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**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
FULL COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 4, 2010
STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ERIC K. SHINSEKI
SECRETARY,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
February 4, 2010**

Chairman Filner, Ranking Member Buyer, Distinguished Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

Thank you for this opportunity to present the President's Fiscal Year 2011 Budget and Fiscal Year 2012 Advance Appropriations request for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Our budget provides the resources necessary to continue our aggressive pursuit of the President's two overarching goals for the Department—to transform VA into a 21st Century organization and to ensure that we provide timely access to benefits and high quality care to our Veterans over their lifetimes, from the day they first take their oaths of allegiance until the day they are laid to rest.

We recently completed development of a new strategic framework that is people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking. The path we will follow to achieve the President's vision for VA will be presented in our new strategic plan, which is currently in the final stages of review. The strategic goals we have established in our plan are designed to produce better outcomes for all generations of Veterans:

Improve the quality and accessibility of health care, benefits, and memorial services while optimizing value;
Increase Veteran client satisfaction with health, education, training, counseling, financial, and burial benefits and services;
Protect people and assets continuously and in time of crisis; and, Improve internal customer satisfaction with management systems and support services to achieve mission performance and make VA an employer of choice by investing in human capital. The strategies in our plan will guide our workforce to ensure we remain focused on producing the outcomes Veterans expect and have earned through their service to our country.

To support VA's efforts, the President's budget provides \$125 billion in 2011—almost \$60.3 billion in discretionary resources and nearly \$64.7 billion in mandatory funding. Our discretionary budget request represents an increase of \$4.3 billion, or 7.6 percent, over the 2010 enacted level.

VA's 2011 budget also focuses on three concerns that are of critical importance to our Veterans—easier access to benefits and services; reducing the disability claims backlog and the time Veterans wait before receiving earned benefits; and ending the downward spiral that results in Veterans' homelessness.

This budget provides the resources required to enhance access in our health care system and our national cemeteries. We will expand access to health care through the activations of new or improved facilities, by expanding health care eligibility to more Veterans, and by making greater investments in telehealth. Access to our national cemeteries will be increased through the implementation of new policy for the establishment of additional facilities.

We are requesting an unprecedented increase for staffing in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to address the dramatic increase in disability claim receipts while continuing our process-reengineering efforts, our development of a paperless claims processing system, and the creation of a Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record.

We are also requesting a substantial investment for our homelessness programs as part of our plan to ultimately eliminate Veterans' homelessness through an aggressive approach that includes housing, education, jobs, and health care.

VA will be successful in resolving these three concerns by maintaining a clear focus on developing innovative business processes and delivery systems that will not only serve Veterans and their families for many years to come, but will also dramatically improve the efficiency of our operations by better controlling long-term costs. By making appropriate investments today, we can ensure higher value and better outcomes for our Veterans. The 2011 budget also supports many key investments in VA's six high priority performance goals (HPPGs).

HPPG I: Reducing the Claims Backlog

The volume of compensation and pension rating-related claims has been steadily increasing. In 2009, for the first time, we received over one million claims during the course of a single year. The volume of claims received has increased from 578,773 in 2000 to 1,013,712 in 2009 (a 75 percent increase). Original disability compensation claims with eight or more claimed issues have increased from 22,776 in 2001 to 67,175 in 2009 (nearly a 200 percent increase). Not only is VA receiving substantially more claims, but the claims have also increased in complexity. We expect this level of growth in the number of claims received to continue in 2010 and 2011 (increases of 13 percent and 11 percent were projected respectively even without claims expected under new presumptions related to Agent Orange exposure), which is driven by improved access to benefits through initiatives such as the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, increased demand as a result of nearly ten years of war, and the impact of a difficult economy prompting America's Veterans to pursue access to the benefits they earned during their military service.

While the volume and complexity of claims has increased, so too has the productivity of our claims processing workforce. In 2009, the number of claims processed was 977,219, an increase of 8.6 percent over the 2008 level of 899,863. The average time to process a rating-related claim fell from 179 to 161 days in 2009, an improvement of 11 percent.

The progress made in 2009 is a step in the right direction, but it is not nearly enough. My goal for VA is an average time to process a claim of no more than 125 days. Reaching this goal will become even more challenging because of additional claims we expect to receive related to Veterans' exposure to Agent Orange. Adding Parkinson's disease, ischemic heart disease, and B-cell leukemias to the list of presumptive disabilities is projected to significantly increase claims inventories in the near term, even while we make fundamental improvements to the way we process disability compensation claims.

We expect the number of compensation and pension claims received to increase from 1,013,712 in 2009 to 1,318,753 in 2011 (a 30 percent increase). Without the significant investment requested for staffing in this budget, the inventory of claims pending would grow from 416,335 to 1,018,343 and the average time to process a claim would increase from 161 to 250 days. If Congress provides the funding requested in our budget, these increases are projected to be 804,460 claims pending with an average processing time of 190 days. Through 2011, we expect over 228,000 claims related to the new presumptions and are dedicated to processing this near-term surge in claims as efficiently as possible.

This budget is based on our plan to improve claims processing by using a three-pronged approach involving improved business processes, expanded technology, and hiring staff to bridge the gap until we fully implement our long-range plan. We will explore process and policy simplification and contracted service support in addition to the traditional approach of hiring new employees to address this spike in demand. We expect these transformational approaches to begin yielding significant performance improvements in fiscal year 2012 and beyond; however, it is important to mitigate the impact of the increased workload until that time.

The largest increase in our 2011 budget request, in percentage terms, is directed to the Veterans Benefits Administration as part of our mitigation of the increased workload. The President's 2011 budget request for VBA is \$2.149 billion, an increase of \$460 million, or 27 percent, over the 2010 enacted level of \$1.689 billion. The 2011 budget supports an increase of 4,048 FTEs, including maintaining temporary FTE funded through ARRA. In addition, the budget also includes \$145.3 million in information technology (IT) funds in 2011 to support the ongoing development of a paperless claims processing system.

HPPG II: Eliminating Veteran Homelessness

Our Nation's Veterans experience higher than average rates of homelessness, depression, substance abuse, and suicides; many also suffer from joblessness. On any given night, there are about 131,000 Veterans who live on the streets, representing every war and generation, including those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. VA's major homeless-specific programs constitute the largest integrated network of homeless treatment and assistance services in the country. These programs provide a continuum of care for homeless Veterans, providing treatment, rehabilitation, and supportive services that assist homeless Veterans in addressing health, mental health and psychosocial issues. VA also offers a full range of support necessary to end the cycle of homelessness by providing education, jobs, and health care, in addition to safe housing. We will increase the number and variety of housing options available to homeless Veterans and those at risk of homelessness with permanent, transitional, contracted, community-operated, HUD-VASH provided, and VA-operated housing.

Homelessness is primarily a health care issue, heavily burdened with depression and substance abuse. VA's budget includes \$4.2 billion in 2011 to prevent and reduce homelessness among Veterans—over \$3.4 billion for core medical services and \$799 million for specific homeless programs and expanded medical programs. Our budget includes an

additional investment of \$294 million in programs and new initiatives to reduce the cycle of homelessness, which is almost 55 percent higher than the resources provided for homelessness programs in 2010.

VA's health care costs for homeless Veterans can drop in the future as the Department emphasizes education, jobs, and prevention and treatment programs that can result in greater residential stability, gainful employment, and improved health status.

HPPG III: Automating the GI Bill Benefits System

The Post-9/11 GI Bill creates a robust enhancement of VA's education benefits, evoking the World War II Era GI Bill. Because of the significant opportunities the Act provides to Veterans in recognition of their service, and the value of the program in the current economic environment, we must deliver the benefits in this Act effectively and efficiently, and with a client-centered approach. In August 2009, the new Post-9/11 GI Bill program was launched. We received more than 397,000 original and 219,000 supplemental applications since the inception of this program.

The 2011 budget provides \$44.1 million to complete the automated solution for processing Post-9/11 GI Bill claims and to begin the development and implementation of electronic systems to process claims associated with other education programs. The automated solution for the Post 9/11 GI Bill education program will be implemented by December 2010.

In 2011, we expect the total number of all types of education claims to grow by 32.3 percent over 2009, from 1.70 million to 2.25 million. To meet this increasing workload and complete education claims in a timely manner, VA has established a comprehensive strategy to develop an end-to-end solution that utilizes rules-based, industry-standard technologies to modernize the delivery of education benefits.

HPPG IV: Establishing a Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record

Each year, more than 150,000 active and reserve component service members leave the military. Currently, this transition is heavily reliant on the transfer of paper-based administrative and medical records from the Department of Defense (DoD) to the Veteran, the VA or other non-VA health care providers. A paper-based transfer carries risks of errors or oversights and delays the claim process.

In April 2009, the President charged me and Defense Secretary Gates with building a fully interoperable electronic records system that will provide each member of our armed forces a Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER). This virtual record will enhance the timely delivery of high-quality benefits and services by capturing key information from the day they put on the uniform, through their time as Veterans, until the day they are laid to rest. The VLER is the centerpiece of our strategy to better coordinate the user-friendly transition of service members from their service component into VA, and to produce better, more timely outcomes for Veterans in providing their benefits and services.

In December 2009, VA successfully exchanged electronic health record (EHR) information in a pilot program between the VA Medical Center in San Diego and a local Kaiser Permanente hospital. We exchanged EHR information using the Nationwide Health Information Network (NHIN) created by the Department of Health and Human Services. Interoperability is key to sharing critical health information. Utilizing the NHIN standards allows VA to partner with private sector health care providers and other Federal agencies to promote better, faster, and safer care for Veterans. During the second quarter of 2010, the DoD will join this pilot and we will announce additional VLER health community sites.

VA has \$52 million in IT funds in 2011 to continue the development and implementation of this Presidential priority.

HPPG V: Improving Mental Health Care

The 2011 budget continues the Department's keen focus on improving the quality, access, and value of mental health care provided to Veterans. VA's budget provides over \$5.2 billion for mental health, an increase of \$410 million, or 8.5 percent, over the 2010 enacted level. We will expand inpatient, residential, and outpatient mental health programs with an emphasis on integrating mental health services with primary and specialty care.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the mental health condition most commonly associated with combat, and treating Veterans who suffer from this debilitating disorder is central to VA's mission. Screening for PTSD is the first and most essential step. It is crucial that VA be proactive in identifying PTSD and intervening early in order to prevent chronic problems that could lead to more complex disorders and functional problems.

VA will also expand its screening program for other mental health conditions, most notably traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression, and substance use disorders. We will enhance our suicide prevention advertising campaign to raise awareness among Veterans and their families of the services available to them.

More than one-fifth of the Veterans seen last year had a mental health diagnosis. In order to address this challenge, VA has significantly invested in our mental health workforce, hiring more than 6,000 new workers since 2005.

In October 2009, VA and DoD held a mental health summit with mental health experts from both departments, and representatives from Congress and more than 57 non-government organizations. We convened the summit to discuss an innovative, wide-ranging public health model for enhancing mental health for returning service members, Veterans, and their families. VA will use the results to devise new innovative strategies for improving the health and quality of life for Veterans suffering from mental health problems.

HPPG VI: Deploying a Veterans Relationship Management System

A key component of VA's transformation is to employ technology to dramatically improve service and outreach to Veterans by adopting a comprehensive Veterans' Relationship Management System to serve as the primary interface between Veterans and the Department. This system will include a framework that provides Veterans with the ability to:

Access VA through multiple methods; Uniformly find information about VA's benefits and services; Complete multiple business processes within VA without having to re-enter identifying information; and, Seamlessly access VA across multiple lines of business. This system will allow Veterans to access comprehensive online information anytime and anywhere via a single consistent entry point. Our goal is to deploy the Veterans Relationship Management System in 2011. Our budget provides \$51.6 million for this project.

In addition to resources supporting these high-priority performance goals, the President's budget enhances and improves services across the full spectrum of the Department. The following highlights funding requirements for selected programs along with the outcomes we will achieve for Veterans and their families.

Delivering World-Class Medical Care

The Budget provides \$51.5 billion for medical care in 2011, an increase of \$4 billion, or 8.5 percent, over the 2010 level. This level will allow us to continue providing timely, high-quality care to all enrolled veterans. Our total medical care level is comprised of funding for medical services (\$37.1 billion), medical support and compliance (\$5.3 billion), medical facilities (\$5.7 billion), and resources from medical care collections (\$3.4 billion). In addition to reducing the number of homeless Veterans and expanding access to mental health care, our 2011 budget will also achieve numerous other outcomes that improve Veterans' quality of life, including:

Providing extended care and rural health services in clinically appropriate settings;

Expanding the use of home telehealth;

Enhancing access to health care services by offering enrollment to more Priority Group 8 Veterans and activating new facilities; and, Meeting the medical needs of women Veterans.

During 2011, we expect to treat nearly 6.1 million unique patients, a 2.9 percent increase over 2010. Among this total are over 439,000 Veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, an increase of almost 57,000 (or 14.8 percent) above the number of Veterans from these two campaigns that we anticipate will come to VA for health care in 2010.

In 2011, the budget provides \$2.6 billion to meet the health care needs of Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is an increase of \$597 million (or 30.2 percent) over our medical resource requirements to care for these Veterans in 2010. This increase also reflects the impact of the recent decision to increase troop size in Afghanistan. The treatment of this newest generation of Veterans has allowed us to focus on, and improve treatment for, PTSD as well as TBI, including new programs to reach Veterans at the earliest stages of these conditions.

The FY 2011 Budget also includes funding for new patients resulting from the recent decision to add Parkinson's disease, ischemic heart disease, and B-cell leukemias to the list of presumptive conditions for Veterans with service in Vietnam.

Extended Care and Rural Health

VA's budget for 2011 contains \$6.8 billion for long-term care, an increase of 858.8 million (or 14.4 percent) over the 2010 level. In addition, \$1.5 billion is included for non-institutional long-term care, an increase of \$276 million (or 22.9 percent) over 2010. By enhancing Veterans' access to non-institutional long-term care, VA can provide extended care services to Veterans in a more clinically appropriate setting, closer to where they live, and in the comfort and familiar settings of their homes.

VA's 2011 budget also includes \$250 million to continue strengthening access to health care for 3.2 million enrolled Veterans living in rural and highly rural areas through a variety of avenues. These include new rural health outreach and delivery initiatives and expanded use of home-based primary care, mental health, and telehealth services. VA intends to expand use of cutting edge telehealth technology to broaden access to care while at the same time improve the quality of our health care services.

Home Telehealth

Our increasing reliance on non-institutional long-term care includes an investment in 2011 of \$163 million in home telehealth. Taking greater advantage of the latest technological advancements in health care delivery will allow us to more closely monitor the health status of Veterans and will greatly improve access to care for Veterans in rural and highly rural areas. Telehealth will place specialized health care professionals in direct contact with patients using modern IT tools. VA's home telehealth program cares for 35,000 patients and is the largest of its kind in the world. A recent study found patients enrolled in home telehealth programs experienced a 25 percent reduction in the average number of days hospitalized and a 19 percent reduction in hospitalizations. Telehealth and telemedicine improve health care by increasing access, eliminating travel, reducing costs, and producing better patient outcomes.

Expanding Access to Health Care

In 2009 VA opened enrollment to Priority 8 Veterans whose incomes exceed last year's geographic and VA means-test thresholds by no more than 10 percent. Our most recent estimate is that 193,000 more Veterans will enroll for care by the end of 2010 due to this policy change.

In 2011 VA will further expand health care eligibility for Priority 8 Veterans to those whose incomes exceed the geographic and VA means-test thresholds by no more than 15 percent compared to the levels in effect prior to expanding enrollment in 2009. This additional expansion of eligibility for care will result in an estimated 99,000 more enrollees in 2011 alone, bringing the total number of new enrollees from 2009 to the end of 2011 to 292,000.

Meeting the Medical Needs of Women Veterans

The 2011 budget provides \$217.6 million to meet the gender-specific health care needs of women Veterans, an increase of \$18.6 million (or 9.4 percent) over the 2010 level. The delivery of enhanced primary care for women Veterans remains one of the Department's top priorities. The number of women Veterans is growing rapidly and women are increasingly reliant upon VA for their health care.

Our investment in health care for women Veterans will lead to higher quality of care, increased coordination of care, enhanced privacy and dignity, and a greater sense of security among our women patients. We will accomplish this through expanding health care services provided in our Vet Centers, increasing training for our health care providers to advance their knowledge and understanding of women's health issues, and implementing a peer call center and social networking site for women combat Veterans. This call center will be open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Advance Appropriations for Medical Care in 2012

VA is requesting advance appropriations in 2012 of \$50.6 billion for the three medical care appropriations to support the health care needs of 6.2 million patients. The total is comprised of \$39.6 billion for Medical Services, \$5.5 billion for Medical Support and Compliance, and \$5.4 billion for Medical Facilities. In addition, \$3.7 billion is estimated in medical care collections, resulting in a total resource level of \$54.3 billion. It does not include additional resources for any new initiatives that would begin in 2012.

Our 2012 advance appropriations request is based largely on our actuarial model using 2008 data as the base year. The request continues funding for programs that we will continue in 2012 but which are not accounted for in the actuarial model. These initiatives address homelessness and expanded access to non-institutional long-term care and rural health care services through telehealth. In addition, the 2012 advance appropriations request includes resources for several

programs not captured by the actuarial model, including long-term care, the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Vet Centers, and the state home per diem program. Overall, the 2012 requested level, based on the information available at this point in time, is sufficient to enable us to provide timely and high-quality care for the estimated patient population. We will continue to monitor cost and workload data throughout the year and, if needed, we will revise our request during the normal 2012 budget cycle.

After a cumulative increase of 26.4 percent in the medical care budget since 2009, we will be working to reduce the rate of increase in the cost of the provision of health care by focusing on areas such as better leveraging acquisitions and contracting, enhancing use of referral agreements, strengthening DoD/VA joint ventures, and expanding applications of medical technology (e.g. telehome health).

Investments in Medical Research

VA's budget request for 2011 includes \$590 million for medical and prosthetic research, an increase of \$9 million over the 2010 level. These research funds will help VA sustain its long track record of success in conducting research projects that lead to clinically useful interventions that improve the health and quality of life for Veterans as well as the general population.

This budget contains funds to continue our aggressive research program aimed at improving the lives of Veterans returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan. This focuses on prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation research, including TBI and polytrauma, burn injury research, pain research, and post-deployment mental health research.

Sustaining High Quality Burial and Memorial Programs

VA remains steadfastly committed to providing access to a dignified and respectful burial for Veterans choosing to be buried in a VA national cemetery. This promise to Veterans and their families also requires that we maintain national cemeteries as shrines dedicated to the memory of those who honorably served this Nation in uniform. This budget implements new policy to expand access by lowering the Veteran population threshold for establishing new national cemeteries and developing additional columbaria to better serve large urban areas.

VA expects to perform 114,300 interments in 2011 or 3.8 percent more than in 2010. The number of developed acres (8,441) that must be maintained in 2011 is 4.6 percent greater than the 2010 estimate, while the number of gravesites (3,147,000) that will be maintained is 2.6 percent higher. VA will also process more than 617,000 Presidential Memorial Certificates in recognition of Veterans' honorable military service.

Our 2011 budget request includes \$251 million in operations and maintenance funding for the National Cemetery Administration. The 2011 budget request provides \$36.9 million for national shrine projects to raise, realign, and clean an estimated 668,000 headstones and markers, and repair 100,000 sunken graves. This is critical to maintaining our extremely high client satisfaction scores that set the national standard of excellence in government and private sector services as measured by the American Customer Satisfaction Index. The share of our clients who rate the quality of the memorial services we provide as excellent will rise to 98 percent in 2011. The proportion of clients who rate the appearance of our national cemeteries as excellent will grow to 99 percent. And we will mark 95 percent of graves within 60 days of interment.

The 2011 budget includes \$3 million for solar and wind power projects at three cemeteries to make greater use of renewable energy and to improve the efficiency of our program operations. It also provides \$1.25 million to conduct independent Facility Condition Assessments at national cemeteries and \$2 million for projects to correct safety and other deficiencies identified in those assessments.

Leveraging Information Technology

We cannot achieve the transformation of VA into a 21st Century organization capable of meeting Veterans' needs today and in the years to come without leveraging the power of IT. The Department's IT program is absolutely integral to everything we do, and it is vital we continue the development of IT systems that will meet new service delivery demands and modernize or replace increasingly fragile systems that are no longer adequate in today's health care and benefits delivery environment. Simply put, IT is indispensable to achieving VA's mission.

The Department's IT operations and maintenance program supports 334,000 users, including VA employees, contractors, volunteers, and researchers situated in 1,400 health care facilities, 57 regional offices, and 158 national cemeteries around the country. Our IT program protects and maintains 8.5 million vital health and benefits records for Veterans with the level of privacy and security mandated by both statutes and directives.

VA's 2011 budget provides \$3.3 billion for IT, the same level of funding provided in 2010. We have prioritized potential IT projects to ensure that the most mission-critical projects for improving service to Veterans are funded. For example, the resources we are requesting will fund the development and implementation of an automated solution for processing education claims (\$44.1 million), the Financial and Logistics Integrated Technology Enterprise project to replace our outdated, non-compliant core accounting system (\$120.2 million), development and deployment of the paperless claims processing system (\$145.3 million), and continued development of HealtheVet, VA's electronic health record system (\$346.2 million). In addition, the 2011 budget request includes \$52 million for the advancement of the Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record, a Presidential priority that involves our close collaboration with DoD.

Enhancing our Management Infrastructure

A critical component of our transformation is to create a reliable management infrastructure that expands or enhances corporate transparency at VA, centralizes leadership and decentralizes execution, and invests in leadership training. This includes increasing investment in training and career development for our career civil service and employing a suitable financial management system to track expenditures. The Department's 2011 budget provides \$463 million in General Administration to support these vital corporate management activities. This includes \$23.6 million in support of the President's initiative to strengthen the acquisition workforce.

We will place particular emphasis on increasing our investment in training and career development—helping to ensure that VA's workforce remain leaders and standard-setters in their fields, skilled, motivated, and client-oriented. Training and development (including a leadership development program), communications and team building, and continuous learning will all be components of reaching this objective.

Capital Infrastructure

VA must provide timely, high-quality health care in medical infrastructure which is, on average, over 60 years old. In the 2011 budget, we are requesting \$1.6 billion to invest in our major and minor construction programs to accomplish projects that are crucial to right sizing and modernizing VA's health care infrastructure, providing greater access to benefits and services for more Veterans, closer to where they live, and adequately addressing patient safety and other critical facility deficiencies.

Major Construction

The 2011 budget request for VA major construction is \$1.151 billion. This includes funding for five medical facility projects in New Orleans, Louisiana; Denver, Colorado; Palo Alto and Alameda, California; and Omaha, Nebraska.

This request provides \$106.9 million to support the Department's burial program, including gravesite expansion and cemetery improvement projects at three national cemeteries—Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania; Los Angeles, California; and Tahoma, Washington.

Our major construction request includes \$51.4 million to begin implementation of a new policy to expand and improve access to burial in a national cemetery. Most significantly, this new policy lowers the Veteran population threshold to build a new national cemetery from 170,000 to 80,000 Veterans living within 75 miles of a cemetery. This will provide access to about 500,000 additional Veterans. Moreover, it will increase our strategic target for the percent of Veterans served by a burial option in a national or state Veterans cemetery within 75 miles of their residence from 90 percent to 94 percent.

VA's major construction request also includes \$24 million for resident engineers that support medical facility and national cemetery projects. This represents a new source of funding for the resident engineer program, which was previously funded under General Operating Expenses.

Minor Construction

The \$467.7 million request for 2011 for minor construction is an integral component of our overall capital program. In support of the medical care and medical research programs, minor construction funds permit VA to realign critical services; make seismic corrections; improve patient safety; enhance access to health care; increase capacity for dental care; enhance patient privacy; improve treatment of special emphasis programs; and expand our research capability. Minor construction funds are also used to improve the appearance of our national cemeteries. Further, minor construction resources will be used to comply with energy efficiency and sustainability design requirements.

Summary

Our job at the VA is to serve Veterans by increasing their access to VA benefits and services, to provide them the highest quality of health care available, and to control costs to the best of our ability. Doing so will make VA a model of good governance. The resources provided in the 2011 President's budget will permit us to fulfill our obligation to those who have bravely served our country.

The 298,000 employees of the VA are committed to providing the quality of service needed to serve our Veterans and their families. They are our most valuable resource. I am especially proud of several VA employees that have been singled out for special recognition this year.

First, let me recognize Dr. Janet Kemp, who received the "2009 Federal Employee of the Year" award from the Partnership for Public Service. Under Dr. Kemp's leadership, VA created the Veterans National Suicide Prevention Hotline to help Veterans in crisis. To date, the Hotline has received almost 225,000 calls and rescued about 6,800 people judged to be at imminent risk of suicide since its inception.

Second, we are also very proud of Nancy Fichtner, an employee at the Grand Junction Colorado Medical Center, for being the winner of the President's first-ever SAVE (Securing Americans Value and Efficiency) award. Ms. Fichtner's winning idea is for Veterans leaving VA hospitals to be able to take medication they have been using home with them instead of it being discarded upon discharge.

And third, we are proud of the VA employees at our Albuquerque, New Mexico Clinical Research Pharmacy Coordinating Center, including the Center Director, Mike R. Sather, for excellence in supporting clinical trials targeting current Veteran health issues. Their exceptional and important work garnered the center's recognition as the 2009 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Recipient in the nonprofit category.

The VA is fortunate to have public servants that are not only creative thinkers, but also able to put good ideas into practice. With such a workforce, and the continuing support of Congress, I am confident we can achieve our shared goal of accessible, high-quality and timely care and benefits for Veterans.