

## CRITICAL ISSUE 4

### Accountability to Veterans and Their Representatives

***The Department of Veterans Affairs must ensure its organizational structure, policies, and programs promote good governance to be responsive to the needs of veterans.***

Accountability is one of the cornerstones of good government. It ensures actions and decisions taken by public officials are subject to external oversight so as to guarantee that government programs meet their stated objectives and respond to the needs of the communities they are designed to benefit. In the pursuit of genuine accountability, *The Independent Budget* veterans service organizations (IBVSOs) believe the Department of Veterans Affairs and its officials are obligated to provide information about their decisions and actions, and justify them to the public and those institutions of accountability tasked with providing oversight and enforcement. The IBVSOs are tasked with ensuring that VA offices provide information and justification on important decisions and actions as well as seek to enforce standards of good performance when responding to the needs of the veterans VA serves.

Accountability is challenging to enforce or manage when key leadership executives are missing. As of this writing, VA reports vacancies for key VA leadership positions including the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs and numerous assistant secretaries. Some of these executive positions are critical to adequately address key areas of concern that the IBVSOs have articulated in previous *Independent Budget* reports, but remain unresolved. It is difficult to imagine that much progress can be made on the deficits we have identified when key executives in these areas of responsibility have not been nominated to serve, or appointed as appropriate.

Within VA, the organizational structures of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Central Office and its field organizations are designed to complement each other. The most recent reorganization in VA Central Office was completed in March 2011. According to VA, the purpose is to continue the transformation of the agency to define and demonstrate the highest standards in health care to meet the needs of enrolled veterans. The core principles of this transformation provide that care should be veteran-centered, team- and evidence-based, and data-driven.

During this transformation, IBVSO interactions with VHA personnel have become more cumbersome than in previous alignments, and the reorganized system seems to have had a dampening effect on the agency's responsiveness to IBVSO concerns. Moreover, since the reorganization of the VHA Central Office and the pending downsizing of Veterans Integrated Service Network personnel, there has been less access to, and receipt of, information to conduct proper oversight when issues arise dealing with timely access, quality of care, and policy implementation.

Correspondingly, transformation and modernization of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) as outlined in Critical Issue 2, depends upon developing and implementing a system of accountability at every organizational level in the claims process: from individual employees to

regional office management to central office leadership. Key to VBA accountability must be the creation of new and realistic metrics and performance standards that place quality at the same level of importance as productivity in order to create a culture that holds everyone accountable for adjudicating every claim right the first time.

A “Transparency and Open Government” memorandum of January 21, 2009, distributed to heads of executive departments and agencies documented President Obama’s commitment to running a transparent, participatory, and collaborative government that offers “increased opportunities [for stakeholders] to participate in policymaking and to provide...Government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information.” Despite the veteran community’s bringing first-hand experience about performance of VA into the accountability process, holding the agency accountable for its decisions and actions is increasingly becoming a voluntary exercise. Therefore, the IBVSOs strongly recommend Congressional oversight to monitor current VA reorganizational efforts. The current accountability process by the veterans service organization community is yielding little effective intervention or enforcement. As this process continues, veterans subject to VA’s policies and practices are likely to suffer, or be underserved.

### **Recommendations:**

VA should begin practicing fully and faithfully under the President’s executive order on transparency in government.

VA should voluntarily share information with veterans service organizations on factual information that deals with workloads, efficiency, productivity, and performance by key offices and key executives.

VA should be more diligent and efficient in filling vacant positions of key executive offices.

VA should create new and realistic metrics and performance standards that place quality at the same level of importance as productivity in the claims process.