United States Department of Veterans Affairs

Open Government Plan

April 2010

Prepared on behalf of the
Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

On his first full day of office, President Obama issued his Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, an approach to governing that Veterans Affairs takes seriously indeed.

Even as VA transforms itself into a 21st century organization that is people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking, we are fully committed to creating a more transparent, participatory and collaborative agency. At VA, we believe that good leadership and good governance are essential to serving those who have served us. That is why Secretary Shinseki designated Peter Levin, VA's Chief Technology Officer, as the Senior Accountable Official for Open Government, and other Senior Leaders have stepped up to play important roles in the effort. VA is in the process of a profound cultural transformation, one that is open, transparent and already yielding results.

We believe transparency and accessibility are tools of transformation. Leveraging free and proliferated web-based channels, we have connected with Veterans and their families via our new website, Facebook and Twitter to share stories about changes in policy, as well as news from VA and from Veterans. We have developed a new data quality plan to ensure that we report financial, business and other data that it is high quality and useful. We are also leveraging transparency to reengineer our business processes and improve performance across the agency.

At the confluence of VA's efforts, we are developing a very exciting flagship initiative: VAi2. This initiative will transform our business processes, provide transparency to our work, and create a collaborative effort between our agency, the Veterans we serve and the public that trusts us to do so. Specifically, VA is tapping the talent and expertise of individuals from both inside and outside government to contribute new ideas that will ultimately to produce new, innovative solutions at VA.

Candidly, VA has not always been the model for government performance or service delivery. However, with strong leadership, good governance, and a new commitment to creating a culture that is open, transparent, participatory, and collaborative we will achieve results and create a high performing VA of which our citizens, our nation, and most importantly, our Veterans and their families can be proud.

A letter of introduction of the Department of Veterans Affairs' plan for transformation and openness from the Chief Technology Officer and Senior Official for Open Government

Secretary Shinseki is transforming the Department of Veterans Affairs into a 21st century organization that is people centric, results driven, and forward looking. An essential part of this vision is to meet our strategic goals with web-based tools that enable transparent, responsive, and accountable government.

The following plan outlines our roadmap to be open, transparent, inclusive, and collaborative. At VA, we already began this journey by asking our dedicated employees for ideas to fix the broken claims processing system, and the response was tremendous. In fact, our first experiment so was successful, we decided to do it again for Health Information Technology.

Veterans Affairs has great ambitions: to stay on the cutting edge of health care delivery, to lay the foundation of safe, secure, and authentic health record interoperability, to deliver excellent service for Veterans' who apply for disability and education benefits, and to create a modern, efficient, and customer-friendly interface that all Veterans will enjoy and all citizens will value.

With this plan, we challenge all VA colleagues to add four words to their transformation vocabulary: openness, transparency, participation, and collaboration. As essential as VA employees are to transformation, a truly successful open government initiative depends on Veterans and citizen engagement, from ordinary outreach to fast, reliable, and friendly communications. As we move more of our services and products online, we are constantly asking Veterans and citizens for the answers to "How are we doing?" and "What should we be doing better?" Beginning in February 2010, we created a structured web-based format that enables Veterans, citizens, and employees to give us exactly this input: we received hundreds of ideas and know that this is just the beginning. For example, our Facebook page is the third most friended in federal government, and one of the fastest growing.

In the next pages, we describe our plan to be open and transparent. We look forward to hearing from Veterans and citizens about how we are doing and what else we can do to improve.

Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs has the solemn duty to serve those who have served our nation. America's Veterans have served in many conflicts, from World War II to the war in Afghanistan, with a mission to keep our country and the American people safe The Department of Veterans Affairs' mission is to fulfill President Lincoln's promise "to care for him who have borne the battle, the widow, and his orphan." The VA fulfills this by providing benefits, healthcare, and memorial affairs to our Veterans and their families.

Today, the VA's 300,000 employees work hard to accomplish our mission and keep our country's promise to America's Veterans and their families, even in the wake of many challenges. These range from an influx of Veterans due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the many important and complex needs of our Veterans, including polytraumatic injuries. The Department provides a wide range of services, from enhanced care to America's aging Veterans to services for our younger Veterans through web-based and mobile communications. Additionally, these challenges are exacerbated for our Veterans and for the VA by our current economic difficulties. From health care to homelessness, America's heroes need the VA now more than ever before.

While the external demands on the VA could not be greater, the VA itself faces significant internal challenges. In a world where technology evolves at exponential rates, the VA struggles with legacy systems that do not meet the 21st century needs of our Veterans. These antiquated, paper-bound systems are slow and difficult to scale. Old business processes need to be updated. Systems lack interoperability and inefficiency has too often been the rule, rather than the exception.

Despite these external and internal challenges, VA is in the process of making critical improvements, and we are already seeing results. Low performing projects are being stopped, processes are being reengineered, backlogs are being reduced and customer service is improving. But this is the beginning of a long journey toward achieving the Secretary's vision and VA's full potential.

Creating a more transparent, collaborative and participatory VA is critical to achieving an important transformation and VA's long-term success. It is often said that sunlight is the best disinfectant, and we believe that openness and transparency will lead to increased efficiency and performance. Candor about VA's challenges is allowing us to identify issues and solutions from Veterans and VA employees. We also know that many of the best ideas come from outside of Washington, and, in fact, many come from Veterans and other citizens across the country. New web-enabled technologies not only provide opportunities for the VA to deliver services in a more open and transparent way, they enable greater participation and collaboration inside government, across the VA and with other agencies, as well as outside government, with Veterans, their families and all Americans.

In short, open government can help the Department of Veterans Affairs deliver real results. Soon, the days when Veterans sent their information, waited two years and found, by form letter, that their claim was denied because of a trivial error will be over. Instead, new web-based tools will allow Veterans to see everything at each step in the process. They will have the opportunity to suggest improvements and get answers to questions in real time, online. Most importantly, open government empowers Veterans not only to hold our Department accountable, but to directly participate in its improvement.

We are eager to hear how we can improve our system, and look forward to your feedback.

Leadership, Governance, and Cultural Transformation

1. Forward-thinking leaders

Open government at VA is not just letters on a page. Open government embodies a transformation in our culture, a culture already steeped in pride and dedication to our mission: "To care for him who have borne the battle, the widow and his orphan." We recognize that excellent service to Veterans and their families means embracing transparency, participation and collaboration in a way that positively affects all stakeholders. Therefore the creation of the Open Government Plan at VA relies on the support and the vision of forward-looking senior leadership who recognized the need for openness at our Agency. This document was shaped by VA's most senior leadership and they will play a critical, hands-on role in its implementation as well.

Before the President of the United States formally mandated that all federal agencies adopt a culture of openness and transparency, the newly appointed Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, addressed the U.S House of Representatives' Committee on Veterans Affairs, promising a 21st century VA, one that is people-centric, results-driven and forward looking.

> *"We must seek out opportunities for delivering best services with available resources; we must continually challenge ourselves to look for ways to do things smarter and more effectively. We will aggressively leverage the world's best practices, our knowledge base, and our emerging technologies to increase our capabilities in areas such as healthcare, information management, and service delivery."*

We at VA have proudly risen to this call to create the forward looking organization Secretary Shinseki envisioned to serve Veterans and their families.

2. Governance

Secretary Shinseki has not only provided the vision and leadership for a more open, higher performing VA, he has also dedicated the resources to operationalize this vision. This starts with a governance structure that makes open government and service delivery a priority. In order to achieve a more open and transparent VA, Secretary Shinseki created a leadership team to ensure VA's successful transformation into a 21st century organization. That is why Secretary Shinseki began by creating the new and innovative position of Chief Technology Officer to solve VA's challenges with creative, business-oriented, technology-based solutions. He also tasked VA's Chief Technology Officer, Peter Levin, as the Senior Official Responsible for Open Government. The CTO reports directly to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary, a strong demonstration of the importance and seriousness with which VA treats these issues. In addition to the CTO, VA's Open Government Leadership Team includes VA's Chief Information Officer and

Chief FOIA Officer, Roger Baker; VA's Chief Financial Officer, Todd Grams; and VA's Assistant Secretary of Policy and Planning Raul Perea-Henze.

Good governance is open governance. That is why VA will use its renovated governance policy to ensure that open government is a department-wide priority, rather than yet another duplicative leadership group. The individuals at VA leading the open government charge are senior leaders with a voice at the Secretary's and Deputy Secretary's meetings and the authority to get the job done. In cooperation with the Executive Leadership Board, all senior members of VA will be included in and responsible for the outcomes of open government.

3. Changing the culture from top to bottom

Creating an atmosphere of openness at VA, the second largest federal agency, will require not only leadership from the top of the organization, but also significant efforts to integrate these values into our business processes. Therefore, we at VA will take the following steps to support employee adoption of these values agency-wide:

- **Open Government Online Employee Forums**
  We will adopt an online crowd-sourcing platform, used to engage the public while promulgating our VA Open Government Plan, to allow employee specific input, questions and suggestions for making VA more open and transparent. Our employees have the most hands-on working knowledge of VA's business lines. Their input and suggestions will provide excellent feedback on how to operationalize our Open Government Plan. (For more information please see the participation and flagship initiatives section of the plan.)

- **Open Government Employee Innovations**
  Leveraging the success of VHA's and VBA's online innovation competitions, we will hold competitions for employee-generated ideas regarding the future implementation of openness related measures. These competitions will recognize extraordinary ideas that advance the open and transparency mission of this plan. Using innovative selection processes, VA employees will select the most innovative ideas for promoting open government at VA.

- **Sharing VA Open Government Initiatives on our VA intranet site**
  VA has struggled to communicate with our employees about our efforts and successes. In the next calendar year we will add a menu of the transparency initiatives, as well as information on how to get involved (through the online platform and the Innovations Competition) in open government, to the intranet home page.

- **Innovation Toolkit**
  Knowing about VA's open government successes is an important first step, but it will yield little results without providing VA employees with the correct tools to implement the open government policies. That is why VA is creating an

Innovation Toolkit. This toolkit will outline the methodologies and mechanisms that VA uses to further open government as well as ways to collaborate with other federal agency employees with similar commitments to openness and transparency.

- **Celebrate Open Government Successes**
  In addition to sharing our successes in creating a more open VA within the agency, we must also communicate our efforts to those outside VA. That is why we will continue our existing social media efforts through tools such as Facebook and Twitter, and expand to other new media as well.

4. How we measure success

VA will know that we have been successful in our open government endeavors when the tidal wave of questions regarding the status of a claim recedes and Veterans receive the benefits and services they need. VA will use informal surveys on websites like Facebook to monitor how we are doing. After six months, we will develop a short, formal survey to determine whether stakeholders and the public have heard about our open government plan and whether it has been effective.

Furthermore, we will measure success based on participation with our private and academic partners, the number of employees participating and the level of participation, as well as whether and how Veterans and citizens are also involved in the process.

Transparency

1. Communication

VA's redesigned website

VA launched a redesigned website in November 2009. A major benefit of the new look and feel is that content is placed into discrete, user-friendly categories to make it easier to find information. A new rotating stories feature on the website's homepage includes topics such as the Secretary's public outings, special interest stories, and breaking VA news. The website also makes it easier to connect with VA through its multiple online applications for services and benefits.

While we are very proud of the product of the redesign, our website transformation continues. In January 2010, our website suffered from some server stability issues and exposed flaws in our web governance structure. At the direction of the CTO, we are completing an inventory of our processes, equipment, software, human capital and contractor resources. The study will inform the CTO of what is needed to support a robust, useful, and easily navigable website for our Veterans and citizens. The report, which lays out the current and most desired states, is due April 30.

2. Data transparency at VA

From healthcare to building maintenance, VA collects and uses enormous qualities of data to carry out our mission. While we have not been as open and transparent with data as we could or should be, we are moving in the right direction. We have begun to take necessary steps to comply with the public reporting requirement for our data while protecting the privacy and security of personal information. We are committed to improving our existing processes and efficiently providing high-value data to the public.

VA's current data available for download

In response to the Open Government Directive, we developed a guide for our employees to use Data.gov to increase awareness of our mission and to help the public understand the data we produce and its impact on Veterans. As such we are creating and managing data sets, and systematically uploading them to the online federal data website, Data.gov. We are also responsible for providing the public with information about the data, called metadata, that makes data more accessible and usable. We are working diligently to ensure that the online data sources open to the public include VA's high priority data sets, as well as information and insight into potential applications for the data. Data is available for download at http://www.data.gov/. Current data sets from VA on Data.gov include:

- Patient Satisfaction Surveys: These statistics offer a snapshot of the quality of care provided at VA health care facilities. The report includes information about waiting times, staffing levels, infection rates, surgical volumes, quality measures, patient satisfaction, service availability and complexity, accreditation status, and patient safety. The data in this report have been drawn from multiple sources across VHA.

- Veterans Benefits and Compensation: This dataset provides a count of the number of Veterans receiving disability compensation or pension payments from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The data is reported at the county level, by age group and by percent disability rating for each state plus recipients in Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico

- Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures: This report shows estimated VA expenditures for major programmatic areas by geographic area (state, county and congressional district). The major programmatic areas are: Compensation and Pension; Readjustment (Education) and Vocational Rehabilitation; Insurance; Construction; and Medical and Administrative.

High-value data sets and tools

High value is defined as information that can be used to increase agency accountability and responsiveness, improve public knowledge of the agency and its operations, further the core mission of the agency, create economic opportunity, or respond to need and demand as identified through public consultation. From our perspective, this definition encompasses almost all of the data that VA owns: much of the agency's data will help

VA's interactive ARRA map

with accountability, both to the Veterans and communities that VA serves. This in turn will further the core mission of the agency. One example of high-value information identified with VA is data regarding the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funded projects at VA. ARRA afforded $1.4 billion dollars for projects such as maintenance of facilities and construction of new facilities. In an attempt to be open and transparent about where the funds are currently in use, we have created an interactive map that allows visitors to search for Recovery Act funded projects all over the country. The expectation is that high-value information would help Americans find potential jobs by using the map. (http://www.va.gov/recoverymap)

Prioritization, release, and monitoring high value information and data

While VA is more open and transparent with its data than ever before, we currently face the challenge of prioritizing and re-publishing data that is currently available to the public online. For example, each fiscal year (FY) we release the Performance and Accountability Report (PAR), the report card that measures our progress toward providing Veterans with outstanding services. The entire PAR is located on the VA website and is available for download by the public in PDF format.

Performance and Accountability Report
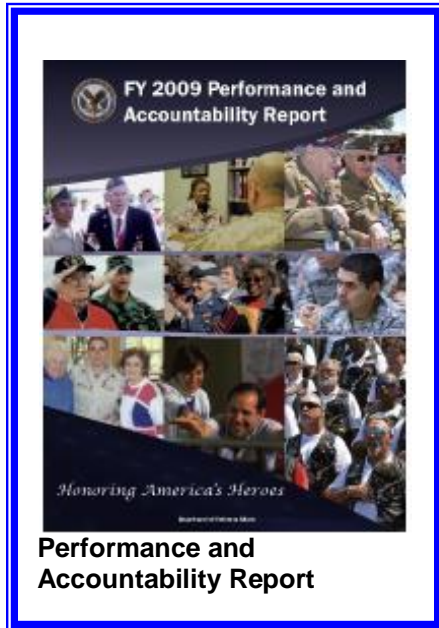
Unfortunately, PDF is not an open, machine-readable format, thereby stifling interaction and study, which is the underlying purpose for having transparency outlined in our plan. We are committed to republishing these and other reports in open, machine-readable formats. Additionally, we will require that the metadata for published reports, like the PAR, are available for download in tandem with the final document.

To ensure that these improvements are made across VA, we will develop a plan for data prioritization and release as well as milestones for implementation. VA's Web Governance Board is the key entity to ensure this vision becomes a reality. The Board is made up of representatives from each administration across VA and is tasked with making recommendations concerning the use of the Internet and the associated websites and services within VA.

VA is also integrating the need for data transparency into the structure of the agency. Our agency responded to the need to prioritize, catalog and release the massive amounts of data stored within VA. The Assistant Secretary of Policy and Planning, Dr. Raul Perea-Henze, is spearheading the effort to hone data transparency by creating a group of leaders to serve as Data Points of Contact within VA. These points of contact represent each administration, staff office and administrative office within the agency. The Data POCs meet monthly to discuss the state of Data.gov and the data being assembled at all levels in VA. The Data POCs are leaders at VA who work tirelessly to answer the call for data transparency. They report to the Assistant Secretary of Policy and Planning, who reports to the Deputy Secretary.

To ensure continued improvement in the quality of the data we report to the world, the acting Chief Financial Officer for the VA, Todd Grams, has developed with his Senior Assessment Team a plan to improve and report all the financial data to USAspending.gov and Recovery.gov. The Chief Financial Officer is also a member of the Executive Leadership Board.

SPOTLIGHT ON TRANSPARENCY: VETERANS BENEFITS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Part of transparency at VA is being honest and upfront about our challenges as well as our successes. Making the claims process a transparent one is the single largest challenge within the agency. We are currently employing innovative, forward-looking tools to address the challenge of transparent claims processing.

Veteran Benefits Management System is a business process and technological transformation of the current benefits claims process. VBMS is comprised of three pieces:

The Virtual Regional Office is a collaborative lab environment that incorporates user feedback to create and design the specifications for a new and improved system.

The Little Rock Pilot is working to increase teamwork within VBA by creating, leveraging, and optimizing lean, highly effective teams.

The Providence Pilot aims to improve the business process by understanding all the components that go into receiving and processing a Veteran's claim status.

The Transparency Bottom Line: When we improve our business processes, it is easier for us to be transparent to Veterans about the status of their claims and other related benefits questions. Right now, it is extremely difficult for us to answer the questions of "Where is my claim?" and "When will I know more?" We are working to improve our ability to provide more answers quickly and ensuring that they are accurate.

The Secretary, Deputy Secretary, and Acting Under Secretary for Benefits at the VRO in Baltimore

**3. Compliance: eRulemaking; IT Dashboard; Recovery.gov; USAspending.gov**

We, at the Department of Veterans Affairs, are committed to complying with federal transparency initiatives. While we struggle with compliance on some of the initiatives, we have identified these shortcomings and are working within the agency to improve performance.

E-rulemaking (Regulations.gov)

E-rulemaking is a way for the public to comment on rules that we promulgate at VA in response to Congressional laws. We are committed to improving our internal processes and simultaneously make it easy for the public to access VA-specific rules on Regulations.gov.

Our first priority is to create a transparent process. Currently, Regulations.gov contains over 3,000 VA related rulings. Unfortunately, our website currently lacks information for the public to learn more about our e-rulings and how they can participate in this very important process. One way we plan to address this issue is by creating an online repository of our past e-rulings with a clear way for the public to contact us with questions regarding previous decisions. We will also include a link off of our homepage that provides visitors with information about what e-rulemaking is, what it means for our agency, and how e-rulemaking can be used to affect policies at VA and beyond.

IT Dashboard

Federal IT Dashboard
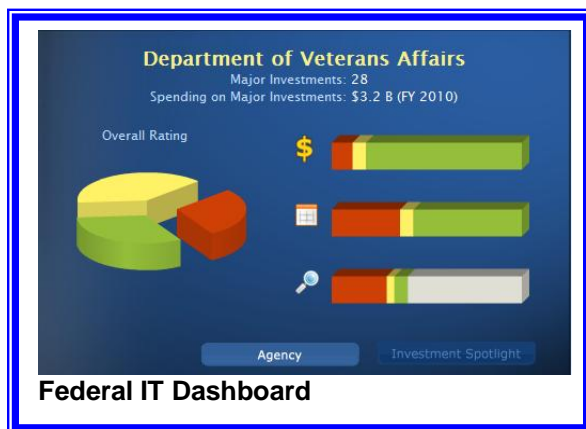
The IT Dashboard is a website operated by the Office of Management and Budget that details information on federal technology investments. Specifically, the IT Dashboard allows the public to track and review performance, spending and progress of technology investments of the different federal agencies. In fact, VA Chief Information Officer, Roger Baker helped specify and design the Federal IT dashboard.

VA IT Dashboard and PMAS

Assistant Secretary Baker also provides leadership and accountability for the proper management of IT projects. He created the Project Management Accountability System (PMAS) in summer 2009, and all projects are scheduled to be integrated into the system by spring of 2010. PMAS will deliver IT products in short, iterative cycles. This will ensure that VA does not waste millions or even billions of dollars in taxpayer

resources only to learn of failed implementations days before expected delivery. PMAS resulted in the immediate cessation of 45 projects that were not meeting our standards of excellence. As we report out this data, it will ensure absolute transparency of VA's spending on IT projects.

As a result of the new culture of accountability created by PMAS, VA developed the VA IT Dashboard to capture critical information for projects including status, cost and schedule. The VA IT dashboard's development and display allows the public to view our projects, their pending status, and how much the projects are costing. The next step is to allow the public to view the VA IT Dashboard information in machine readable and open format. This will enable the public to use the information for research, or their own personal knowledge, and interface with our program offices in a meaningful way. Below is a graphic from our website illustrating the status of projects in the VA IT Dashboard:

OI&T Product Delivery Dashboard Summary

SUMMARY

	O	O	G	G	Y	Y	R	R	N/A	N/A	#	%
Overall Project Rating	5	6%	56	73%	11	14%	5	6%	0	0%	77	100%
Requirements	6	8%	35	45%	15	19%	21	27%	0	0%	77	100%
Schedule - Curr Increment	3	4%	70	91%	2	3%	2	3%	0	0%	77	100%
Schedule - Prev Increment	5	6%	55	71%	1	1%	6	8%	10	13%	77	100%
Cost - Curr Increment	3	4%	66	86%	1	1%	1	1%	6	8%	77	100%
Cost - Prev Increment	3	4%	64	83%	1	1%	2	3%	7	9%	77	100%
Cost - Project	6	8%	57	74%	3	4%	5	6%	6	8%	77	100%
Acquisition Plan	5	6%	58	75%	8	10%	3	4%	3	4%	77	100%

STATE	COUNT
Active	77

VA's IT Dashboard

Recovery.gov

We take the responsibility of allocating ARRA funds very seriously. That is why we ensure that our spending reports are prepared and submitted to OMB and Recovery.gov on time, every time. We have developed a set of departmental, agency program, and expenditure plans that detail specific projects and the level of resources that will be funded by ARRA dollars. Our recovery plans, status of ongoing efforts and weekly financial and accomplishment reports are published online and available for download at www.va.gov/recovery.

USAspending.gov

USAspending.gov collects all the financial spending data for an agency. The spending data is in one of four categories: Grants, Loans, Contracts, and Other Assistance. VA currently provides information for grants spending, but the data is deemed to be low quality. To improve the quality of the data and to ensure VA provides data on loans, contracts, and other assistance, the acting Chief Financial Officer, Todd Grams, developed a Data Quality Plan. This plan defines the governance needed as well as the technological changes required to be more transparent with our spending data.

4. Records Management

VA maintains multiple systems of records as required by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). VA will continue to uphold Records Management standards by providing resources and tools for the Department's Records Managers. These resources are available online for download at http://www.rms.oit.va.gov/Resources.asp. The records within the VA system should be available for download for knowledge and use, and the Agency will explore the creation of such a site that is well maintained and easy to access.

5. Congressional Requests

Due to the nature of VA's business, many offices within the agency receive correspondence from members of Congress. VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs assists in the response to this correspondence and hosts information regarding the nature of Congressional interaction with the Department on their website at http://www4.va.gov/oca/c2c.asp. In an attempt to increase transparency and openness between VA and the public, the agency will explore the possibility of an online reserve of declassified and logically cataloged Congressional inquiries and VA responses. Where applicable, metadata could be provided, showcasing VA's commitment to creating a community of users that understands VA's business lines and the clear ties to the important branches of the federal government that it serves.

6. Freedom of Information Act

FOIA and Transparency

Providing information through Freedom of Information Act inquiries is one of the most important activities for any agency. We receive a high volume of these requests: VA received 99,333 requests in FY 2008 and 69,432 requests in FY 2009. On January 29, 2009, the Secretary issued a memo to Assistant Secretaries reinforcing his commitment to the principles of transparency and openness and asking key officials to ensure that requested information be made available in a timely manner. VA's Chief FOIA Officer, Roger Baker, disseminated this information department-wide, and held training sessions for FOIA Officers that explained how to apply the presumption of openness and the foreseeable harm standard. Additionally, several VA FOIA facilities held training sessions for their field offices to ensure a presumption of openness when making determinations on FOIA requests.

In April 2009, VA held a training session for FOIA Officers to discuss the Attorney General's FOIA Memorandum, which provided guidance to agencies on how to implement the President's goals of openness and transparency. Several offices within VA have publicized the President's FOIA Memorandum and Attorney General's FOIA Guidelines, including distributing these documents and providing further training. Other offices have developed internal FOIA Standard Operating Procedures Guides, which established authorized personnel to respond to FOIA requests and centralize the FOIA processes and responsibilities.

Our Chief FOIA Officer has been instrumental in anticipating and encouraging a culture of openness through the transformation of the FOIA request process within VA. We recently implemented a new electronic request, response and tracking system, which is successfully cutting our backlog of FOIA requests, despite an increase in the number of requests made to the agency over FY 2008 and FY 2009.

VA's FOIA Backlog

Our number of backlogged requests decreased from 2,840 in FY 2008 to 503 in FY 2009. The decrease in the number of these requests is partly attributed to the VA FOIA offices' successful backlog reduction efforts. VA has also been systematically closing out its oldest pending FOIA requests. The chart below reflects VA's backlog in terms of requests and administrative appeals, and in terms of the date the request was received:

Freedom of Information Act Requests				
	Initial Requests		Appeals	
	FY 2008	FY 2009	FY 2008	FY 2009
Pending Backlog	2,840	503	68	72
Date of oldest request	03/26/2003	04/04/2006	11/10/2005	04/07/2009

While it is difficult to determine the exact number of backlogged requests for the past fiscal year due to implementation of our electronic FOIA tracking solution in June 2009, our quarterly backlog averages have decreased from 1,300 overdue requests in the fourth quarter of 2008 to 319 in the first quarter of 2010.

Responding to Requests

By acquiring a web-based FOIA tracking system, FOIA officers can now track the status of FOIA requests, transfer cases electronically, and upload FOIA correspondences with requesters. This tool allows VA's geographically dispersed FOIA officers to be up-to-date on any FOIA request received.

In order to further increase the effectiveness of the FOIA tracking tool, a Program Manager has been designated to provide technical assistance to FOIA Officers using the system. The FOIA Program Manager also conducts routine data integrity checks to ensure that the data input into the system is accurate and available.

FOIA offices have hired more staff and contractor support to address FOIA backlogs, as well as identify methods to help streamline the FOIA process to reduce department-wide response times to FOIA requests. VA FOIA offices have also taken part in ensuring that their offices have an effective system for responding to requests: The VA FOIA office is working with other FOIA offices such as the Office of Resolution Management (ORM) to develop FOIA training for ORM's field officers.

FOIA and Proactive Disclosures

When VA General Counsel (GC) provides training and advice to FOIA agency officials, GC advises that discretionary disclosures be made even though portions of records may be exempt from disclosure and no foreseeable harm may result as a result of the discretionary release.

Other VA offices, such as the Office of Operations, Security, and Preparedness plan to conduct a review of their materials that may be disclosed in light of the presumption of openness without compromise or harm to national security, personal privacy, or law enforcement interests.

7. Open Government Initiative Accountability

Throughout our Open Government Plan, we lay out very specific programs, many of which are already underway, that will enhance, showcase, and create transparency at VA. The table below lists each initiative in our plan, where it is addressed in the plan, how it relates to open government, the office responsible for the initiative and when you can expect to see a status update on each project:

Open Government Initiative	Responsible Office	Where it is in the plan	When you can see its progress on our dashboard
Employee innovations	VBA &VHA	page 10	July 2010
Innovation Tool Kit	Office of the Secretary	page 10	June 2010
Sharing open government success publicly	OPIA/New Media	page 10	May 2010
How we measure success	Office of the Secretary	page 10	July 2010
VA website transformation	OPIA/OIT	page 12	May 2010
Web inventory	OIT	page 12	May 2010
VBMS	VBA	page 12	July 2010
VRO	VBA	page 12	July 2010
eRulemaking	OGC	page 15	July 2010
IT Dashboard	OIT	page 15	May 2010
PMAS (VAIT Dashboard)	OIT	page 16	May 2010
FOIA	OIT	page 16	October 2010
Records management	Staff Offices	page 17	October 2010
Congressional requests	Congressional & Legislative Affairs	page 17	October 2010
Online Communications Hub	OPIA/New Media	page 21	July 2010
Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record	OSVA/VHA/OIT	page 22	October 2010
AViVA	OSVA/VHA/OIT	page 23	July 2010

Citizen Engagement	OSVA/ /OPIA	page 23	May 2010
Blue button personal record consortium	Office of the Secretary	Page 23	June 2010
Gulf War Veterans Illness Task Force Report feed back	Office of the Secretary	page 24	July 2010
Veterans Relationship Management (VRM)	VBA	page 24	October 2010
Ebenefits	VBA	page 25	May 2010
VBA Innovation Competition	VBA	page 27	June 2010
VHA Innovation Competition	VHA	page 27	June 2010
VAi2	Office of the Secretary	page 27	October 2010
Agent Orange RFI	Office of the Secretary/VBA	page 28	July 2010

As part of our Open Government Plan, we will use this information to create an accountability dashboard , hosted from the VA website at www.va.gov/open, which will monitor whether VA is executing on each open government project. Projects marked green will be right on schedule. Projects marked yellow will be either slightly behind schedule or are slow to get started. Red will indicate that a project has been stopped. Each project and its color will be updated on a quarterly basis and accompanied by a written status update specifically illustrating why each project is given its current color indicator.

Open Gov Initiative	Status	Update	Update Date
Communication Hub	R	No dedicated resources to start Planning.	April 7, 2010
VBMS	Y	Delivery dates slipping behind planned.	April 7, 2010
Agent Orange Fast Track	G	Received 23 RFIs. 3 day lockdown to write RFP.	April 7, 2010

Illustration of accountability dashboard

Participation and Collaboration

> ### SPOTLIGHT ON COLLABORATION: SECOND LIFE
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> The VA National Center for Patient Safety (NCPS) has taken their work online to a new level with Second Life. Second Life is an online, virtual reality, community that allows members, through their avatar, to create a separate reality in which they can hold jobs, buy and sell property and interact with other Second Life members. NCPS, in conjunction with the University of Michigan, is creating patient safety scenarios in Second Life that will allow health care providers to virtually practice the patient safety techniques in a controlled, interactive environment.
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> **Second Life nurse avatar**

1. 21st century public outreach

VA's Facebook fan page

Transparency inherently requires communicating the actions we take and the services we provide in our offices, hospitals and benefits offices. VA is aggressively leveraging Web 2.0 technologies to reach out to Veterans, family members, employees and other concerned citizens. These social media tools include Facebook and Twitter, among others. Currently, VA has the 3rd highest number of "fans" among Cabinet-level agencies with nearly 25,000 from across the United States. VA has one of the fastest growing fan bases in the Federal Government and receives more than 180 comments per day responding to between 3-5 information posts submitted by VA on Facebook. Posts that draw the largest feedback are those that trigger discussion among VA's friends concerning topics such as benefits, hospital care and VA special

events like the Winter Paralympics and our homeless stand downs held at VA Medical Centers.

2. Plan for enhanced participation and collaboration

Concept design for communication hub

To best serve its clients—and in keeping with tenets of open government—VA must effectively create and foster a culture of productive, two-way communication. This will include both proactive communications across multiple venues and the development of techniques by which the organization can better receive and incorporate feedback from clients.

With an ever-expanding array of Web 2.0 platforms at its disposal, VA will create an Online Communications Hub (OCH), which will function as a central online gathering place for Veterans, family members, and the general public. The purpose of the OCH will be to compete within the same media space as organizations like Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), Blackfive, and other, similar drivers of traditional media coverage. VA's OCH will fully integrate internally produced media, externally produced media, mechanisms for feedback, relevant traditional media, social media, and links to the VA website.

VA will also add a new blog. Modeled after other successful federal government blogs such as The Department of State's *DipNote* and the Transportation Security Administration *TSA Blog,* our central blog will be staffed by a VA employee. VA employees will put a human face on the organization and will post relevant information about VA to the public, highlighting our programs, challenges, successes, and failures from the inside. One of the most exciting aspects of the OCH will be the guest blog submissions from employees and the general public. These posts will place Veterans, employees, the public, and senior VA staff on equal footing in the OCH. The best ideas or critiques will be featured. Submission requirements will be posted and pieces that are articulate and well-reasoned will be selected—regardless of the writer's position. The guest blog section will emulate the highly successful *Huffington Post*.

In order to effectively capture feedback in an efficient manner, we are looking forward to establishing a topical discussion forum modeled after other successful discussion boards. The comments left by registered users will be moderated, organized and submitted to the appropriate offices for action. This blog will enable VA to connect questions and comments about benefits to the correct office within VBA, and questions about health care to the appropriate individual or individuals in VHA. This blog will also give VA a new way to both spot trends and better understand the needs of our Veterans, while at the same time openly and transparently engaging with the public.

3. Innovation in Health Information Technology

Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record

When a Servicemember retires today, the current process requires transporting paper-based administrative and medical records from the Department of Defense to the Department of Veterans Affairs. That is why, in April 2009, President Obama announced with Secretary Robert Gates of the Department of Defense and Secretary Eric Shinseki of the Department of Veterans Affairs a joint effort to provide a Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) for Servicemembers and Veterans. VLER will enable Veterans to have a seamless transition from active duty to Veteran with a single file, easily transferred from one agency to another. This major collaboration effort between DoD and VA will also reach out to other partners, including Department of Health and Human Services and private health care organizations.

The basic premise of VLER is to facilitate electronic access to administrative and medical information under proper security and privacy controls from the day young men and women enter military service, throughout their military careers, and for the rest of their lives.

Built on existing point-to-point electronic health record infrastructure, VLER has become a standards-based, open architecture framework that will ultimately enable seamless interoperability with other federal agencies and, crucially, private sector partners. It is the difference between tin cans on a string and wireless handsets that allow you to speak to anybody with a telephone.

The advantages of connecting to the dial tone of web-based communications are astonishing. VA has one of the best platforms in the world and it indisputably improves quality, convenience and continuity of care. VLER will make them better. Benefits administration depends on timely access to military assignment records, administrative records, and service-related medical records. VLER will make that better too. VLER will provide automated information access to Veterans, their families and care-givers, and their service providers. It will relieve them of the burden of keeping track of their paper records, because documentation will all be in one complete, secure and virtual place.

Under the Secretary's leadership, the ground-up transformation of VA has already begun. His clear vision of the use of information technologies will make a tremendous difference in openness and agency performance. Our dedicated employees are going to get better tools that will enable us to provide better service, faster and more effectively. And, our Veterans are going to get the delivery of their health care and benefits they have deserve, with less stress and red tape.

AViVA

A Virtual Installation of VistA Architecture (AViVA) is a recent innovation that we are using to support collaboration.   AViVA creates a universal user interface for the

electronic health record and includes prototyping of data connectors in order to securely link the AViVA platform to patient data from any source. The AViVA project incorporates HealtheVet as an update of the VistA legacy database system.

VA's current electronic hospital management system uses a graphical user interface known as the Clinical Patient Record System (CPRS). CPRS data is stored in the legacy data system known as VistA. CPRS requires installation on each machine that operates the program rendering the program difficult to scale and expensive to maintain and update. AViVA's implementation improves this model in two ways. First, AViVA creates a modular, web-enabled electronic health record system that can be easily and remotely maintained. Second, Medical Data Web Services (MDWS), which can be accessed by the Department of Defense, will allow the creation of applications for any data source to be plugged into the system.

AViVA is a very exciting program for the collaboration portion of our Open Government Plan and because we are committed to creating systems that allow health care providers to collaborate to provide the best care for Veterans. AViVA's web based presentation layer will allow our doctors and nurses around the country to search patient records as simply and succinctly as you can search for pizza on Google Maps and as securely as the best retail financial service businesses. Additionally, AViVA creates collaboration between VA and DoD, our partner in caring for our nation's heroes. Finally AViVA creates an open source platform that allows software to be shared with entities outside of VA, creating opportunities for further innovation and development beyond the agency.

Blue Button

In January 2010 we were invited, in conjunction with the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS) to attend the Markle Consumer Engagement Workgroup, which focused on incentivizing the market to provide consumers with electronic access to their health data and technology solutions to better use this data. The workgroup concluded that VA, HHS, and CMS, as major federal health data holders, will participate in follow up discussions on the breakthrough idea of a download or "blue" button. The blue button will be accessible in online health data portals directly enabling individuals to download their electronic health data. At the direction of Health and Human Services and VA CTOs, planning for a virtual meeting is underway for May 2010 to showcase the public availability of a synthetic sample data set designed to foster innovation, and enable industry stakeholders to provide feedback for future development. These efforts are intended to further support e-personal health care using open government principles.

4. Citizen Engagement: ideas for our Open Government Plan

Citizen engagement using Ideascale

To create this Open Government Plan, VA launched an idea platform where anyone in the public could tell us how we could be

23

more open, transparent, participatory and collaborative. We used the power of the crowd's ability to comment and vote on the ideas to reach the top ten ideas we would include in our plan. We received 186 ideas with 3,100 votes and 450 comments from 580 contributors.

We are excited about the feedback and we are excited to incorporate it into our already exciting plans for an open and transparent VA. We look forward to continuing this dialogue in the future.

5. Public feedback: Gulf War Veterans Illness Task Force's draft report

Draft report comment via regulations.gov

The Gulf War Veteran Illness Task Force was formed to address the needs of Gulf War Veterans who suffer from unexplained, chronic, multisystem or undiagnosed illnesses. The Task Force is comprised of representatives from offices including health, benefits, policy, congressional and public affairs. This Task Force conducted a comprehensive review of VA programs that serve Gulf War Veterans. We believe that improving the responsiveness of VA to the challenges facing the 1990-1991 Gulf War Veterans is a priority that requires innovation and the engagement of all stakeholders, including VA employees, DoD, Congress and Veterans' Service Organizations (VSOs). That is why we posted a public notice on http://www.regulations.gov actively seeking public feedback (http://yourgulfwarvoice.uservoice.com) on the draft report (http://www1.va.gov/opa/vadocs/gwvi_draf_report.pdf). We look forward to continuing to work with all stakeholders on behalf of these Gulf War Veterans.

6. Veterans Relationship Management

VRM will provide on-demand, self-service access to our services and benefits on an easily customized platform that each Veteran and his or her family can suit to their needs. The project creates multi-channel access to our employees, providing Veterans with important personal information, and that puts the Veteran in the driver's seat of the benefits application experience.

VRM promotes participation in a way that is very tangible to the public and most importantly to our Veterans. For the first time, we are allowing Veterans and any interested member of the public to contact us and access information that will enhance their knowledge about our business operations and provide a higher quality of service. The VRM tool will ultimately add value by driving our business lines to enhance the reliability of information that is provided to support the project, so that our customers are

given the most accurate and up to date information possible. VRM is well into the beginning planning phase and we anticipate exciting things to come.

Ebenefits

Ebenefits is one of the early successes of the VRM project. Ebenefits is an online portal that Veterans can use to access important benefits information and documentation. Ebenefits is an especially exciting achievement for our benefits administration because the effort has been spearheaded and supported by our partner in serving our nation's heroes, the Department of Defense (DoD). Our online portal, with the collaboration and cooperation of DoD, uses a single sign-on, familiar and easily accessible for Veterans and their families, to access all of our applications for the myriad of benefits available. Current self-service capabilities available on Ebenefits include:

- **Military Personnel Record** (https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/) Veterans and Active Duty Service Members can log into the "My eBenefits" portal and use Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) online to check, view, and print documents in their OMPF.

- **State-Specific Benefits** (https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/) Veterans can log into their portal to search for state provided benefits such as educational grants and scholarships, special exemptions or discounts on fees and taxes, home loans, Veteran's homes, free hunting and fishing privileges and more.

- **MOVE!23** (https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits-portal/) MOVE!23 Patient Questionnaire is VA's national weight management program for our Veterans. MOVE! can help Veterans lose weight, keep it off and improve their health.

The Ebenefits initiative of VRM is ongoing, with new updates scheduled once a quarter for the next two consecutive fiscal years. Next quarter Veterans will be able to enjoy the following services:

- **Certificate of Eligibility** Apply for, view and print VA Loan Certificate of Eligibility.

- **Health Eligibility Check** Online tools that help Veterans determine what types of Medical Benefits to which they are entitled.

- **Compensation and Pension Claims Status** Veterans will be able to track the status of certain benefits claims.
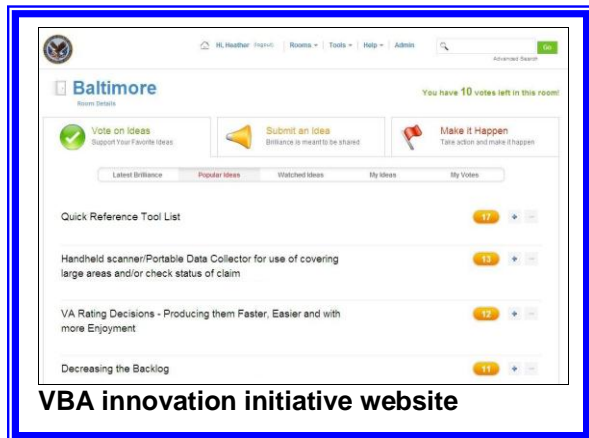
- **Personal Information Access**
  Our Veterans will be able to view and update important personal information such as their direct deposit banking information and their physical address.
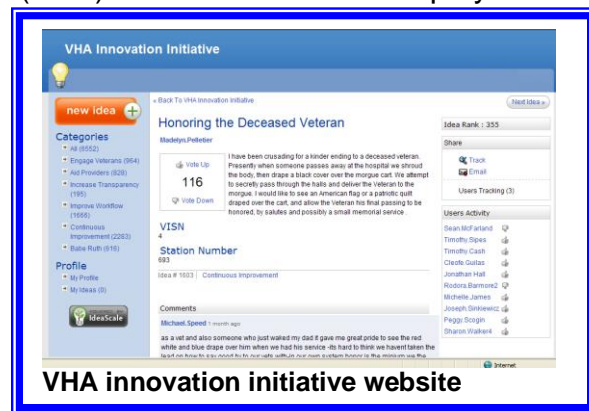
Flagship Initiative

VA Innovation Initiative

In August 2009, President Obama challenged employees of VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to an innovation competition to improve claims processing for Veterans. Over 7,000 VBA employees submitted 3,000 ideas. Each VBA Regional

VBA innovation initiative website

Office selected the top idea and the final selection panelists received all 57 ideas to evaluate them. Ten finalists' ideas were selected by a panel comprised of Admiral Patrick W. Dunne, former VA Under Secretary for Benefits; Craig Newmark, founder of craigslist.org; Dr. Peter Levin, Chief Technology Officer; and Garry Augustine, Deputy National Service Director for Disabled American Veterans. Ten ideas were chosen, including five that required funding, and all are currently being developed and implemented.

After the success of the VBA innovation competition, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) reached out to our employees to find innovative ways to improve or create health

VHA innovation initiative website

information technology using the same general process as in the VBA competition. In February approximately 45,000 VHA employees submitted 6,500 ideas and cast 500,000 votes. The seventy-five ideas that received the most votes, along with twenty-five ideas dubbed "gems" by the Under Secretary, will be reviewed by a panel of judges responsible for selecting a pool of 25 winning ideas to be funded. We look forward to announcing the winners after May 7th.

This summer, VA Innovation Initiative (VAi2) will institutionalize these efforts as an ongoing initiative that seeks to improve VA's ability to increase Veteran access to its services, reduce or control costs of delivering those services, enhance the performance of its operations, and improve the quality of service Veterans and their families receive. Through the VA Innovation Initiative, VA employees, private sector entrepreneurs, and academic leaders will have the opportunity to participate in creating a 21st century agency by contributing their best ideas and solutions. The VAi2 will identify, prioritize, fund, test, and deploy the most promising solutions to our most important challenges.

We will develop the competition in iterative "rounds", staggered throughout the year. This will allow the participants to focus on specific topics and provide the most thoughtful and useful ideas. We plan to tackle some of VA's largest challenges; for example, eliminate Veteran homelessness, enable 21st century benefits delivery and services, and electronic health record interoperability.
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Agent Orange Fast Track is an excellent example of how we are already soliciting private sector ideas for delivering benefits faster:

SPOTLIGHT ON COLLABORATION: AGENT ORANGE PRESUMPTIVES

On October 13, 2009 Secretary Shinseki added B Cell leukemia, Parkinson's Disease, and Ischemic Heart Disease to the presumptive list of conditions associated with Agent Orange exposure. This will expand benefits to service-connected Veterans with these illnesses. The decision will also add an estimated 200,000 net new claims to the current backlog.

While this decision presents a challenge, it also presents an opportunity. In a continued effort to enhance customer service, the VA created a Request for Information (RFI) not only to manage the large volume of new claims under Agent Orange but also to develop new business processes, technologies, and systems that will reduce the claims backlog at VBA. The RFI resulted in over 23 responses. This is just one example of how VA can collaborate with the private sector to battle the claims backlog and improve the agency's business processes.

What's next for VA

We have a lot to be excited about at VA, especially where our Veteran-centric projects and initiatives relate to open government. We are committed to building a culture of openness and transparency at every field office, hospital, benefits center, and at headquarters. We welcome the opportunity for ongoing participation and collaboration from Veterans, other federal agencies and the public to make our programs more effective and transparent. VA's journey toward transparency and openness is just beginning and we are thankful for the thoughtful input and support of our senior leadership, employees, concerned citizens, and Veterans.

The beginning miles of our journey are marked by extraordinary accomplishments of our employees from across this nation – from their innovative ideas to their willingness to accept openness as part of their every day operation – their commitment to our mission and now to an open government create the initiatives and programs that you read about here. We are proud that they have chosen VA to advance their careers and to care for our nation's Veterans.

We are proud to be part of a federal community that embraces truth and honesty as part of our daily operations. We are anxious to share our successes, be honest and open about our shortcomings, and provide opportunities for our communities, Veterans and other agencies help us improve. One of the most important ways we need to improve is in our "data operations".

VA is committed to meeting data transparency requirements and will develop a plan for data prioritization and release as well as milestones for implementation. We are committed to providing Veterans and the public with high priority data that is clear, concise and easy to use. We look forward to including input from the public concerning how best to reach this goal and to making high quality data accessibility a reality.

VA looks forward to learning and growing as new and different instruments for open government are created and implemented. The Department of Veterans Affairs is proud to use these tools to enhance our service to the citizens of America and especially to our Veterans.