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VA Needs Legislative Push to Inform Veterans of Health Issues Connected to Military Service

(WASHINGTON, D.C., May 19) – “Federal law stipulates that the Department of Veterans Affairs has a responsibility to inform veterans of the benefits they have earned by virtue of their service to our nation while in uniform,” said John Rowan, National President of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA). “What is needed, however, is legislation to mandate that the VA inform veterans—and the healthcare community—of health issues associated with military service.”

In testimony today before the Subcommittee on Health of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, Rowan said that the VA “does a woefully inadequate job of reaching out to veterans and their families to inform them of the benefits to which they are entitled” —certainly to the almost 80 percent of veterans who do not use the VA for their health care.

This state of affairs has led VVA, in concert with dozens of health advocacy organizations, healthcare firms, and others concerned about improving the health of our nation’s veterans, to create the Veterans Health Council. “By working together,” Rowan said, “we hope to reach out to veterans and their families to inform them about those diseases and other maladies that may derive from their time in service. We hope, too, to reach out to the wider healthcare community, to educate them about such health conditions.

“Through our website, www.veteranshealth.org, and the web sites and publications of our partners, we can reach hundreds of thousands of veterans who otherwise might not know that a disease that is plaguing them and eating away at their savings may be associated with their service in Vietnam, or Kuwait, or Iraq, or Afghanistan, and that they are eligible for treatment and may qualify for disability compensation and pension as well as other benefits from the VA.

“While we have every confidence that Secretary Shinseki and his team will endeavor to make far greater efforts at outreach, we believe that legislation is needed that would require the VA to devise a coordinated outreach plan attached to budget numbers,” Rowan said. “Such legislation, which would dovetail with the Obama Administration’s move to a national system of electronic medical records, would mandate that a veteran’s

medical/health history be part of his/her treatment record, if a veteran uses VA facilities or chooses to go to private physicians; require that clinicians ask if a patient has ever served in the U.S. military and, if so, ask a series of follow-up questions; and require that all VA clinicians, particularly primary care providers, take and receive certification for the VA's Veterans Health Initiative curriculum every three years."

PLEASE NOTE: Because of an unanticipated and unavoidable conflict with the venue where VVA had scheduled a press event prior to this hearing, the press event has been cancelled. However, Mr. Rowan will be available to the Media for interviews before and after the hearing.

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