



# House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

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**Bob Filner**  
Chairman



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## About the Committee: Oversight Plan for the 109th Congress

### U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

#### OVERSIGHT PLAN FOR 109<sup>th</sup> CONGRESS

In accordance with clause 2(d)(1) of Rule X of the House of Representatives, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs on February 10, 2005, adopted its oversight plan for the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress.

This oversight plan is directed at those matters most in need of oversight within the next two years. The Committee is cognizant of the requirement adopted for the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress that oversight plans "have a view toward insuring against duplication of Federal programs." The Committee will consult as necessary with other House Committees having jurisdiction over the same or related laws affecting veterans.

Oversight will be accomplished through committee and subcommittee hearings, field and site visits by Members and staff, and meetings and correspondence with interested parties. Methods of oversight will include existing and requested reports, studies, estimates, investigations and audits by the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, and the Offices of the Inspectors General of the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor.

The Committee will seek the views of veterans' service organizations, military associations, other interest groups and private citizens. The Committee also welcomes communications from any individuals and organizations desiring to bring matters to its attention.

While this oversight plan describes the foreseeable areas in which the Committee expects to conduct oversight during the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Committee and its subcommittees will undertake additional oversight activities as the need arises.

The full Committee may at the discretion of the Chairman after consultation with the Ranking Minority Member conduct any of the oversight activities planned by the subcommittees.

#### **Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs**

1. **Consistency Among Claims Decisions.** The Committee is concerned about evidence of inconsistencies among VA's regional offices when making an initial decision on whether to award disability benefits and the rating assigned to similar disabilities. As GAO reported in August 2002 and November 2004, VA has not systematically assessed the consistency of regional offices' ratings of impairments. In December 2004, the VA Inspector General began a review of inconsistencies in the rating assigned to disability claims. Following the results of that assessment, the Committee intends to examine the measures VA is taking to assess and measure consistency and to assure that disability decision-making is consistent among all 57 regional offices.
2. **Training of Claims Adjudicators.** The Committee plans oversight of the training standards of claims adjudicators, to include how changes in law and regulation are transmitted to the field and disseminated to regional staff, how

quality assurance is maintained, and the implementation of VA's new pilot authority under Public Law 108-454 to create structured on-job training for claims adjudicators under VA educational assistance programs.

3. **Nonservice-Connected Pension Program.** The VA pension program provides financial assistance to more than 340,000 low-income veterans. Benefits under the pension program provide assistance to veterans who are totally and permanently disabled, but whose disability is not service-connected. Veterans who are age 65 or older may qualify for a VA pension based upon age. To be eligible, veterans must have at least 90 days of military service, including at least one day of wartime service. The Committee will examine the administration of these programs.
4. **Review of Board of Veterans' Appeals and Appeals Management Center.** The Board of Veterans' Appeals reviews benefit claims determinations made by local VA regional offices, and issues decisions on appeals. In fiscal year 2004, the Board decided 38,371 appeals and remanded 56.8 percent for additional action. In order to handle the large number of remands, the Veterans Benefits Administration established an Appeals Management Center. The Committee will review the operations of the Board of Veterans' Appeals and the Appeals Management Center through briefings and hearings.
5. **Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission.** Public Law 108-136 established the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission. The commission will examine and make recommendations concerning, among other things, the appropriateness of the level of benefits and the appropriate standard or standards for determining whether a disability or death of a veteran should be compensated. The Committee will review the recommendations of the Commission through briefings and hearings.
6. **Maintenance, Appearance, and Upkeep of National Cemeteries.** Many VA national cemeteries, both open and closed, are in a deplorable state of disrepair. A 2002 Logistics Management Institute study of improvements to veterans' cemeteries (entitled "National Shrine Commitment") identified 928 full-scale cemetery restoration and repair projects. The Committee will examine the immediate and long-term needs of the national cemetery system.

#### **Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity**

1. **Jobs and Business Opportunities for Servicemembers and Veterans.** The Committee plans to conduct hearings to highlight servicemembers and veterans as a desirable business asset, with a focus on recently separated servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Committee will also examine the results of the President's National Hire Veterans Committee, created by Public Law 107-288.
2. **Department of Labor Job Training and Transition Services.** Public Law 107-288, the Jobs for Veterans Act, improved and modernized the Department of Labor's veterans' employment and training services, including providing veterans "first-in-line" priority in all DOL funded employment and training programs. Public Law 108-183 requires DOL to furnish pre-separation job placement services to servicemembers serving overseas. The Committee will examine the effectiveness of each of these programs.
3. **Department of Labor Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialist and Local Veterans Employment Representative Programs.** The Department of Labor funds state employment service positions, Department of Labor Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs). These positions are responsible for identifying employment opportunities for veterans and job placement. The Subcommittee will evaluate the results obtained by DVOPs and LVERs and program coordination with other government and non-governmental agencies tasked with ensuring veterans achieve and maintain gainful employment.

4. **State Approving Agencies.** Veterans may only receive GI Bill benefits while attending a VA-approved course of instruction. VA contracts with state education agencies to approve and monitor education and training programs to ensure they meet the needs of veterans. The state agencies also provide local resources to investigate alleged violations of VA education regulations as well as a wide range of oversight functions on behalf of VA. The Subcommittee will assess the performance of the State Approving Agencies.
5. **Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment.** VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program provides services and assistance to enable veterans with service-connected disabilities to obtain and maintain suitable employment, and to enable certain other disabled veterans to achieve independence in daily living. The Committee will examine VR&E's focus on suitable employment, assistance to the most seriously disabled veterans, succession planning, contracted services, claims processing, employer outreach and quality assurance.
6. **Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act.** Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) provides a broad range of employment rights and responsibilities for veterans and employers. The law was recently amended to establish a demonstration project for improved enforcement by the Federal government. The Subcommittee will assess the effectiveness of USERRA with special emphasis on National Guard and Reserve members returning to the workforce following activation.
7. **The Veterans Corporation.** The Veterans Corporation (TVC) was created to promote entrepreneurial activities among veterans. The Subcommittee will review TVC programs, activities and plans for future expansion.
8. **VA Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business.** Federal agencies are required to observe a veterans set aside for a portion of their supply and service contracts for small and disadvantaged businesses. The Subcommittee will determine whether VA is meeting its goals to expand opportunities for small, disadvantaged and veteran-owned businesses.
9. **Categorical Ranking System.** The Office of Personnel Management has authorized implementation of a categorical ranking system that accords veterans' preference differently than the 5 or 10 point advantage required by the previous system. The subcommittee will review the effectiveness of the new system.

#### **Subcommittee on Health**

1. **Advisory Committee Review.** VA has many advisory committees, often required by Congress, to provide advice and guidance on veterans programs and services. The Subcommittee will review the cost and effectiveness of advisory committees.
2. **Delivery Options for VA Health Care.** The Subcommittee will examine the use of telemedicine and other innovative alternatives to provide quality and cost-effective care to eligible veterans.
3. **Home Improvements and Structural Alterations Program.** The Subcommittee plans to review the operation of the program and whether there is a duplication of services in VA's adapted housing program.
4. **Homeless Assistance Programs for Veterans.** The Subcommittee will evaluate the effectiveness of VA's homeless programs, coordination with other federal agency programs, and the need for better census and outcome data.
5. **Long-Term Care Programs.** The Subcommittee will review VA's institutional and non-institutional programs and explore innovative ways to deliver long-term care for eligible veterans.

6. **Medical Research Programs.** The Subcommittee will examine the extent to which VA's research programs meet the statutory requirement for conducting research into injuries and illnesses related to military service and benefit the clinical treatment needs of veterans.
7. **Meeting the Health Care Needs of Veterans.** The Subcommittee will evaluate VA's priorities of care in fulfilling its mission to provide timely, high-quality health care.
8. **Post Deployment Health.** Thousands of service members have recently returned and will continue to return from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The Committee will assess VA's programs for meeting the health care needs of these veterans, including their mental health care needs.
9. **Prosthetics and Special-Disabilities Programs.** The Subcommittee will assess VA programs, including research and technology development, that serve veterans with spinal cord injury, vision impairment, loss of or loss of use of extremities, hearing impairment, or other serious disabilities and injuries.
10. **VA Capital Asset and Facility Management.** VA plans to invest \$1 billion annually over the next several years to implement the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) recommendations and modernize VA's health care system. The Subcommittee will continue to evaluate the CARES process and VA's capital asset plans, including those for Charleston, SC and Denver, CO. Additionally, the Subcommittee will review VA's implementation of section 411 of Public Law 108-422, which established the Capital Asset Fund and provided VA with additional authority to transfer unneeded VA real property.
11. **VA Nursing Quality and Recruitment.** The Subcommittee will explore innovative measures VA medical centers may use to attract and retain nursing personnel and support quality patient care, including the Magnet Recognition Program.
12. **VA Physician and Dentist Issues.** Public Law 108-445, the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Personnel Enhancement Act of 2003, established a reformed compensation system for VA physicians and dentists. The Subcommittee will conduct oversight to ensure VA is meeting Congressional intent, and to monitor the extent the reformed compensation system reduces VA's use of costly contract physicians.
13. **Women Veterans Programs.** VA has many clinical programs that serve women veterans. The Subcommittee will evaluate VA's programs and the various care delivery options to provide services to women veterans. \_

#### **Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations**

1. **VA's Acquisition Process.** The VA spends approximately \$6 billion annually for pharmaceuticals, medical and surgical supplies, prosthetic devices, information technology, construction, and services. VA faces major challenges to implement a more efficient, effective, and coordinated acquisition program. The subcommittee will hold a hearing to review VA's procurement practices.
2. **Evaluating Management Efficiencies.** The VA plans to achieve specified savings each fiscal year by implementing various procedures to achieve cost avoidance. The subcommittee will examine the relationship of projected savings with demonstrated savings and assess the impact on delivery of quality services.
3. **Nursing Recruitment, Retention, and Staffing.** VA continues to have nursing recruiting and retention problems, and nursing resource issues. The subcommittee will review what actions VA has taken to address these issues. The subcommittee will also review VA's staffing methodologies, standards, and data systems for nursing services to enhance recruiting, retention, and job satisfaction.

4. **VA Information Technology Programs.** The subcommittee will continue its oversight of VA's IT programs, including the Core Financial and Logistics System, the integrated financial management and logistics system under development by VA. The Subcommittee will continue its review of this program and VA's development plans for the future.
5. **Recruiting and Retention of Medical Specialists.** The subcommittee will examine whether VA has the proper medical specialists to meet the needs of veterans.
6. **Credentialing and Screening of VA Healthcare Employees.** The subcommittee will examine VA's implementation of Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommendations for screening professional credentials of VA healthcare practitioners.
7. **VA/DOD Consolidated Mail Order Pharmacy Demonstration.** The subcommittee has requested that GAO review the cost effectiveness of having VA consolidated mail order pharmacies handle DOD's prescription refills. The subcommittee will assess whether cost savings could be realized by consolidating similar programs within VA and DOD.
8. **Controlled Substances Security.** The IG's Combined Assessment Program Reviews have repeatedly found material weaknesses in VA medical center security of controlled substances. Poor security or lack of security seriously increases the potential for waste, fraud, abuse, and drug diversion. The subcommittee will examine how VA is addressing this issue.
9. **Medical Care Collection Fund.** The subcommittee will conduct a follow-up oversight on VA's progress in its medical care collection efforts including demonstrations, consolidations and outsourcing initiatives.
10. **Medical Appointment Waiting Times.** VA states that 94 percent of primary care appointments are made within 30 days, even with a 34 percent increase in health care users. The subcommittee will examine VA's progress in reducing waiting times and review the methodology utilized in these performance outcome measurements.
11. **Human Subjects Protection Program.** GAO will evaluate VA's notification procedures for dealing with research misconduct, and the lessons learned from veterans' deaths as a result of research misconduct. The subcommittee will review what corrective actions have been implemented by VA system-wide.
12. **Physician Time and Attendance.** The IG has cited numerous problems with part-time physician time and attendance issues in its Combined Assessment Program (CAP) reports. In its Audit Part-Time Physician Time and Attendance, Report 02-01339-85, April 23, 2003, the IG made recommendations to correct the problem. The subcommittee will continue to review corrective actions taken by VHA.
13. **VA/DOD Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program.** The subcommittee will evaluate DOD's utilization of a single examination that meets both military services' separation requirements and VA's disability compensation criteria. The subcommittee will also review VA's efforts to co-locate Veterans Benefits Administration and Veterans Health Administration personnel involved in compensation and pension claims processing to provide more efficient one-stop claims processing centers. Further, the Subcommittee will examine whether there is duplication of physical examinations between VA and DOD.
14. **Force Protection and Seamless Transition.** The process for determining eligibility for veterans' benefits, assessing health status and receiving VA health care once a servicemember separates from active duty should be seamless, timely and accurate. The subcommittee will review VA and DOD progress toward a seamless transition to veteran status.

15. **Electronic Medical Records.** VA and DOD through their joint Health Executive Council have developed a plan to create an interoperable electronic medical record by 2005. The subcommittee will review the progress that has been made in interoperability and the timely bi-directional exchange of medical information.
16. **Workers' Compensation Program.** The IG previously reported on VA's poor case management of workers' compensation claims. VA is at risk for program abuse, fraud, and unnecessary costs because it has not fully implemented IG recommendations issued in 1999. The subcommittee will examine what should be done to improve the Workers Compensation Program.
17. **EEO Complaint Resolution System.** Public Law 105-114, the Veterans Benefits Act of 1997, included a requirement that the Department of Veterans Affairs take actions to improve its equal employment opportunity program and created the Office of Resolution Management. The subcommittee will review the effectiveness of the Office of Resolution Management.
18. **Enhanced Land Leases and Divestment of Federal Property.** The subcommittee will review the adequacy of internal controls related to leasing or selling of Department of Veterans Affairs' assets and assess the tangible benefit to taxpayers.

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