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# News Release

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## **Task Force Aims at Improved Services for GWOT Veterans** *Nicholson - Veterans "Should Not Have To Fight For Benefits Earned"*

WASHINGTON – Military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan can look forward to more timely receipt of benefits, better information and more streamlined processes, thanks to streamlined federal procedures announced today by Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson, who chaired a presidential task force.

“The federal government must be responsive and efficient in delivering our benefits and services to these heroes,” Nicholson said during a speech to the National Press Club. “They should not have to fight bureaucratic red tape for benefits earned by their courageous service.”

On March 6, President Bush appointed Nicholson to lead the Interagency Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes, which reviewed federal benefits and processes for changes that could quickly improve veterans’ access to services and programs.

Nicholson went to the White House April 23 to personally brief President Bush about the task force’s recommendations.

The Task Force brought together top officials from the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Education, as well as the Office of Management and Budget, the Small Business Administration and Office of Personnel Management.

The task force focused on improvements that could be made within the authority of the individual departments or agencies, using existing resources. The panel specifically targeted health care, benefits, employment, education, housing and outreach activities.

The report includes 25 recommendations to improve delivery of federal services to returning military men and women. The government-wide action plan contains steps for individual department and agency activities and incorporates cooperative interaction among those providing complimentary services.

## **Task Force 2/2/2/2**

Recommendations focus on increasing awareness of available benefits among service members and their families and improving the process for receiving them. Eighteen recommendations will involve collaborative efforts among several federal agencies to improve the timeliness, ease of application, and delivery of services and benefits.

The task force report is available on VA's Website at: <http://www.va.gov/taskforce/>. A fact sheet highlighting the recommendations is attached.

# # #

### **Taking Care Of America's Returning Wounded Warriors Interagency Task Force On Returning Global War On Terror Heroes**

**On April 19, 2007, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson Submitted The Report Of The Interagency Task Force On Returning Global War On Terror Heroes To The President.** The Task Force identified and examined existing Federal services provided to returning Global War on Terror service members, identified gaps in those services, and sought recommendations from appropriate Federal agencies on ways to fill those gaps quickly and effectively.

**The Report Includes Recommendations To Improve Delivery Of Federal Services To Returning Military Men And Women.** The government-wide action plan contains steps for individual Department or Agency commitment and incorporates cooperative interaction among those providing complimentary services. Recommendations focus on improving the process for receiving services and increased awareness of available benefits among service members and their families. Recommendations involve collaborative efforts among several federal entities to improve the timeliness, ease of application, and delivery of services and benefits to those who earned them.

## **Improving The Process Of Meeting The Needs Of Returning Service Members**

### ➤ **Health Care**

- Develop a system of co-management and case management for returning service members to facilitate ease of transfer from Department of Defense care to VA care.
- Screen all GWOT veterans seen in VA health care facilities for mild to moderate Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- Assist the VA enrollment process by modifying the VA 1010EZ form for GWOT service members, enhance the on-line benefits package to allow a GWOT service member to self-identify, and expand the use of DoD's military service information to establish eligibility for health care benefits.
- VA will require each Medical Center Director and Network Director to provide full support at Post-Deployment Health Reassessment for Guard and Reserve members to enroll eligible members and schedule appointments.
- Standardize VA Liaison agreements across all Military Treatment Facilities.
- Expand VA access to DoD records to coordinate an improved transfer of a service member's medical care through patient "hand-off".
- Enhance the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) to more specifically track GWOT service members.
  - Develop a Veterans Tracking Application and identifiers to improve monitoring of returning GWOT service members.
  - Create a Polytrauma identifier to increase recognition of additional needs of those injured service members.
  - Create a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) database to track patients who have experienced TBI.
  - Create a DoD / VA interface for health care providers to have access to data on combat theater injured service members.
- Create an embedded fragment surveillance center to monitor returning service members who have possibly retained fragments of materials in order to provide early medical intervention.
- Enhance capacity for GWOT service members to receive dental care in the private sector as VA continues to improve their capacity for dental services at their facilities.
- Enhance Information Technology interoperability between VA and HHS Indian Health Service.
- VA and HHS will collaborate to improve access to returning service members in remote or rural areas.

### ➤ **Benefits**

- Develop a joint DoD / VA process for disability benefit determinations by establishing a cooperative Medical and Physical Evaluation Board process within the military service branches and VA care system.
- Extend VA's Vocational Rehabilitation Evaluation Determination Time Limit of the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program beyond 12 months to allow additional time for returning service members to better understand their rehabilitation needs.
- Expedite handling of adapted housing and special home adaptation grant claims by notifying the returning GWOT applicant within 48 hours of rating decision.

➤ **Jobs, Education & Housing**

- Expand eligibility of the Small Business Administration PatriotExpress Loan to provide full range of lending, business counseling and procurement programs to veterans, service-disabled veterans, reservists and families if the desire for a returning service member or family is to obtain self-employment.
- DoD and the Department of Labor will collaborate to improve Civilian Workforce Credentialing and Certification allowing for greater exposure of a service member's military experience to civilian opportunities.
- The Department of Labor will work with DoD to develop a Wounded Veterans Intern Program to gain valuable work experience while they serve on medical hold and are transitioning to departure from military service.
- The Department of Housing and Urban Development will expand access to the National Housing Locator (NHL) to be used by service members and veterans through DoD and VA. The NHL was initially launched as a response to needs for victims of Hurricane Katrina. By expanding its use, returning service members will have a resource that provides safe, disability accessible if needed, and affordable housing to ease in the potential re-location to a new area.

**Reaching Out To Service Members And Their Families About Available Benefits And**

**Services**

- Increase attendance at the Transition Assistance and Disable Transition Assistance Programs (TAP / DTAP) for active duty, guard and reserve.
- The Department of Education in cooperation with the Department of Labor will participate in DoD job fairs to provide returning service members and their families with an awareness of the post-secondary education benefits available.
- The Department of Labor, through the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), will participate in the Workforce Investment System in every state and territory and partner with over 120 private and public sector job fairs to expand the number of employers involved in active veteran recruitment.
- The Department of Labor and DoD will promote awareness of the Uniformed Services Employment and Re-employment Rights Act (USERRA) rights to improve active duty, Guard, and Reservists understanding of their rights at entry to, during, and exiting from military service.
- The Department of Education will provide education benefits training to the 211 Transition Assistance Program sites which service more than 150,000 transitioning service members annually.
- The Office of Personnel Management will expand their military treatment facility outreach to promote the availability of federal employment and veterans' preference rights.
- The VA Global War on Terrorism newsletter, mailed quarterly to returning service members, will be modified to provide consistent summaries and awareness of available federal services and benefits.

## **Background On The Task Force Work And Next Steps**

- **The President Directed U.S. Department Of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Jim Nicholson On March 6, 2007 To Establish An Interagency Task Force On Returning Global War On Terror Heroes.** The Task Force brought together top-level officials from the U.S. Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Education, as well as the Office of Management and Budget, the Small Business Administration, Office of Personnel Management and General Services Administration. The Task Force was focused on improvements using existing executive authority and resources.
- **The Task Force Inventoried Existing Federal Services And Benefits.** The Task Force identified 280 current services and benefits available to service members, veterans and their families. These include programs such as providing health care to service members and their families and benefits such as disability pay, life insurance, job training, education, employment services, housing, loss of property reimbursement and child care.
- **The Task Force Established A Website And Contact Information To Receive Input From Service Members, Their Families, Federal Employees, Veterans Organizations, And The General Public.** More than 2,300 comments and suggestions were received about ways to improve services. The Task Force staff also met with the leadership of both national, state and local veteran organization representatives, service members and their families, and other interested parties seeking to provide input in ways to better meet the needs of those returning from service in the Global War on Terror.
- **Task Force To Reconvene In 45 Days To Provide Updates On The Progress Of the Government Wide Action Plan.** The work of the Task Force will continue past this report to the President. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs will monitor the implementation of the recommendations to ensure they are accomplished and receive status reports from the member departments and agencies.