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DAV Department of Ohio Newsletter

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VA Secretary Denis McDonough Reveals Priorities

The newly appointed Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Denis McDonough, explained his goals for the VA during his recent Senate Confirmation Hearing. His top priority, assigned to him (by the President) for the second-largest federal agency, is “getting our veterans through this pandemic.”

Prior to the Hearing, over 9,200 veterans and 121 VA workers (*as of February 4th*) had succumbed to the COVID-19 pandemic at VA facilities. In terms of the COVID-19 vaccine, Secretary McDonough had pledged he would advocate for veterans to receive the vaccines. “I will be a staunch and fierce advocate for veterans getting access to care, treatment and vaccines,” said McDonough.

The Secretary’s other listed priorities for the VA include: (1) helping veterans build civilian lives with education and job opportunities; (2) making the VA more inclusive for women, minority and LGBTQ veterans; (3) working to eliminate veterans’ homelessness; (4) reducing veteran suicide; and (5) building trust with veterans, their families and caregivers.

McDonough promised he would have a “relentless focus” on the VA’s three core responsibilities: (1) providing timely, world-class health care, (2) ensuring timely access to VA benefits and (3) “honoring our veterans with their final resting place.” According to McDonough: “the VA faces great challenges – challenges made even more daunting by the coronavirus pandemic. Its capabilities have not always risen to the needs of our veterans.”

Secretary McDonough is only the second VA Secretary that has never served in the military. Former VA Secretary David Shulkin was the first.

He addressed this issue by explaining that his government experience is the biggest benefit he brings to the job. “I’m a fighter, and I’m relentless,” McDonough said. “I know and understand the federal government. I can unstick problems inside

agencies, and especially at an agency as big as the VA, that's important. I will deliver if I'm confirmed as secretary."

VA Firmed Physicians May Be Still Treating Veterans

Up to 227 private sector physicians, currently treating veterans under the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP), may have been fired by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for poor-quality care, according to a Government Accounting Office (GAO) review.

A requirement of the VA MISSION Act of 2018 was that the VA must track medical providers participating in the VCCP to determine if they were eligible to care for veterans.

Since May of 2019, 136 medical providers have been barred by the VA from participating in the VCCP. The reasons they were barred range from poor quality care, patient abuse, clinical performance to losing their medical licenses.

During the review, VA officials told the GAO they had no plans to evaluate the medical providers (initially identified by the GAO), adding that they are eligible to participate in this program because they were disbarred by the VA before the VA MISSION Act of 2018 went into effect.

The VA has contracts with two (2) companies (Optum and TriWest) to manage the VCCP. Neither company has a process in place for continuously monitoring health care providers in their networks. The GAO recommended that the companies: (1) institute credentialing and monitoring policies or improve the ones they have; and (2) the VA access the risk to veterans when former VA providers who generated quality concerns continue to provide care by participating in the VCCP.

The VA indicated they would implement the GAO's recommendation by April of 2021. The VA have reviewed a listing of 56 medical providers (forwarded to them by the GAO) and have taken appropriate action to ensure that they meet all the VA MISSION Act requirements.

The Disabled American Veterans (DAV) must work to ensure that all the GAO's recommendations are implemented by the VA and a thorough review of the 227 medical providers (who were dismissed by the VA) is completed to ensure that they are not participating in the Veterans Community Care Program. VA Spokesman Randy Noller stated the VA is "committed to ensuring our nation's heroes receive safe and appropriate health care from qualified community providers." The DAV must ensure that this occurs.

DAV Issues VA Budget & Policy Recommendations

The Disabled American Veterans (DAV), in concert with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), compiled an Independent Report detailing its Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) budget and policy recommendations. The three (3) Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), who represent over 2.3 million veterans, have been submitting these Annual Reports for more than 30 years.

The Annual Report was distributed to Congress and the President Joe Biden's Administration on February 3, 2021. The President's Budget recommendations, including his request for VA funding, is expected to be released in early March.

The Report is focused on urging Congress to provide the VA with nearly \$4 billion in the next federal budget for delayed and overdue construction on medical facilities. Currently the VA has over \$65 billion in delayed construction projects, of which \$7 billion include addressing safety issues. In the Report, the three VSOs recommended \$102.2 billion in discretionary spending for the VA for fiscal 2022.

DAV Senior Executive Advisor Peter Dickinson stated: "We're calling once again on the VA, the administration and Congress to provide realistic levels of funding to maintain VA's health care infrastructure. Budgets for short-term, major and minor construction have been inadequate year after year. We recommend doubling that for next year."

The VSOs' recommendations also include a list of priorities for the VA, Congress and the Biden administration. For example, the VA arbitrarily ended a decades-old practice last year of allowing VSO representatives to review disability claim benefits decisions (for 48 hours) for accuracy before they are finalized and issued to veterans. State of Ohio's Attorney General (AG) David Yost (along with 42 other state AGs) joined with the DAV and requested that this VA decision be rescinded. (*This issue was discussed in the Department of Ohio's July 2020 Newsletter.*)

The VSOs also want the VA to add more medical conditions to the list of illnesses presumed to be caused by toxic exposures and create a more uniform way to add illnesses to the list. "VA has failed to add diseases that have been determined to have a positive scientific association with those known exposures," concluded DAV Senior Executive Advisor Dickinson. "Recently, it took Congress to add three diseases that have been pending with VA for four years."

Unresolved Issues for the New VA Secretary

While the disabled veterans wait for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to be re-organized by the new VA Secretary Denis McDonough, there are still several veteran-related issues that need to be resolved. Many of these issues were surfaced and explained in earlier issues of the Department of Ohio's Newsletter.

VA Secretary McDonough outlined his primary goals/objectives during his Senate Confirmation Hearing, along with his administrative philosophy. Hopefully his words will not change their meaning during his tenure. For example, the former VA Secretary made many statements/promises during his Confirmation Hearing, which he reversed once he took office.

The DAV agrees that addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, in regard to veterans, should be the top priority of the VA Secretary. The 9,416 COVID-19 veteran deaths (*as of February 5, 2021*) at VA facilities attest that this situation should be addressed first; but there are other administrative actions that are important. They are:

- Allowing the Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) 48 hours to review disability claims before they are finalized by the VA. (*in July 2020 issue*)
- Establishing a maximum amount of time veterans have to wait to see a private sector physician through the VA's Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP). (*in October/November 2020 issue*)
- Developing a Plan to resolve the massive backlog of requested military records at the National Personnel Records Center (*in January 2021 Issue*)
- Reversing the VA's recent policy of outsourcing all Compensation and Pension (C&P) Examinations to the private sector. (*in January 2021 Issue*)

However, the most important action that the new VA Secretary should undertake initially is to make the VSOs "viable stakeholders at the table" in any veterans' policy decisions. Although this was promised by the former VA Secretary during his Confirmation Hearing, the VSOs were continually excluded/isolated from the implementation of *The VA MISSION Act of 2018*.

The *Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020* was enacted on January 5, 2021. The DAV, and other VSOs, must be allowed to participate as "stakeholders" with the VA in the law's implementation. VA Secretary McDonough has vowed to fight for our veterans and the DAV wants to assist him!

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