



Convention

Highlights

Monday, July 24, 2017
Joint Opening Session

VA Secretary Offers Five Priorities for Improving Veterans Care

VA Secretary David Shulkin addressed delegates during today's Joint Opening Session. After touting his department's 46% increase in medical appointments over the past year, Shulkin addressed five priorities he would like to accomplish to improve veterans health care and services: greater choice, modernizing the health care delivery system, efficiency, timeliness of care and suicide prevention. With regard to choice, the Secretary said care needs to be based on clinical needs, not rules. "We want to offer the right care at the right place," he said.

Modernizing the delivery system includes moving from the older electronic health records system to what is currently in use by the Department of Defense. When someone joins in the military, a single electronic record will follow him or her through life. "This will give us a modern system that veterans deserve," Shulkin said. He added that VA also will modernize its facilities, including the more than 500 Civil War-era buildings it owns.

Improving timeliness of services will include quicker decision on appeals and claims, Shulkin said, noting that the current appeals process was established in 1933. He added that 97% of appeals are decided within 30 days, while 86% are adjudicated within a week. Shulkin stressed that veterans can now view wait times at VA facilities by visiting www.accesstocare.va.gov, which posts the wait times of all appointments at all VA facilities. "No other health care system posts wait times for appointments," the Secretary said. "You can see how long it will take to see a doctor and make appropriate plans." VA plans to invest more resources for telehealth, now used by 717,000 veterans. Furthermore, Shulkin's goal is to have all VA compensation and benefit claims decided within 30 days.

The Secretary's fourth priority is to utilize VA's resources more efficiently to treat war wounds such as PTSD, traumatic brain injury and amputations. He added that with the recent passage of the *VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017*, VA can now rid itself of "bad actors" whenever necessary. Since January, Shulkin said 700 VA employees have been fired, suspended or demoted. "We are establishing a new culture at VA," he said, "one in which employees believe it is an honor to serve veterans. Those employees who have lost their values will no longer be a part of VA." Shulkin also hopes to improve cooperation with DoD's medical system.

In addressing priority five, Shulkin called suicide an "epidemic public health crisis." The Veterans Crisis Line has been improved so that the "rollover rate" dropped from 30% to less than 1%. Shulkin said vets are overwhelmingly less likely to commit suicide if they are receiving VA care. He also announced that veterans who have received other-than-honorable discharges can access VA mental health care help. "We need to work closer to make sure we are doing everything we can to combat suicide," he said. "Identifying those who are most at risk is crucial."

The Secretary also touted VA's Housing First program, which is committed to ending veterans homelessness. As the name suggests, the program finds permanent housing and then follows that with services based on the

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individual's needs and preferences. Shulkin reiterated the need for an "integrated" health care system. "The President and I agree that complete privatization is the wrong path," he said. "But we do need to give veterans more choices." He also praised the 8.6 million hours donated by VFW volunteers at VA facilities: "Thank you for that."

D.G. Yuengling and Son Inc., Donates \$100,000

Jennifer Yuengling, vice president of operations for America's oldest beer brewer, D.G. Yuengling and Son Inc., presented \$100,000 to VFW. This is the second year the brewery has partnered with VFW. Yuengling noted that her father, Dick, spent six years in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard.

Twisted X Boots Presents \$75,000 Check

President and CEO of Twisted X Boots, Prasad Reddy, presented VFW with a \$75,000 check. Reddy, a native of India, fondly recalled his U.S. naturalization ceremony nearly 40 years ago. He remembered the VFW members in attendance who welcomed him as a citizen with a copy of the U.S. Constitution. Reddy said he was grateful for "the freedom and opportunities this great country has given me." Twisted X sells a line of patriotic, VFW-inspired boots.

Henry Repeating Arms Makes \$50,000 Donation

Henry Repeating Arms President Anthony Imperato donated \$50,000 to VFW. He also recognized Rhode Island VFW Department Service Officer Raymond Denisewich, by presenting him with a limited edition VFW tribute rifle.

Recognizing Outstanding Service

Three members of Delta Airline's Honor Guard accepted VFW's *Americanism Award* on behalf of the entire honor guard team, which has escorted the remains of 5,300 U.S. troops in the past 12 years. Delta's General Manager of Worldport Operations Johnny Boynton, Aircraft Maintenance Technician Jerome White and Operations Service Manager Daniel Howard spoke for the Delta honor guard. White said being part of the honor guard is a "humbling" experience. "We volunteer with no extra pay for showing up early and working late," he said. "We do it because it's right and needs to be done." White, who worked with the Pentagon's Joint Task Force Full Accounting while on active duty, added that "I was lucky. I got to come home with all of my appendages."

Richard Cody, a retired Army general who commanded the 101st Airborne Division, received VFW's *Armed Forces Award* for his 36 years of military service. Cody's leadership was particularly effective as the Army's vice chief of staff during the 2007 crisis at the former Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The life member of Post 792 in Montpelier, Vt., joined VFW in 1977. He recalled coming home after 1991's Persian Gulf War and being welcomed by VFW and Auxiliary members at 1 a.m. at an airport in Bangor, Maine. "It moved me to watch these people who didn't even know us come out and thank us," said Cody, chairman of the board of Homes for Our Troops, which builds and donates specially adaptive homes for severely wounded Post-9/11 veterans.

Also receiving awards were All-American commanders and All-American Triple Crown awardees. George Fletcher, of Post 7043 in Coalport, Pa., was named *VFW Recruiter of the Year*. The Department of Arizona received accolades for 50 consecutive years of membership growth. Post 11999 Commander Jack Smith accepted the *Fred C. Hall Memorial Outstanding Post Special Project Award* on behalf of his Post located in Cloudcroft, N.M. The Post hosts groups of men and women from the Warrior Transition Battalion out of Fort Bliss, Texas, for outdoor recreational activities, all free of charge for those veterans.

Various Awards and Speakers

USAA Director of Military Affairs Bob Winzenried discussed the importance of providing help to returning service members. Winzenried's son, Bobby, served in Iraq and suffered multiple concussions that had long-lasting effects, which he didn't discuss with anyone. Winzenried said Bobby died of those traumatic brain injuries last year. "We need to let those troops know it's OK to ask for help," the Department of Texas VFW member said. "It's easier to talk to someone who's been there."

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During VFW Commander-in-Chief Brian Duffy's opening remarks, he introduced Nguyen Phai, a Vietnamese tour guide who has escorted winners of VFW's Return to Vietnam trip since 2011. Nguyen told *VFW* magazine that of all of the groups he leads around his country, VFW is the only one to invite him to the United States.

VFW Auxiliary President Colette Bishop was awarded the *VFW Gold Medal of Merit and Citation*.

Savannah Wittman, national Voice of Democracy winner, presented her winning essay.

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