

Convention Highlights

Tuesday, July 21, 2015
Business Session

Obama Says VA ‘Work is Not Done’

Referring to VA’s 2014 crisis, President Barack Obama said “the full magnitude of broader problems also came to light—long wait times, veterans denied care, some people inexcusably cooking the books. It was unacceptable.” He acknowledged that “our work is not done” and his Administration still has “a big challenge” in fixing those problems. “I’m still not satisfied—we are not going to let up.”

Obama offered five priorities of his Administration’s “veterans agenda”:

- Providing “resources” from Congress.
- Ensuring “promised” health care.
- Cutting the disability backlog.
- Upholding the dignity of veterans, including ending veterans homelessness.
- Protecting troops and their families against “unscrupulous predatory lenders.”

As to the issue of veterans actually seeing a VA doctor, Obama said “on average, veterans are waiting just a few days for an appointment.”

USA Today, however, audited VA information from June 9 that showed “the average new patient seeking a primary care appointment at VA medical centers or their outpatient clinics have to wait even longer than the 27 days the department originally reported.”

VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald, who spoke before Obama, provided VFW delegates a thorough progress report on his department and a quick update on a few future objectives.

The most significant of his new initiatives is a program called **My VA** that McDonald, confirmed a year ago on July 29, said can be “customized” for each VA patient.

My VA has five goals:

- Improve veterans’ experience.
- Improve VA employees’ experience.
- Improve VA’s internal support system.
- Establish a culture of continual improvement.
- Enhance VA’s partnerships with veterans advocates.

For veterans, he said the program will give them more control over their benefits portfolio and the ability to handle certain functions—like starting or stopping benefits or adding dependents—on their own. Enrolled veterans have a website www.veterans.gov and will soon have a single toll-free telephone number to manage their options.

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McDonald, during his 30-minute speech, reported that 9.1 million vets are enrolled in VA's health care system—the country's largest. He also noted that by 2017 some 10 million veterans will be over the age of 65. To be prepared for that, as well as "the aging of Iraq and Afghanistan vets," McDonald said VA has requested a \$168.8 billion budget for fiscal year 2016.

He explained that VA facilities handled about 55 million appointments in fiscal year 2014 and that number will rise.

"While the total number of veterans will decrease, our patient workload will actually increase because of aging, not because of an influx of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans," he said. "We have to build that capacity today."

He also expected an increase in the 1.32 million compensation claims VA completed last year, predicting that by 2017 that number will rise to 1.44 million claims.

McDonald also wants to address VA's aging infrastructure, which includes 336 vacant "or nearly vacant" buildings costing taxpayers \$23 million a year.

Telling delegates that "the American public needs VA," he noted that 70% of U.S. doctors have trained with VA and its health care system trains some 120,000 workers every year.

Wrapping up his speech, McDonald noted that the changes he has made and plan to make are necessary for VA "to keep moving forward."

Rep. Mike Doyle (D-Pa.) also addressed the importance of VA care, noting that the wait time in the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System has "declined significantly." A former member of the House VA Committee, Doyle said, "No matter what the cost, it is our obligation to care for the consequences of war." He also called for Congress to repeal the sequestration act.

Foreign Policy Front and Center

Saying "everybody has to support our national security," Obama touched on several defense-related subjects, calling for an end to sequestration and increasing the defense budget.

He continued: "Now, every ally and every adversary needs to know around the world the United States has and will continue to have the strongest, most capable fighting force the world has ever known."

Afghanistan was prominently mentioned. "Today, we can say that our combat mission in Afghanistan is over," he said. "We brought America's longest war to a responsible end. And we salute every member of this 9/11 generation who has sacrificed to keep us safe ... The war may be over that our ground troops fought, but that country is still dangerous. So we'll persevere in our new mission."

Regarding the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, he proclaimed: "Have no doubt, we will degrade and ultimately destroy this barbaric terrorist organization ... we've got right on our side, and it will happen."

Paying tribute to the five servicemen brutally murdered in Chattanooga, Tenn., the President said, "We are grateful to the courageous police who stopped the rampage and saved lives."

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He also said, “We do know that al Qaeda and ISIL have encouraged attacks on American soil, including against our service members.”

The nuclear deal with Iran also was part of his speech. “Even with this deal,” he said, “we’ll continue to have serious differences with the Iranian government, its support for terrorism, proxies that destabilize the Middle East. So we can’t let them off the hook. Our sanctions for Iran’s support for terrorism and its ballistic missile program and its human rights violations – those sanctions will remain in place.”

Moreover, “We are not going to relent until we bring home our Americans who are unjustly detained in Iran ... Amir Hekmati, a former sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, should be released.”

VFW’s position on this matter was made clear in mid-April: VFW “is demanding that the safe release of former U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Amir M. Hekmati be linked to any potential deal with Iran. We demand that the U.S. government make his release a non-negotiable part of whatever deal is cut with Iran. If our government can swap five of the worst terrorists for one American soldier, we can certainly make the safe release of one former Marine an unconditional part of a deal that has yet been formalized. It’s what America does for its citizens—we bring them home.”

Quest for MIAs Continues

Michael S. Linnington, the director of the new Defense Personnel Accounting Agency (DPAA), briefed convention attendees on its operations and priorities. He assured the audience that DPAA’s mission will not be disrupted, its integrity will remain intact, teamwork will continue as usual, respect will be accorded all families and innovation pursued vigorously.

Priorities include completing the reorganization by the end of 2015, sharing information (case management), improving communications and expanding partnerships with private groups (a prime example is History Flight, which helped recover remains on Tarawa). Such voluntary, non-contractual agreements with these groups will greatly increase DPAA’s capacity worldwide and enhance its resources, said the retired Army general and vet of Iraq and Afghanistan.

A new, \$85 million facility in Hawaii will be dedicated on July 27, he proudly announced.

“VFW’s strong support for our mission especially stands out,” Linnington said, “including its annual trips to Southeast Asia, the only veterans’ service organization to do so every year since 1991.” The director is a member of VFW Post 5343 in New Jersey.

Pittsburgh Jobs Initiative for Veterans

Jack Wagner, executive director of *Pittsburgh Hires Veterans*, provided an overview of the city’s model program for veteran employment. A Vietnam vet and member of VFW Post 3945 in Pittsburgh, Wagner said one of the most important things is to find veterans “quality careers.”

He added that the program’s focus in western Pennsylvania is on manufacturing because there are hundreds of available jobs. “Just as we did not leave a man on the battlefield,” he said, “we cannot leave a veteran unemployed or under-employed.”

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Moreover, “Every VFW Post should become an outpost for employment and education information,” he said. A video he presented featured key players in the Pittsburgh effort.

Recognizing Outstanding Service

Receiving the *James E. Van Zandt Citizenship Award* were representatives of the Arlington Ladies: Margaret Mensch (Army); Paula McKinley (Navy); Jean Anderegg (Air Force) and Maggi Paar (Coast Guard). With a team of volunteers, these women are present at burials at Arlington National Cemetery.

National Citizenship Education Teacher Awards went to Ann Parker Komara, Melinda Hamilton and Craig Blackman. Komara, a fifth-grade teacher at Ottobine Elementary School in Dayton, Va., has students make patriotic windsocks and bracelets to sell to support wounded veterans. Her students also worked with Post 8644 in Bridgewater, Va., to assemble and mail care packages to troops overseas. Komara frequently hosts veterans in her classroom to speak to students.

Hamilton, a seventh-grade social studies teacher at River Bend Middle School in Claremont, N.C., has her students host voter registration drives and organizes class trips to Washington, D.C., Gettysburg and Philadelphia. Inspired by her father, a Vietnam vet, Hamilton honors veterans each year on Veterans Day.

Blackman, a social studies teacher at Indian River High School in Chesapeake, Va., brings history to life for his students by performing war-era plays and dressing like historic figures such as Abraham Lincoln. He had his students research and write about 25 local men killed during the Vietnam War. The essays were then presented to the families of those killed.

John G. Rangos, Sr., was awarded a *Certificate of Appreciation* and a VFW life membership for his philanthropic work—especially with Pittsburgh Hires Veterans—on behalf of veterans. A Korean War vet, Rangos proclaimed: “Let’s help the troops coming off the battlefield.”

Dan Fitzpatrick, founder and president of Quality Dining, Inc., was awarded a *Certificate of Appreciation* for his support of VFW’s *Unmet Needs* program. Customers at Fitzpatrick’s 165 Burger King restaurants have donated \$875,000 to the program since 2008.

Patrick Hallinan received a VFW Commander-in-Chief *Gold Medal and Citation* for his work as executive director of the Army National Military Cemeteries.

Fred Burns received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation* for his 22 years of service as an employee with VFW’s Washington Office.

Past VFW Commander-in-Chief William Thien received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation*.

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