

## Diversity News

April 2008

**Thomas:** In fiscal year 2007, VA hired over 9,000 veterans, the most of any year on record.

**Yvonne:** VA ranks first among non-Defense agencies in the hiring of disabled veterans and is second only to the Department of Defense in overall number of veterans in the workforce.

Of the 260,000 employees currently in VA's workforce, approximately 31 percent are veterans and 7.8 percent are service-connected disabled veterans.

**Thomas:** Helping veterans transition from military to civilian life after service to our Nation is one of VA's foremost commitments in our mission "to care for those who have borne the battle." The success of this commitment depends on VA's employment outreach efforts.

VA is committed to hiring veterans as part of its strategy to meet current and future human capital needs of the organization, particularly amid the growing wave of Federal retirements.

**Yvonne:** In 2006, Human Resources offices VA-wide were asked by the Secretary to join an effort to make VA the leading agency in the employment of veterans. All HR offices were asked to designate an HR specialist as their local veterans employment coordinator to help guide local efforts to attract and recruit veteran applicants for employment in VA's workforce.

**Thomas:** In November 2007, VA first announced plans to hire 10 full-time Regional Veterans Employment Coordinators.

These regional coordinators will work collaboratively with local coordinators to provide direct hands-on assistance to veterans in accessing career opportunities at VA.

This announcement led to the development of the newly established Veterans Employment Coordination Service, or VECS, in VA's Office of Human Resources Management.

**Yvonne:** The mission of this service is to attract, recruit, and hire veterans into VA, particularly severely injured veterans returning from the Global War on Terror.

The Service will also work collaboratively with wounded transition units and regiments, transition centers, Veterans Service Organizations, VA's Vocational

Rehabilitation and Employment Program, and other veteran stakeholders to promote VA career opportunities to the veteran community.

**Thomas:** Yvonne recently had the opportunity to sit down with Michael Hager, the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration, and Dennis May, who recently joined VA as the VECS Director after serving 26 years on active duty with the U.S. Air Force, about this initiative.

**Yvonne:** Where are we now regarding the current veteran population of VA's workforce and where do we want to be?

**Mr. Hager:** We are very fortunate that we have the highest level of veteran population in government, short of DOD. We've worked hard to achieve that. We are currently at 31 percent. We are hoping to move that up to 33 percent of the total population. We are actively working on materials that would help us brand our outreach to the veteran population. We have a number of programs internally within HR to promote the identity and selection and ultimate hiring of veterans. We're using lots of metrics to share with the operating units within the VA where we are today and where our targets are. We're really excited about it that we know we're really good today. We know there's room for improvement and we're passionate to get that accomplished in the few months to come.

**Yvonne:** Why is it important to hire veterans into VA?

**Mr. Hager:** One, it's an extremely talented group of people. They are a huge resource. They've been trained well; they've been trained in their vocation up until now, among the best in the world. They have a passion to serve. Everything about the veteran fits beautifully within the VA, again, their passion, their understanding. They are a veteran, they can relate to veteran needs and everything we do is really focused on service delivery to the veteran and there's not a better pipeline of talent available anywhere beyond the veteran. So that's why we strategically look at this as a real pipeline of strength, of resource, and we just want to make sure that we get the optimum yield out of that potential resource and we're doing everything we can to ensure that we achieve that 33 percent target quickly.

**Yvonne:** How did this initiative to hire veterans, particularly severely injured veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, start?

**Mr. Hager:** It all began with a conversation I had with the Acting Secretary at that time, Mr. Mansfield and we talked about the severely disabled and how much they gave of their tomorrow for our today and chatted with him about inasmuch as they gave it all why don't we come up with a program to ensure that any veteran, any warrior that had gone through battle and has become severely injured and has gone through rehab and is now ready to go to work and desires to go to work. We employ over 250,000 employees at the VA, surely we can

find a job for that individual. So he really took off on this issue with a high degree of interest saying, you know, that's the least we can do here and why don't we put together a program where we don't leave any warrior behind that, again, has given their all for tomorrow for our today. So we launched the concept, we created an infrastructure, a planned infrastructure that, you know, if we hired a director and then we hired for the director representatives throughout the country strategically placed near centers where the soldier, the warrior, would have gone through rehab and now is ready to go to the workplace we could effectively have people go in, interview, recruit, and hopefully place each and every one of those warriors that, again, has decided I'm ready now to go back to work.

I'm just so excited about what is being done with...our outreach program and talking to the young warrior that has just returned from the battlefield at Walter Reed and listening to what their desires are to go back to work and what kind of strategy they have and what are their thoughts and some of these young warriors was the only person that had gone in and sat down and chatted with them since they had returned to the U.S. other than the hospital staff. So you need only go through that experience once to come back to work to say I'm going to do everything possible to make sure that that young warrior, or that middle-aged, or that older warrior, male female, gets a break and that's what we're attempting to do not only get a break, but proactively go out and secure an opportunity for them and it's a real privilege to serve with this mission.

**Yvonne:** What is the mission of VECS?

**Mr. May:** The mission of VECS is simple: to attract, recruit, and hire veterans, particularly severely injured veterans from the recent Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts into the Department of Veterans Affairs.

**Yvonne:** What will the structure of the Service look like?

**Mr. May:** We'll have regional veteran employment coordinators throughout the country working with local veteran employment coordinators at each human resource office at each facility within the Department.

**Yvonne:** Where will the regional VECS be located?

**Mr. May:** Initially, we plan on locating our regional coordinators in the Seattle, Washington, area; San Diego; San Antonio; Louisville, Kentucky; August, Georgia; Fayetteville, North Carolina; and New York City, as well as here in the National Capitol Region at the Walter Reed Medical Center.

**Yvonne:** How were these locations determined?

**Mr. May:** We just looked at where the need was and the need was greatest near, obviously, major military medical treatment facilities as well as the major military installations that were involved with the recent conflicts.

We wanted to make sure we were located where the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines would be located so that we could conduct outreach to them where they are now.

**Yvonne:** What is the current status of the Service?

**Mr. May:** We are actively hiring our regional coordinators as we speak, they be working with over 160 local veteran employment coordinators who have already signed up to volunteer for that duty at each human resource office throughout the VA.

Well, we recognize that hiring is done at the local level. So these local veteran employment coordinators are, for the most part, human resource specialists themselves. They'll be working with the supervisors and hiring managers at their facilities to make sure that they're aware of special hiring authorities at their disposal as well as to identify the different skills that veterans seeking employment bring and, hopefully, can serve as a conduit between the veteran and the hiring manager and supervisor.

**Yvonne:** Will regional coordinators also be familiar with special hiring authorities?

**Mr. May:** Absolutely. We will make sure that they're trained in the different hiring authorities available to attract and recruit veterans and they will work with the local veterans employment coordinators who are, in most cases, human resource specialists themselves who are already aware of the special hiring authorities at their disposal. We will, in turn, work with supervisors and hiring managers to ensure that everyone is aware of the special hiring authorities available to attract and recruit and hire veterans.

**Yvonne:** How will regional coordinators outreach to veterans to help them find VA careers?

**Mr. May:** We're going to maintain a constant presence at the different transition assistance seminars, all the military-related job and career fairs, we're going to work closely with the Wounded Warrior Regiment, the Warrior Transitioning Units, the different VA hospitals, military medical treatment facilities, as well as the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service and the Federal Recovery Coordinators to maintain a constant presence wherever the veterans are to let them know that, when you're ready to reenter the workforce, the VA wants you.

**Yvonne:** Why is it important to hire veterans into VA?

**Mr. May:** Our veterans bring a wealth of experience and knowledge that would only enhance our workforce as we go about our mission of serving veterans. Their dedication to integrity, their commitment to service, and their commitment to excellence would only enhance our workforce. We have set a strategic goal by the end of this year to increase that number to 33 percent. Again, it's not just a "feel good" proposition; this will enhance our workforce as we provide service to our Nation's veterans.

It's important that we at the Department of Veterans Affairs continue to set the example not only for our federal workforce but our private sector workforce as it comes to hiring veterans as they are ready and willing and able to reenter the workforce.

**Thomas:** At a time when members of our Armed Forces are being asked once again to sacrifice in defense of our great Nation, it is important that VA continue to set the example for others in the manner in which we honor the service of men and women in the military.

All veterans deserve VA's complete commitment to ensuring that they are afforded every opportunity to successfully enter the workforce and lead productive lives. Through the VECS initiative, VA hopes to open up more employment opportunities for these veterans.

**Yvonne:** VECS is seeking current VA employees who are 30 percent or more disabled veterans to serve as one-on-one peer counselors for those members we're bringing on board as result of this new initiative. If you're interested, or for questions or concerns about VECS, email the VECS Team at [VECS@va.gov](mailto:VECS@va.gov).

**Thomas:** That's all we have for this edition of Diversity News. We certainly appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink.

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**Yvonne:** And check out our bimonthly newsletter, [Diversity@Work](mailto:Diversity@Work), available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also on our Web site, you can find previous editions of Diversity News.

Also, we want to hear from you!

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Until next time...

**Both:** Have a great month!