

VA Director Webcast

On 17 January 2019, the Director of the Department of Veterans Affairs hosted a webcast. I registered for it and watched it. Several of the people responsible for various parts of the VA presented information. Although it was mostly a session telling us how wonderful the VA is, here are some the highlights of that webcast.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie will implement appeals modernization, which will transform a complex appeals process into one that is simple, timely and provides greater choice to Veterans who disagree with a VA decision. Implementation will occur effective Feb 19. "VA has been preparing for full implementation of the Appeals Modernization Act over the past 18 months," Wilkie said. "Our staff has worked diligently, particularly in the last few weeks, to ensure the new, streamlined process is available to Veterans in February. The AMA was signed into law Aug. 23, 2017. Under the act, Veterans will now have three options for claims and appeals: (1) supplemental claim; (2) higher-level review; or (3) direct appeals to the Board of Veterans' Appeals. All decision reviews submitted after February 2019 will fall under the new system. Once the Appeals Modernization Act is fully implemented, VA's goal is to complete supplemental claims and higher-level reviews averaging 125 days. Decisions appealed to the Board under its direct docket will average 365 days. Under the current process, appeal resolutions averaged three to seven years and has been a major concern for Veterans wanting to appeal a VA decision.

In an earlier article, I reported that recently the VA appears to have not been spending time, energy and funding on suicide prevention among our Veterans. The webcast also announced a partnership with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to promote suicide prevention initiatives. The reason given for the partnership is that DHS is the third-largest federal employer of Veterans in the US. Director Wilkie said "Our two agencies are committed to ensuring that Veterans receive the care they need, and this landmark partnership will allow us to leverage the strengths of both organizations to reach more Veterans and save more lives." The VA and DHS has been working with the Department of Defense (DoD) to improve mental health resources for Veterans moving from active duty to civilian life. The VA and the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) will convene for the inaugural Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide among Service Members, Veterans and their Families (SMVF) on Feb. 6, in Washington, D.C.

On a slightly negative side, the VA Director sent a letter to the President of the American Federation of Government Employees asking the union to stop making statements about Veterans and suicide. I agree with both sides with reservation. Veterans suicide is a national problem and needs public attention, as the union is doing. Veterans also are strong members of our local communities, providing assistance to Veterans and non-Veterans alike.