and immediate action and, through our MyVA initiative, is helping USDVA work to ensure Veterans are in control of how, when and where they want to be served.

The USDVA's biggest success of 2014 may arguably be the wakeup call that is leading the much needed change well into the new year; however, we cannot overlook what was accomplished by the vast majority of employees and volunteers that embody USDVA's I CARE core values and their sense of duty to our nation's Veterans. Their top accomplishments follow:

1. I CARE

Secretary Bob McDonald asked all VA employees and volunteers to recommit themselves to the principles of I CARE. These values — Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence — define our culture and strengthen our dedication to those we serve. They provide a baseline for the standards of behavior expected of all USDVA employees.

2. Medical appointments on track

Nationally, USDVA has completed 24 million appointments between June 1, 2014 and October 31, 2014, which is a 1.4 million increase over the same time period in 2013.

3. Private-sector care for Veterans

USDVA made nearly 1.2 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector from June 1, 2014 through October 31, 2014, nearly doubling (48 percent increase) the authorizations made during the same period in 2013.

4. Building for the future

In 2014, USDVA activated 93 buildings, which resulted in 1,420,884 additional square feet for clinical, mental health, long-term care facilities, and administrative space.

5. Excellence in Service

For the fourth consecutive year, USDVA's Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy received the highest customer satisfaction score among the nation's public and private mail-order pharmacies, according to a J.D. Power study.

6. GI Bill turned 70, continues to change lives

USDVA celebrated the 70th anniversary of the GI Bill of Rights in 2014. In FY 2014, USDVA provided more than $10.8 billion in Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to service members, Veterans, and their families to enhance their economic opportunities. Since the inception of the program in 2009, more than $47 billion has been paid to more than 1.3 million Post-9/11 GI Bill participants (as of December 1, 2014).

In FY14, as part of the GI Bill of Rights, USDVA guaranteed 440,000 home loans totaling $100 billion, while also assisting 80,000 Veterans in avoiding foreclosure, saving taxpayers over $2.7 billion. Veterans Benefits Administration has maintained the lowest foreclosure rate for 25 consecutive quarters when compared to all other types of home loans.

7. More benefits for families and survivors

VA expanded the eligibility criteria for the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship to include the surviving spouses of service members who died in the line of duty after September 10, 2001. USDVA began accepting applications by mail for the Fry Scholarship under the newly expanded eligibility criteria on November 3, 2014.

8. USDVA Cemeteries tops in customer satisfaction

For the fifth consecutive time, USDVA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA) topped the American Customer Satisfaction Index's (ACSI) independent survey of customer satisfaction. NCA achieved a customer satisfaction index of 96, the highest ACSI score in either the private or public sector in the history of the survey.

9. USDVA employees continue to work on the claims backlog

In FY 2014, USDVA decided a record-breaking 1,320,870 disability compensation and pension (rating) claims for Veterans and Survivors – the highest in USDVA history.

Veterans waited, on average, 119 fewer days to receive a decision on their claims compared to the previous year. The claims backlog (any claim older than 125 days) has also been reduced from the peak of 611,000 in March 2013 to 239,000 as of November 30, 2014 – a 61 percent reduction and lowest number of backlogged claims in four years.

10. Fully Developed Claims exceeding goals

USDVA continues to exceed goals with regard to Fully Developed Claims. In FY 2014, 39 percent of claims received were submitted as Fully Developed Claims, up from three percent at initiative start in 2012.

11. More Veterans and families sign up for eBenefits

By the end of FY2014, USDVA had registered 4.2 million service members, Veterans, and family members in eBenefits. In addition, approximately 2,000 VSO representatives have credentials for accessing eBenefits through VBA's new Stakeholder Enterprise Portal, which enables them to file online compensation claims on behalf of Veterans.

12. USDVA goes digital

Under USDVA's technology initiatives, one major achievement has been its transition from an outmoded paper-intensive process to a fully electronic processing system, the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS).

Previously USDVA processed 5,000 tons of paper per year; now it is processing 93 percent of the disability claims inventory electronically. USDVA has converted over 1 billion documents to digital images that are being maintained in Veterans' electronic claim folders. In FY 2014, 1.4 million rating decisions and 820,000 claims were completed using VBMS.

13. USDVA keeps reducing the number of homeless Veterans

VA, together with federal, state, and local partners, reduced the estimated number of homeless Veterans by 33 percent as noted in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) 2014 Point-in-Time Estimate of Homelessness.

In FY 2014 alone, USDVA provided services to more than 260,000 homeless or at-risk Veterans in VHA's homeless programs. Not all Veterans required an intensive homeless program intervention, but for those that did, nearly 71,500 Veterans were either placed in permanent housing or prevented from becoming homeless.

14. USDVA hires more mental healthcare professionals

VA hired 782 psychologists and psychiatrists in 2014 as well as 257 other mental health providers, such as social workers, nurses and licensed professional counselors, and 45 mental health administrative support employees. These professionals are filling new positions and existing vacancies to meet the growing requirements for mental health services.

15. Veterans Crisis Line is expanded to help more Veterans

In response to the President's Executive Order, USDVA expanded the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line (VCL) by 50 percent, and enhanced its partnerships with community mental health providers.

In FY 2014, the VCL answered 374,050 phone calls, assisted 64,593 people through chat services and 13,463 people through text services. VCL responders assisted in sending emergency services (rescue) to 9,719 Veterans. Call volume answered by VCL in 2014 increased by 30 percent. Chat contacts increased by 18 percent, and Text contacts increased by 19 percent.

16. USDVA expands care for Veterans with military sexual trauma

Under authority from VACAA, USDVA expanded eligibility for Veterans in need of mental health care due to military sexual trauma (MST) that occurred during their military service. The expansion primarily pertains to Reservists and National Guard members participating in weekend drill, gives the authority to offer Veterans the appropriate care and services needed to treat conditions resulting from MST that occurred during a period of inactive duty training.

17. More healthcare options for women Veterans

USDVA has enhanced provision of care to women Veterans by focusing on the goal of developing Designated Women's Health Providers (DWHP) at every site where women access USDVA. USDVA has trained over 2,000 providers in women's health and is in the process of training additional providers to ensure that every woman Veteran has the opportunity to receive her primary care from a DWHP.

USDVA now operates a Women Veterans Call Center (WVCC), created to contact women Veterans and let them know about the services they may be eligible for. From April 2013 to April 2014 the WVCC received over 9,600 incoming calls and made over 93,000 outbound calls.

18. USDVA to reorganize and improve

VA is working to reorganize the department for success, guided by ideas and initiatives from Veterans, employees, and all of our stakeholders. This reorganization is a part of the MyVA initiative and is designed to provide Veterans with a seamless, integrated, and responsive customer service experience.

The Department developed the Blue Print for Excellence- a detailed vision of how VA will evolve as a model national health care provider delivering both excellent health care and an excellent experience of care to all Veterans served.

19. Enhancing accountability

In 2014, USDVA established the Office of Accountability Review to ensure leadership accountability for improprieties related to patient scheduling and access to care, whistleblower retaliation, and related matters that impact public trust in USDVA.

The U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) certified USDVA under their Whistleblower Protection Certification Program after USDVA worked to achieve compliance and protect employees who identify or report problems from unlawful retaliation. USDVA also worked closely with OSC to successfully resolve whistleblower retaliation complaints filed by three individuals from the USDVA Phoenix Health Care System.

In 2014, USDVA also began posting regular data updates that show progress in efforts to accelerate access to quality health care for Veterans who have been waiting for appointments. This data includes both pending and completed appointments at the facility level.

20. USDVA looks to recruit the best and brightest in the medical field

USDVA faces a competitive market to recruit and retain highly skilled health care providers, particularly mental health specialists, given the growing demand for these jobs in the private sector. Complex hiring processes for clinicians, to include requirements for boarding, credentialing, privileging, physicals, security/backgrounds, add to the department's challenge. We are working to close the pay gap between USDVA and private sector clinicians to make USDVA an employer of choice.

21. USDVA listening to Veterans and USDVA employees

In the aftermath of Phoenix, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Bob McDonald instructed all USDVA facilities to hold town hall meetings to engage Veterans as well as the USDVA employees that serve them. As a result of that first round of meetings coast-to-coast, Secretary McDonald mandated quarterly town hall meetings as a way to continue to improve communications with Veterans. These quarterly town-hall events are an important step toward improving the delivery of benefits and services and rebuilding trust among all those USDVA serves.

Looking forward to 2015

While USDVA recognizes these milestones, we continue to tackle the challenges of the department. We also embrace the opportunities for transformation that they bring.

To achieve lasting success for the department, USDVA must develop a strategy for meeting an increased demand for services and benefits, and for meeting the needs of a changing Veteran population. This includes preparing for the increasing numbers of women Veterans coming to USDVA for care; looking at the unique needs of post-9/11 Veterans; and using innovative approaches to reach every Veteran who needs services.

Sec. Bob McDonald wrote in the Baltimore Sun in October "Veterans need USDVA, and many more Americans benefit from USDVA." By focusing on three fundamental priorities in 2015 – rebuilding trust, improving service by putting the Veteran first, and setting the course for longer-term excellence and reform – USDVA's employees can better serve our Veterans and the American people.

CalVet Strike Team Update

CalVet Strike Team claims review efforts in San Diego, Los Angeles, and Oakland as of January 29, 2015.

Number of Claims Reviewed	**44,921**
Lump Sum Payments Total	**$45,603,451***
Monthly Award Payments Total	**$5,878,940**
Annualized Monthly Awards Payment Total	**$70,547,276****

*Retroactive payments based on the time the claim has been sitting at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
**Payments going to California veterans every year for the rest of their lives.

CalVet Small Business/ DVBE Update

CalVet's December Small Business (SB) / Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise (DVBE) Monthly Report for Fiscal Year 2014-2015 reflected the following estimates:

- Agency Total: **SB increase to 25.97% from 24.24%**
- Agency Total: **DVBE increase to 6.24% from 5.06%**

Congress Blocks Reduced Housing Allowance for Student Veterans

Bryant Jordan, Military.com

Veterans going to school on the GI Bill will not be affected by lower basic housing allowances that Congress imposed on active-duty troops, thanks to eleventh-hour lobbying efforts by two House committees and veterans' service organizations.

Without the provision, student vets would have seen their housing assistance lowered because their housing stipends are tied to the Basic Allowance for Housing rates of the active duty force.

"We set up literally until midnight with both committees to wall [the BAH rates] off from each other," said Steve Gonzalez, assistant director for The American Legion's Veterans Employment & Education Division in Washington, DC. "Right now you have a BAH number that only corresponds to the GI Bill and BAH that only corresponds to the active duty military."

Gonzalez said the fix is only temporary, however, and the Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars -- which also took part in the last-minute lobbying -- will begin working with the new Congress next week on a permanent solution.

The groups worked with the House Veterans Affairs Committee and House Armed Services Committee to get the language inserted into the National Defense Authorization Act, he said. The Senate committees were not involved at all even though they agreed with the final version of the bill that included the temporary fix, Gonzalez said.

The House Veterans Affairs Committee had been pushing legislation to exempt veterans from a 1 percent cut in the active duty BAH rate. The Defense Department sought the reduction as a cost-savings measure, apparently giving little thought to its impact on student veterans.

Veterans in school under the Post 9/11 GI Bill receive monthly housing allowances that are tied to the active duty BAH. The amount is based on the BAH rate for an E-5 with dependents and will go up or down each year in accordance with housing costs across the country.

Because housing costs vary from place to place, the allowances do as well.

For example, the current BAH for an E-5 with dependents at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, is $1,560. For an E-5 assigned to the Pentagon, the allowance is $2,175, according to the Defense Department's calculator. [To access the calculator, go to http://www.defensetravel.dod.mil/site/bahCalc.cfm]

The BAH reduction for service members will mean a loss of about $187 for an E-5 stationed at Fort Sam Houston, and about $261 for an E-5 assigned to the Pentagon. The amounts are relatively small but collectively represent millions in savings for the Pentagon.

The Pentagon originally asked for a 5 percent reduction to BAH over three years, but lawmakers backed off on that against pressure from veterans groups and military associations that lobbied on behalf of the active duty service members.

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LinkedIn for Our Veterans

LinkedIn, the number one online professional network, remains committed to assisting our Veterans connect with available jobs across America. LinkedIn offers U.S. Military Veterans a free one-year job seeker subscription. This is a great social media platform for our Veterans who are looking for work.

Veterans can use LinkedIn to create an online professional profile and social media presence. LinkedIn can also be used to find people, research companies, and find job opportunities. For more information about the LinkedIn job-seeker subscription, visit www.veterans.linkedin.com.

CALENDAR

February 7

Mega Muster/Career Fair
Marine Corps Reserve
7:30 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Hilton Hotel, Long Beach
Contact: (305) 546-0617

February 15

Disabled Veterans Pheasant Hunt
7:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Quail Point Hunt Club
29625 County Road 14, Esparto
RSVP Required: (530) 632-5207

February 18

Hiring our Heroes Resource Fair
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
American Legion Post 82
130 South Blvd., San Mateo
Contact: (202) 463-5807

Resolving Outstanding Tickets and Warrants
5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. : Self-Help Presentation
6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. : Consultations with pro bono attorneys
Patriotic Hall
1816 South Figueroa Avenue, Los Angeles

February 21

Tulare County Library
Veterans Resource Center Grand Opening
11:00 a.m.
475 North M Street, Tulare
Contact: (559) 713-2700

February 23

Honor a Hero/Hire a Vet Job & Resource Fair
South San Francisco Municipal Services Building
10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
33 Arroyo Drive, South San Francisco
Contact: http://bit.ly/18lDPg8

Note: To view full calendar, visit www.calvet.ca.gov/home/calendar

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