The Access Crisis

As False Waiting Lists Are Uncovered, DAV Promotes Solutions

A scandal that surfaced in Phoenix involving secret waiting lists and months-long wait times for veterans seeking health care through the Department of Veterans Affairs has led to the resignation of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki and has shook the public’s faith in the government agency charged with caring for our nation’s heroes.

Shinseki resigned on May 30, apologizing for a scandal in which employees throughout the VA’s massive hospital system conspired to hide months-long wait times for veterans who seek health care.

After accepting and announcing the resignation, President Obama immediately directed Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Sloan D. Gibson to take over the embattled agency until a new secretary is named. In announcing Shinseki’s resignation, the president described the retired Army general as a person of integrity who presided over a bureaucracy that was overwhelmed by two long wars and an aging veteran population, and which ultimately succumbed to widespread cheating to hide its shortcomings.

“I want to reiterate, he is a very good man,” President Obama said of Shinseki at the White House following the resignation. “I don’t just mean that he’s an accomplished man. I don’t just mean that he’s been an outstanding soldier. He’s a good person who’s done exemplary work on our behalf.”

However, he concluded that the growing calls for Shinseki’s firing had become too much of a distraction from the complicated work of fixing the troubled department.
“We respect Secretary Shinseki’s decision to resign and allow new leadership to address this crisis with new solutions,” National Commander Joseph Johnston said of the longest-serving VA head. “But ultimately, a change in leadership does not address the root of the VA health care system’s problems of access and insufficient funding levels.”

“History clearly shows that unless VA receives sufficient resources to hire enough doctors and nurses, and has enough physical space to treat veterans, waiting-list problems will continue,” said Washington Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine. “Over the past decade, DAV—along with Independent Budget veterans service organizations—has pointed out that the VA has received more than $17 billion less than was needed, a figure that was derived primarily from VA’s own internal analysis. Although these facts have been clear to successive Administrations and Congresses, none took the actions necessary to provide VA the resources it required.”

The VA is dealing with a 50-percent increase in primary care visits in the past three years. During the same period, the department has increased the number of primary care doctors by just nine percent.

DAV’s willingness to speak pointedly about that important factor in this crisis drew fire from some who were responsible for setting VA’s levels of funding.

In mid-May, DAV and other veterans’ service organizations offered comprehensive testimony on the underlying causes of the waiting-list problems. In addition to demanding full accountability for any VA employee found to have violated VA rules, regulations or laws, DAV provided detailed analysis and forward-looking recommendations to address the root cause of waiting lists: lack of access and capacity to treat all veterans seeking care.

There were those in Congress who took exception to the fact
that the vast majority of veterans’ organizations did not call for Secretary Shinseki’s resignation. These VSOs, which include DAV, became the target of verbal attacks on the eve of Memorial Day weekend.

“Certain people were only listening for calls for the VA secretary to resign,” said Augustine. “While they may be enamored with the idea that all of VA’s problems and challenges can be overcome by replacing one secretary, the plain facts and simple logic dictate otherwise. We need serious policy solutions, not cheap political attacks on the integrity of leaders of veterans’ organizations who hold different opinions, all of whom served honorably to defend this nation and then devoted all or most of their lives to serving their fellow veterans.”

Rather than be distracted by insults, DAV pushed forward, reaching out to both Republicans and Democrats in the Senate and House, as well as the president and leaders in VA to implement solutions. On June 10, just before press time, a major first step was taken legislatively when a bipartisan bill was passed in response to the current VA health care crisis.

“DAV commends Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Fl.) and ranking member Mike Michaud (D-Me.) for joining together so quickly,” said Commander Johnston. “The House’s action is a first step that with the anticipated approval of similar bipartisan legislation in the Senate from Chairman Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), and in conjunction with actions already taken and planned by Acting VA Secretary Gibson, could lead to better access to medical care for the men and women who served.”

The bipartisan bills would fund construction of 26 new medical facilities and set up ways to make it easier for veterans to seek private care if they do not live near a VA medical facility. The bills would also improve access to health care
for survivors of military sexual assault.

DAV staff is working with all parties to help fine-tune, strengthen and coalesce around effective administrative, regulatory and legislative changes needed to address VA’s capacity and access problems. “As the House and Senate work toward a final compromise bill, it is imperative that VA remains responsible for both coordinating and paying for enrolled veterans’ medical care, regardless of the provider, in order to achieve the best health outcomes for veterans,” said National Legislative Director Joseph Violante.

“As Congress expands the mandate to provide care outside VA, we must ensure that it provides the additional funding without taking away funding from VA’s hospitals and clinics that are already at or near capacity,” Augustine said.

“While this crisis is deeply disturbing, we hope the issues uncovered serve as a wake-up call to focus America’s attention on the need to fulfill the sacred promises made to the men and women who so honorably served our country,” said National Adjutant Marc Burgess.

“DAV stands ready to work closely with Acting Secretary Sloan Gibson to implement solutions necessary to ensure all veterans can access the health care they need,” National Commander Joseph W. Johnston said. “We hope that newly appointed leadership continues to build on the progress made during Secretary Shinseki’s tenure in regard to reducing the claims backlog, addressing homelessness among veterans and improving access to mental health care.”

5 Core Principles for Improvement