

Convention Highlights

Tuesday, July 26, 2016
Business Session

Donald Trump: ‘VA Will Remain Public’

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, accompanied by his running mate Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, received thunderous applause numerous times today when he addressed delegates on topics including the “inexcusable” VA wait-time crisis, his plan to reform the Department and his strategy for fighting terrorism. “The veterans health system will remain a public system because it is a public trust,” he said. “That means veterans will have the right to go to a VA facility or the right to see a private doctor or clinic of their choice, whatever is fastest and best for the veteran.”

Saying when he gets to the White House, “you’ll see a change in VA and the whole government system,” Trump outlined his 10-point plan for veterans: **1.** Appoint a qualified VA secretary to “clean up” the VA. **2.** Remove or discipline federal employees and managers who break trust. **3.** Ask Congress to give the VA secretary full authority to fire or discipline VA employees who risk “the health, safety or well-being of a veteran.” **4.** Create a commission to investigate VA’s wrongdoings and present a report to Congress outlining VA reform. **5.** Protect and promote honest, hardworking VA employees. **6.** Create a private White House hotline for veterans to voice specific VA complaints that will be answered 24 hours a day. **7.** Create an “incentives reward program” for VA employees trying to save money while improving quality of care. **8.** Ensure veterans are given preference in employment. **9.** Increase the number of mental health care professionals and outreach to those outside of the system. **10.** Ensure veterans have more timely access to care.

In addressing the Islamic State’s acts of terror, Trump said American foreign policy must change to defeat and destroy ISIS. He said the world’s perception of U.S. “weakness” has allowed the Islamist terror network to thrive. One element in Trump’s plan to combat ISIS is more stringent screening of refugees. “It’s essential that we suspend the refugees from Syria and other dangerous countries so we don’t bring into the United States the same terrorism that our American soldiers are fighting overseas,” he said to the loudest applause and cheers of his speech.

The presidential contender said our country’s “depleted military” must be “completely re-built.” Then “from a position of strength,” Trump would reach out to other nations in friendship. “America needs to extend our hand in friendship to foreign nations who want to be our friends, and we can’t be taken advantage of by these countries that we work so closely with,” he said. “Many of these countries are taking advantage of us. We want to be friends, but they also have to be friends with us. We want a more peaceful future for our world, but peace will require new approaches.”

Telling the crowd it’s time to “reject the doubters,” Trump concluded with a plea to follow the example set by veterans, “who work together across racial lines, across income lines, across all lines in unity of mission and purpose. Nobody does it better than our veterans.”

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VA: 'Same-Day Access' Expected by December

VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald highlighted the progress his Department is making in the transformation to better serve veterans. He noted that 13 of VA's top 18 executives have been hired since he became secretary, and eight of those are veterans. He said VA is collaborating with "world-class institutions" such as Johnson & Johnson, USAA, Starbucks, NASA and Kaiser Permanente to offer the best services possible for veterans.

McDonald addressed the network of 67 Community Veterans Engagement Boards (CVEB), saying he hopes to have 100 across the country by year's end. CVEBs leverage all community assets to meet the needs of veterans within the community. "If there's no CVEB in your community, let's make it happen," he said.

With 9 million enrollees, VA offers "whole veteran health care," McDonald said. That means VA has alternatives such as yoga and acupuncture, as well as sports, music, writing and art therapy. "We validate and embrace what works to heal veterans," he said.

Regarding access to care, the secretary said that 97% of appointments are completed within 30 days of a veteran's preferred date; 86% are completed within seven days and 22% are completed the same day. The average wait time for primary care is five days, six days for specialty care and two days for mental health care. "By December, you can expect same-day access in primary care and same-day access in mental health care," he said.

"Veterans are the only ones who really know what it means to stand on that dangerous ground between freedom and tyranny," he concluded.

Quest for MIAs is 'Daunting Task'

Fern Sumpter Winbush, acting director of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, told delegates there are still 83,000 unaccounted for Americans. She called it a "daunting task" to resolve their fates and return their remains. She said she hopes 2016 will be a record year for identifications. An at-large member of VFW's Department of Virginia, Winbush said her agency is now working with colleges and universities to get graduate students to come on board for research projects. The Afghanistan veteran also discussed Next Generation DNA Sequencing being used to test DNA samples that previously failed with traditional sequencing methods.

Recognizing Outstanding Service

Receiving VFW's *Hall of Fame Award* was comedian, actor and Marine veteran Rob Riggle. A life member of the Department of California, the Afghanistan veteran said he was "very humbled" by the award. Wearing his grandfather's VFW pin, Riggle said growing up he always wanted to serve his country. "It was one of my dreams," he said. "That's what's great about this country, you can pursue all your dreams."

National Citizenship Education Teacher Awards went to Jessica Mosley, Donna Kregelka and William Ellery. Mosely, a fourth-grade teacher at Park Intermediate School in Payette, Idaho, is a Navy reservist and member of Post 2738 in Payette. Her students make cards for deployed troops and hospitalized veterans, and participate in Veterans Day programs at school.

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Kregelka, a social studies teacher at Chippewa Middle School in Okemos, Mich., has her students participate in the school's Valentines for Veterans program. She also has a U.S. Constitution party where students enjoy a buffet of red, white and blue foods while dressed in their most patriotic attire. Kregelka established a WWII class, too, which is sought after by students each year.

A history teacher at Carmel High School in Carmel, Ind., Ellery brings veterans into his classroom and has taken students to meet with Doolittle Raiders. He takes students to Europe to place flags on the graves of GIs buried there. His students have participated in Honor Flights, escorting veterans to Washington, D.C., to see the National World War II Memorial.

Various Awards and Speakers

Rep. Robert Pittenger (R-N.C.) told delegates about an initiative he has been working on to raise money for PTSD research and treatment. Called "Stamp out PTSD," the project entails creating a postage stamp that would sell for more than a first-class stamp, the difference going to the program.

Bill Bradshaw received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation* for his 31 years of employment with VFW's National Veterans Service.

Past Commander-in-Chief John Stroud received a *Distinguished Service Medal and Citation*.

John Barrett was named *VFW Accredited Service Representative of the Year* for his work the past 11 years as New Hampshire's lone service officer. A member of Post 8214 in Manchester, Barrett has about 450 claims pending for vets he is assisting.

Prasad Reddy, president and CEO of Twisted X Boots, presented VFW with a \$75,000 check.

Buck Kern, executive director of Snowball Express and Dalia Ballester, managing director of customer care for American Airlines, offered their thanks to VFW for its \$30,000 contribution. Snowball Express provides a free vacation for children who have lost a parent during military service.

Anthony Imperato, president and owner of Bayonne, N.J.-based Henry Repeating Arms, presented Adjutant General John Hamilton with a special edition Henry Military Service Tribute Rifle.

Representatives with the VFW National Home updated members on happenings at the Home and 2016 Buddy Poppy Child Jaeden Davis offered her remarks.

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