

The White House  
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 26, 2014

## FACT SHEET: President Obama Announces New Executive Actions to Fulfill our Promises to Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families

Today, President Obama will address the American Legion's 96<sup>th</sup> convention and outline the five priorities the Administration is focused on to ensure we are fulfilling our promises to service members, veterans and their families: delivering the quality health care veterans have been promised; ensuring all veterans have every opportunity to pursue the American Dream; providing the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) with the resources our veterans deserve; protecting the dignity and rights of all veterans; and eliminating the decades-old disability claims backlog.

The President will announce 19 new executive actions to serve the military community, including new efforts to strengthen service members' access to mental health care. The President will also highlight efforts to improve the transition between DoD and VA care for those leaving military service, and improve economic opportunity for our military families with new private-sector commitments that will make it easier to obtain mortgage interest rate reductions and reduced monthly payments – helping more of our troops save money through lower monthly payments. The President will also announce that the Administration is continuing to make significant progress toward reducing the number of veterans who suffer from homelessness. Over the past four years a third of homeless veterans, nearly 25,000, have moved off the streets, out of shelters and into housing. The President will also renew his call for community action -- asking every American to do their part to support our service members, Veterans, and their families.

All of these announcements, including the new executive actions and progress being made on existing efforts, reflect the commitment of the President and his administration to expanding opportunity for those who sacrifice so much to serve our country: our service members, veterans and their families.

### Delivering the Health Care Veterans Have Been Promised

#### Access to Quality VA Healthcare

The President and VA are committed to ensuring that veterans have access to the timely, high-quality health care that they have earned and deserve. Over the last several months, we have seen inexcusable delays in care at some VA health care facilities. We have taken a number of steps already to change the way VA does business to ensure that this never happens again, and we will keep at it as long as it takes.

- **Improving Access to Care:** To improve the access to care for our veterans, VA has taken several initial steps over the last several months, including: Reaching out to over a quarter million veterans to get them off waitlists and into appointments sooner and training or re-training approximately 10,000 schedulers. Additionally, VA has surged resources to the hospitals and clinics that need it most, including Phoenix. This includes deploying mobile clinics, adding more clinic hours, and recruiting additional and temporary staff members to VA medical centers nation-wide.
- **Accountability:** As the President has made clear, those responsible for manipulating or falsifying records at VA must be held accountable. VA established an independent accountability review board to review employee actions and hold them accountable where there is misconduct. VA has proposed action to relieve several employees of their responsibilities; additional investigations continue.
- **Recruiting the Best Medical Professionals:** This week VA will announce that it is launching a new recruiting campaign designed to help attract the best and the brightest medical professionals to work in the VA system, and to fill the shortages in health care workers, including doctors and nurses, at many VA facilities.
- **Electronic Health Records:** Key to helping Veterans and Service members receive better, safer, and more efficient care is modernizing VA and DoD's Electronic Health Record systems. Today, more than 5.3 million records are jointly accessible and more than 1.5 million pieces of health data are shared daily. By the end of this fiscal year, the Joint Legacy Viewer will be deployed to more DoD medical centers and every



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#### [Our Moral Obligation: President Obama Speaks to the Nation's Largest Veteran Service Organization](#)

President Obama traveled to Charlotte, North Carolina today to address the American Legion, the nation's largest veteran service organization, and pay tribute to the service and sacrifice of our veterans from every corner of the country and every generation.

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#### [Follow Along: White House Economist Betsey Stevenson Takes Over the "I Love Charts" Tumblr](#)

Today, White House Economist Betsey Stevenson is taking over the popular "I Love Charts" Tumblr blog in honor of Women's Equality Day. Follow along here, or on the White House Tumblr.

August 26, 2014 2:35 PM EDT

#### [Working Together to Support Our Military Families](#)

Every day, the men and women of our military perform incredible service on behalf of our country. And as the President has made clear, just as our service members have made a commitment to America, we have a commitment to them – to have their backs at home while they serve around the world.

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VA medical center. This viewer will allow DoD and VA providers to see nearly all of the electronic health records stored in both Departments' systems, including doctors' notes, problem lists, and inpatient discharge summaries.

- **New commitment to Transparency:** For the first time ever, VA is providing the public with regular, updated information on the timeliness of VA care and will continue to report regularly on quality of care on [VA.gov](http://VA.gov). This is more information than any private hospital in the United States currently provides.
- **Protections for Whistleblowers:** VA has reaffirmed and strengthened its commitment to protections for whistleblowers and the new leadership has been clear that retaliation against, or intimidation of, whistleblowers will not be tolerated. In addition, the VA has been working to achieve compliance with the Office of Special Counsel's whistleblower protection certification program.
- **Reforming VA:** Over the last several months, the Administration has taken action to reform the way VA operates. The 14-day scheduling goal has been removed from employee performance plans, and Secretary McDonald is convening a panel of experts to make recommendations on new standards for access to care. We will also establish a new board of physicians to advise the Secretary on best practices for delivering timely, quality care to our veterans, and to ensure that VA care remains the best care anywhere.

## Veterans Mental Health

The President will announce 19 new executive actions to improve the mental health of service members, veterans, and their families, which builds on the progress the Administration has made since the President's 2012 (Mental Health) Executive Order. In response to the 2012 Executive Order, VA has increased its mental health staffing, expanded the capacity of the Veterans Crisis Line, and enhanced its partnerships with community mental health providers; DoD and VA worked to increase suicide prevention awareness and, DoD, VA and the National Institutes of Health jointly developed the National Research Action Plan on military and veteran's mental health to better coordinate federal research efforts. The new mental health executive actions will fall under the following six categories:

- **Improving Service Members' Transition from DoD to VA and Civilian Health Care Providers:** DoD will now be automatically enrolling all service members leaving military service who are receiving care for mental health conditions in the Department's *in Transition* program, through which trained mental health professionals help these individuals transition to a new care team in VA. Currently, service members must be specifically referred to *in Transition* by their DoD provider or seek out the program on their own. Additionally, VA will implement a new policy to ensure that recently discharged service members enrolling in the VA health care system maintain access to mental health medication prescribed by an authorized DoD provider regardless of whether the medication is currently on VA's formulary, unless the health care provider identifies a specific safety or clinical reason to make a change.
- **Improving Access and Quality of Mental Health Care at DoD and VA:** VA will pilot the expansion of mental health peer support to veterans being treated in primary care settings. In addition, DoD has initiated action to do what they can under its authority and will continue to work with Congress to take action to bring TRICARE, DoD's health care coverage, up to full mental health and substance use disorder parity, meaning benefits for these conditions are generally on par with benefits for medical/surgical conditions.
- **Continuing our Commitment to Improve Treatments for Mental Health Conditions including PTSD.** In support of the National Research Action Plan on military and veteran's mental health, the DoD and the National Institutes of Health are launching a longitudinal project focused on the early detection of suicidality, PTSD, and long term effects of TBI, and other related issues in service members and veterans. VA is launching a \$34.4 million suicide prevention study involving 1800 veterans at 29 VA hospitals. In support of the President's BRAIN Initiative, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is announcing a new \$78.9 million research program to develop minimally-invasive neurotechnologies that may help treat many diseases, including PTSD. In addition, the White House announced that this fall it will host the White House BRAIN conference, including a focus on PTSD and TBI.
- **Raising Awareness About Mental Health and Encouraging Individuals to Seek Help:** VA and DoD are expanding their suicide prevention and mental health training for healthcare providers, chaplains, and employees who work directly with veterans.
- **Improving Patient Safety and Suicide Prevention:** VA and DoD are taking action to provide new opportunities for servicemembers, veterans, and their families to give back unwanted medications, and thereby help reduce the opportunities for abuse. The Departments are also taking action to encourage firearm safety and reduce the risk of overdose.
- **Strengthening Community Resources for Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families:** While all individuals can experience mental health conditions, service members, veterans, and their families may experience stressors unique to their time in the military. Understanding military culture and the experiences of service members and their families can help community providers best serve these individuals. DoD and VA will disseminate its existing military cultural competency training to 3,000 community mental health providers during FY 2015.

For the full list of executive actions, click [HERE](#).

**HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS ANSWER THE PRESIDENT'S CALL TO ACTION**

The American Nurses Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the American Nurses Association, is launching an innovative web-based PTSD Toolkit for registered nurses – all 3.1 million of them. The toolkit provides easy to access information and simulation based on gaming techniques on how to identify, assess and refer veterans suffering from PTSD. <http://www.nurseptsdtoolkit.org/>

In collaboration with First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden's [Joining Forces](#) initiative, the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) along with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP), the American Academy of Nursing (AAN), Give an Hour, and many others will collaborate to deliver "Joining Forces Wellness Week 2014." The week-long series of educational topics and programs will occur around Veterans Day. The cornerstone event will be a webinar focusing on military cultural competency, taking a military health history, generational differences in veterans, unique needs of guard and reserve personnel, and the needs of parents and family members of veterans.

### **Ensuring All Service Members Have Every Opportunity to Pursue the American Dream**

President Obama will announce a new voluntary partnership with financial lenders across the country that will help deliver important financial and home loan-related protections to our military community. Congress passed the Service members Civil Relief Act (SCRA) in 2003 to provide protections for military members as they enter active duty. Our Service women and men have earned important financial protections under the law, but too many do not exercise these important rights. But when business and government work together we can make a difference.

**Banks and Mortgage Servicers Answer the President's Call to Action:** [Wells Fargo Bank, N.A., CitiMortgage, Inc., Bank of America, N.A., Ocwen Loan Servicing, LLC, and Quicken Loans are partnering with the Administration to make it easier than ever for active duty service members to obtain mortgage interest rate reductions and reduce their monthly payments.](#) The partnership cuts red tape where possible and establishes concrete steps to reduce the burden on service members by having participating mortgage servicers proactively identify, notify and assist in enrolling eligible service members.

### **Key Provisions of the Partnership**

- **Proactive Identification of Active Duty Service Members:** Under the partnership, participating servicers will proactively identify active duty personnel no less than once a quarter by querying the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), a searchable database of individuals who were or on Title 10 active duty status, against their loan portfolio, reducing the burden on the service member.
- **Proactive Outreach to Eligible Service Members:** Participating mortgage servicers will proactively reach out to individuals that have been identified as being eligible for benefits under SCRA to notify them of their benefits. Servicers will leverage multiple marketing and communication tactics including telephone, mail, e-mail, or other reasonable forms of communication.
- **Simplify the Application Process:** Participating mortgage servicers will work together to ease the burden of enrollment and satisfaction of the SCRA written notice requirement.

**Ensure Active-Duty Military Get the Student Debt Relief They Are Entitled to:** In addition to the Administration's efforts to work with banks and mortgage servicers to ensure service members have access to the benefits they are eligible under the SCRA, the Department of Education has directed its federal student loan servicers to match their student borrower portfolios against DoD's database to identify active-duty service members who are eligible to cap interest rates on student loans – including federal student loans -- at 6 percent and to reduce those interest rates automatically for those eligible without the need for additional paperwork. This week, the Department released additional guidance to encourage Federal Education Loan program servicers to provide for a similar streamlined process.

### **Ensuring Veterans Have Access to a Quality Education**

- **Principles of Excellence:** Making good on our commitment to support Student veterans, President Obama will announce that this week, VA will launch an updated version of the [GI Bill® Comparison Tool](#) and that nearly 6,000 education institutions are now meeting the goals set out in the "Principles of Excellence" (POE) Executive Order. POE ensures schools are providing meaningful cost and quality information, preventing deceptive recruiting practices, and providing high-quality academic and student

support services. We know through the work of organizations like the American Council on Education, Institute for Veterans and Military Families, and Student Veterans of America that a successful student veteran is an informed student veteran. The Comparison Tool leverages many of the lessons learned from these organizations and others and makes it easier to calculate GI Bill® benefits and provides key information about college affordability and value so beneficiaries can choose the best education program to meet their needs. Since its launch in February 2014, there have been over 350,000 unique visitors to the tool. ([benefits.va.gov/gibill/comparison](http://benefits.va.gov/gibill/comparison))

- **Operation Educate the Educators and the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children:** Through First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden's [Joining Forces](#) initiative, all 50 States have now signed on to "Educate the Educators" with over 100 institutions of higher education committed to help train future teachers for the unique needs of military students. 50 States have also signed on to participate in the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children that helps provide consistent policies across school districts and states to help ease the transition for military connected students.

## **UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES ANSWER THE PRESIDENT'S CALL TO ACTION**

The President will announce that commitments to the [8 Keys to Veterans Success on Campus](#) have increased to more than 1,000 community colleges and university campuses and he called on more educational institutions to join this effort. Last year, the President challenged to educational institutions to adopt best practices supporting educational success and fostering postsecondary educational opportunities for veterans. At that time, only 250 community colleges and universities had signed up.

### ***Ensuring Veterans Have Access to Good-Paying Jobs***

- **Economic Communities of Interest:** The Administration is announcing that VA has developed specific campaign plans in 20 communities where public/private partnerships can make a significant difference in the lives of our transitioning service members, veterans and their families. These community based campaigns will last for two years and will promote awareness and use of education benefits and build veteran skill sets by expanding VA's existing partnerships with the Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Veteran Service Organizations and federal agencies. Each campaign will kick off with a two-day hiring summit.
- **Making it Easier for Qualified Service Members to Earn a Commercial Driver's License:** Thanks to the local community based efforts of many, including our Veteran and Military Family Service Organizations like the American Legion and others, for the first time all 50 States and the District of Columbia, now waive the skills test for qualified service members and veterans applying for a State Commercial Driver's License (CDL). For four years, the Administration has worked state-by-state, partnering with DoD, DoT, other Federal agencies and outside stakeholders to make it easier for military truck drivers to earn a CDL. The waiver process saves the CDL applicant time and money, making it easier to transfer the skills learned in the military to civilian life and a job. To date more than 6,000 service personnel have taken advantage of the Skills Test Waiver.
- **Veterans Employment Center:** Earlier this year, the Administration announced the [Veterans Employment Center](#), the first government-wide effort that brings together public and private employers with real job opportunities, and provides the military community with the tools to translate their military skills into plain language and build a profile that can be shared – in real time – with employers who have made a public commitment to hire veterans. The VEC lists over 1.5 million private and public sector jobs and consolidates over a dozen redundant sites. Employers have made commitments to hire over 150,000 individuals from the military community. The site averages over 50,000 users daily.
- **Veteran and Military Spouse Employment:** Through the Administration's Joining Forces initiative, businesses have trained or hired more than 540,000 veterans and military spouses. Furthermore, over 64,000 military spouses have been hired with 224 private- and public-sector partners since the program began three years ago. In addition, 48 States have removed credentialing impediments for separating service members and another 47 States are facilitating military spouse transition and licensure portability.

## **EMPLOYERS ANSWER THE PRESIDENT'S CALL TO ACTION**

The President has emphasized the important role employers play in increasing economic opportunity for veterans through stable employment opportunities—not just because it's good for veterans but because it's good for the bottom line. He is calling for more employers and educational institutions to take on innovative veteran

training partnerships. For example, corporate leaders like Blackstone have made veteran hiring a priority. Together with their portfolio company, Hilton Worldwide, they are partnering with Kendall College to develop a hotel management education and training program to provide transitioning service members and veterans on-the-job experience and an inside track to available jobs upon graduation from the program. All of this is bolstered by the veteran's use of their GI Bill® benefits.

#### **Protecting the Dignity and Rights of All Veterans**

**Ending Veteran Homelessness:** President Obama will announce that the number of veterans who suffer from homelessness has dropped by a third over the past four years as nearly 25,000 veterans have moved into housing. This announcement follows the First Lady's event in June, with HUD and VA, announcing the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. Through this Challenge, mayors, county executives, and governors are signing on to end veteran homelessness in their communities in 2015. To date, over 200 communities have signed on.

#### **COMMUNITY PARTNERS ANSWER THE PRESIDENT'S CALL TO ACTION**

There are over 4,000 homeless women veterans in our country today. These women veterans struggle to find employment and short and long-term housing, and subsequently may be faced with the unthinkable possibility of losing their children. The VA has entered into a public-private partnership with TriWest Healthcare Alliance to connect women veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, especially those with children, to the services and benefits that lead to employment. This effort will initially focus on five cities: Seattle, WA; Phoenix, AZ; San Francisco, CA; Los Angeles, CA; and Honolulu, HI. Partnerships in each city will be established among community leaders, employers, government and non-government organizations, and committed citizens who can work together, individually and collectively to help reduce barriers to employment for homeless women veterans and connect them with employment. The President will call for more public-private partnerships to help end veteran homelessness.

Two years ago, The National Guard Bureau announced their own community based effort last year, and launched Joining Community Forces to leverage their local community foot-print and family support centers to connect Guardsmen and Reservists of all services, Veterans and military families to local community based resources. They are re-doubling their efforts, and are challenging all 54 Guard Bureaus in that effort.

#### **Ensuring that Veterans Affairs Has the Resources to Serve Our Veterans**

On August 7, 2014, the President signed into law the bipartisan Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014. At a time of crisis, our Veteran and Military Family Service Organizations called the country and Congress to action. This legislation provides VA with additional resources to improve access and quality of care for Veterans. This law will help VA hire more doctors, nurses and other medical staff, as well as to provide needed additional space and modernize VA's hospitals and clinics. It authorizes the new Veterans Choice program, which allows eligible Veterans to choose to use non-VA care when they live more than 40 miles from a VA facility or cannot be seen by a VA doctor within a reasonable amount of time. And finally, the law will give Secretary McDonald more authority to hold senior VA leaders accountable.

#### **Ending the Disability Claims Backlog**

##### ***Disability Claims Backlog Update***

Improving quality and reducing the length of time it takes to process disability claims is integral to the Administration's mission of providing the care and benefits that Veterans have earned and deserve in a timely, accurate, and compassionate manner. Through initiatives supported by President Obama, VA has decreased the backlog by more than 50 percent since its peak in March 2013. Continuing this work in 2014, VA is implementing additional changes to the Veterans Benefits Management System to increase automation and integration, system-wide. Thanks to transformation initiatives and the creative and impactful partnerships with

our VSOs like the Disabled American Veterans, VFW, The Legion and others, VA is on track to meet the President's goal and eliminate the claims backlog by completing all claims in 125 days in 2015.

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