



# VBA TODAY

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## ALLISON HICKEY, UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS TRANSFORMATION THROUGH LEADERSHIP



Brigadier General Allison Hickey (Ret.) was sworn in as the Under Secretary for Benefits on June 6, 2011. A recent Veteran herself, General Hickey begins her new career at the Department of Veteran Affairs after completing 27 years of military service in the U. S. Air Force. She hails from a military family, and has served in all three military components:

Active, National Guard, and Reserve. She is well versed in the issues confronting Veterans, their families and survivors. Moreover, she is attuned to the needs of women Veterans, and is committed to meeting their needs.

General Hickey is well qualified to lead the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) through the transformation process initiated by Secretary Shenseki’s vision of a Department that is people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking. Her first encounter with cultural transformation came early in her career, as a cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy. A member of the Class of 1980, she was among the first group of women admitted to a military academy, and that experience has proven to be formative of her career.

After graduation from the academy, General Hickey’s career path led her into aviation. She attended undergraduate pilot training at Columbus Air Force Base, MS, and then on to Castle AFB in California, where she attended combat crew training for the KC-135 Stratotanker, graduating with honors. Her assignment at Grand Forks AFB, ND brought with it the distinction of being the first female KC-135 pilot at that installation. Women pilots were rare at the time, and General Hickey met the attendant

challenges of being among an elite few with grace and ingenuity.

As a women in a field dominated by men, General Hickey quickly learned not only how to successfully navigate within her environment, but also how to make her male counterparts comfortable with the changing environment they faced as more women joined their ranks. Her ability to understand both sides of an issue, and to empathize with each party, is integral to successfully shepherding transformational processes in any organization.

Although she held numerous leadership positions throughout her career, General Hickey’s talents for successfully negotiating change were put to the test during her assignment as the Director of the Air Force’s Future Total Force office at the Pentagon. Her emphasis on transparency and collaboration provided her the means of successfully guiding four divisions, each with their own distinct missions, through a change process that affected more than 140 new Air Force units, and 50,000 Air Force personnel.

General Hickey’s talents as a change-master will be once again put to the test as she takes the reins of the Veterans Benefits Administration. A glimpse of what is in store for VBA employees, and the Veterans they serve, was provided in her testimony during her confirmation hearings before Congress. She attributes her success to, “The ‘right’ mix of focus on an integrated approach to people, process and technol-

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ogy . . .” And, although everyone views change with some trepidation, the employees of VBA welcome General Hickey, confident that her successes in the past will continue well into the future, transforming VBA into the people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking organization we all know is within our reach.



## eBenefits Remote Proofing Getting Your Premium Account Just Got Easier

The eBenefits portal is a collaborative effort between the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense to provide servicemembers, Veterans, their families and caregivers access to benefit information and resources. The portal serves two important functions. First, it provides links to other websites that provide information on servicemember and Veteran benefits. Second, it provides a customized workspace, called My eBenefits, that allows access to all of the online tools currently available through the portal. With a premium level account Veterans and servicemembers can download copies of selected service records, apply for benefits, and track the progress of any disability compensation claims pending with VA.

Recent upgrades have added four new features to assist eBenefits users in accessing their benefits. One enhancement now allows Veterans to apply for **Veterans Group Life Insurance (VGLI)**, as well as view information related to their policy, and update beneficiary information. The **Early Communications** feature sends notifications to eBenefits users via e-mail or the eBenefits message center about benefits the user is eligible for based on changing life events, i.e., activations, mobilizations, retirement, etc. The new **Benefits Explorer** is an interactive pre-screening tool that provides Veterans with a list of benefits they are potentially eligible for based on their eBenefits profile. And finally, the **Patient Authorization** portal allows users the ability to choose whether or not to participate in the exchange of administrative and medical information between VA, DoD and other health providers. This is the first Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) capability integrated into eBenefits.

One of the criticisms of the eBenefits portal is the requirement for In-Person-Proofing (IPP) to obtain a premium level account, without which few features of eBenefits can be used. The IPP process required the Veteran to visit their local regional office, a trip that is sometimes prohibitive because of the distance. Moreover, the feature that allows Veterans with My-HealthVet users obtain a premium level eBenefits account was not operational, that is, until now.

Veterans who have MyHealthVet accounts and a record in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) can now request a level 2 DS Logon for premium eBenefits access. Just follow these simple steps:

1. Go to <http://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhvsdslogon-portal-web/dslogonauth.portal> and sign in with your In-Person Authenticated My-HealthVet credentials.
2. Click on the **DS Logon Account Request** tab.
3. Check the appropriate boxes to verify and acknowledge use of your personal information.
4. Click **Request DS Logon account**.
5. Receive your DS Logon activation code  
Note: If you are upgrading from a Basic DS Logon, once you receive your Premium DS Logon activation code, your Basic account will be immediately deactivated.
6. Go to <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dsaccess/> and select **Activate DoD Self Service Logon**
7. Follow the on-screen instruction to active your DS logon.
8. Record your username and password. Then return to eBenefits and click **Log in**.

Veterans who want to obtain an eBenefits account, do not have a My HealthVet account, but are in receipt of benefits from VBA via direct deposit can now use the telephone proofing process to obtain their Premium eBenefits account. Veterans who have a record in the DEERS, and receive benefits from VBA via direct deposit, can obtain their Premium Level eBenefits account by calling 1-800-827-1000 and follow the prompts.

Keeping pace with the needs of today's Veteran and servicemember, and providing timely accurate benefits information is the goal of the eBenefits program. With each enhancement eBenefits continues to evolve, meeting the needs of tomorrow's Veteran and servicemember today.

## Veterans Administration: A Look Back

July 21<sup>st</sup> marks the anniversary of the Veterans Administration, the precursor of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Veterans Administration was created by Executive Order 5398 during the Hoover administration in 1930. It consolidated the three independent agencies serving Veterans at the time. By bringing the Veteran's Bureau, the Bureau of Pensions and the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers under one roof, VA was better able to administer Veteran programs and eliminate duplication of efforts.

Brigadier General Frank T. Hines had been the administrator of the Veteran's Bureau, and was appointed to the top position at the newly created Veterans Administration. In addition to Veteran benefits, the agency was also responsible for managing retirement payments for emergency officers, Army and Navy pensions, and retirement payments for civilian employees. Later, the agency also acquired the Board of Veterans Appeals, which was established in 1933.

Over the next ten years the number of beds available in Veterans' hospitals would nearly double. But the changes overseen by the Veterans Administration during its first ten years of existence were minimal in comparison to the sea change of the coming decades. Even before WWII ended the Veterans Administration began assisting a new generation of Veterans with the passage of the Disabled Veterans' Rehabilitation Act of 1943. The VA program that resulted from this legislation helped 621,000 disabled WWII Veterans receive job training. However, the real test of the new VA system's ability to cope with change came with the passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the "GI Bill of Rights."

Facing an onslaught of servicemen returning from war and then to civilian life, Congress established three programs to assist the transition by providing education, home loan and unemployment benefits. The three-prong approach successfully reintroduced what was an overwhelming number of Veterans back into the civilian workforce, while at the same time boosting the economy. In 1956, when the WWII GI Bill program ended, 7.8 million Veterans had received some kind of training, and the VA had guaranteed 5.9 million home loans, worth over 50 billion dollars.

The end of the war brought with it a change in leadership at the Veterans Administration. General Omar Bradley was appointed to the post of administrator, and a new chapter of VA history began. Under his leadership the VA's hospital system expanded significantly, opening 29 new facilities, and the policy of affiliating VA hospitals with medical schools was established. This collaboration ushered in VA's medical research program. In addition, during Gen. Bradley's two year term, 13 branch offices, 14 regional offices and 721 contact offices for benefits were opened.

Several iterations of post-war benefits have been provided since the initial success of the WWII GI Bill. While the coverage provided varied with each conflict that was fought, the goal has always been to assist servicemen returning from war, and ultimately to civilian life with a transition that can be quite challenging. In addition, during this time the Vocational

Rehabilitation program was expanded to include eligibility for peacetime Veterans, and became a permanent program within VA.

As the ranks of Veterans grew, so did the Veterans Administration, eventually becoming the second largest agency in the government, second only to the Department of Defense. Supporters of the Veterans Administration sought cabinet-level status, arguing that an agency as large as VA should have direct access to the president. On March 15, 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation elevating the VA to cabinet level status. The Department of Veteran Affairs was created, with Edward J. Derwinski, VA administrator at the time, appointed to be the first Secretary of the department.





## Mining Ideas: Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Innovative Initiative

According to the ancient philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, “The only constant is change.” Today’s fast-paced world provides plenty of evidence to support Heraclitus’s claim, but while change may be constant, it doesn’t necessarily follow that change is good. So, when faced with the challenge of improving a well-established program, how does a manager ensure the changes introduced will not only positively affect the program, but elicits employee support as well? The answer was simple – ask employees for their ideas. This was exactly what the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) did with the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program.

Like all government programs, VR&E adheres to program policies, guidelines, regulations and statutory requirements, some of which are quite complex. While complexities sometimes cannot be avoided, cumbersome and outdated processes can, and eliminating them was precisely the type of change VBA was looking for.

The 2011 VBA Employee Innovation Competition began this past April, and was open to all VBA employees, not just those directly involved in the VR&E program. All suggestions were welcomed, and employees were encouraged to “think outside the box,” but that didn’t mean management didn’t want to target specific areas of the VR&E program for overhaul. They did, and many of the areas identified for improvement directly affect Veterans’ VR&E experience. The overall goal of the competition – rejuvenate the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program.



business processes.

Employees submitted their suggestions online to a central repository that could be viewed by their co-workers, who could then cast votes for the ideas they felt held the most promise for success. A running tally of votes received by each suggestion was visible on the

site, heightening interest in competition. The first round lasted four weeks.



Round two commenced when regional office Directors assessed all of the suggestions submitted by his or her employees, and chose the two best ideas to send forward. One of the two ideas chosen had to come from the top five local submissions, based on votes received. The other idea did not, and the Director was free to choose an idea that he or she felt had the most potential. An executive summary of each winning idea was then submitted to compete at the national level.

After VBA’s central office received all of the submissions from the field round three began. A panel of experts familiar with the VR&E program was chosen from within VBA headquarters to review the suggestions. In addition, experts from the private sector were also included on the panel. All submissions were rated on their potential impact on the program, creativity, cost-effectiveness and scalability, with 25 of the best ideas moving on to the final phase.

Competition always heats up during the final phase, and this contest is no exception. The 25 finalists, to be chosen in early July, will present their ideas to the VA Executive Selection Board in August. The board is comprised of the Deputy Secretary of Veteran Affairs, the Under Secretaries for both Benefits and Health, Chief Information Officer and Chief Technology Officer. Both groups have their work cut out for them. As many as ten ideas could make the final cut, but that number is dependent on funding, so making the best possible impression on the board is of paramount importance. The winners of this competition will be announced in early September of this year, and pilot programs will commence with the beginning of the new fiscal year in October.

Change is definitely on its way, and with 732 ideas for improvement generated during this competition it’s bound to be good. As in the past, employees have risen to the challenge and offered their best ideas. As these ideas are put into action, Veterans enrolled in the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program can look forward to a positive experience while acquiring the skills needed to move forward in their lives.

## Benefits In Brief

# VA Fiduciary Program

The vast majority of Veterans in receipt of disability compensation or pension are responsible for taking care of their own finances. However, there is a small percentage of VA beneficiaries who, because of their disabilities, age (in the case of a minor), or illness, cannot manage their finances. Under these circumstances, the VA protects Veterans' welfare by means of its Fiduciary Program. This program provides an individual or legal entity (like a bank), to



manage the financial affairs of a Veteran who has been determined to be incompetent in handling his or her finances, to protect assets from loss or diversion.

The process of determining a Veteran's competency, and subsequent assignment of a fiduciary, is a lengthy process designed to ensure the rights of the Veteran are not abridged. The process typically begins when a claim for benefits has reached the decision stage, and the individual deciding the claim has reason to believe, because of medical evidence used to substantiate the claim, that the Veteran is not capable of managing his or her finances. Once the decision on the initial claim is completed, VA will propose to rate the beneficiary as incompetent. The VA will afford the beneficiary due process if they disagree with the proposal. Once due process has expired, the VA will then make a final rating decision, finding the beneficiary incompetent to manage VA funds. The VA will continue to pay monthly benefits, but will withhold any retroactive benefits until a payee is appointed.

Once a final rating decision of incompetency is made, the case is then sent to a Field Examiner (FE) for further investigation. The job of the FE is to take affidavits, administer oaths and affirmations, aid claimants in the preparation of claims, make investigations, examine records and witnesses and certify to the correctness of papers and documents upon any matter within the jurisdiction of the VA. He or she will visit the Veteran, as well as conduct interviews with relatives and neighbors, gathering information relevant to the decision. Upon completion of the Field Examination and appointment of a payee, previously withheld funds are released.

Because the FE is familiar with the Veteran's case, he or she plays a critical role in deciding the most suitable means of paying VA benefits based on the Veteran's situation, and in recommending a fiduciary. The fiduciary could be a member of the Veteran's family, an individual appointed by the courts, or an institution if the Veteran resides in a domiciliary, nursing home or similar setting.

After the initial arrangements for a fiduciary are finalized, a beneficiary in the fiduciary program is visited periodically by an FE to verify that the individual is being properly cared for. In addition, fiduciaries are required to provide periodic financial accountings to VA, as a means of verifying monies are properly managed, and all of the needs of the Veteran under the fiduciary's care are being met.



Financial accountings are a major component of the fiduciary program, and the responsibility for reviewing them falls to the Legal Instruments Examiner (LIE). He or she verifies everything is in order, approving the accounting, which is then filed in the Personal Guardianship Folder. However, if irregularities are noted in an accounting the LIE must investigate. If the irregularity is the result of a simple math error, the LIE will request the fiduciary correct the accounting and re-submit the document. However, if irregularities exist that are not attributed to simple math errors, further investigation is conducted, and the case is referred to either a local Field Examiner, the Office of Regional Counsel, or the Office of the Inspector General as appropriate.

The fiduciary program administered by VA is designed to protect the benefits and assets of our most vulnerable group of Veterans, those who cannot manage their financial matters due to illness, age or disability.



The system of checks and balances that make up the fiduciary program guarantees incompetent beneficiaries have access to the services they need, their benefits are protected and their life is lived with dignity.

## Constitutional Convention

On July 2, 1788 the Constitution of the United States took effect, more than a year after the convention first convened. The Constitutional Convention began on May 17, 1787, and delegates debated the fate of our country throughout that long hot summer, adjourning on September 17, 1787. Fifty-five delegates from 12 of the original 13 colonies (Rhode Island refused to send delegates) attended the convention.

The delegates understood the Articles of Confederation was a flawed document, and the country could not continue to operate under such a weak system. If left unchecked, the bickering between the several states would ultimately result in losing the very freedom won in the Revolutionary War.

The crafting of the constitution was an exercise in compromise, diplomacy, and setting aside individual gains for the common good. Although not perfect, every delegates had a hand in shaping the final document. At the conclusion of the convention 16 delegates refused to sign the document. All 13 states eventually ratified the Constitution, Delaware being the first to do so, and Rhode Island the last.



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*The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.*

*Thomas Jefferson*

Happy 4th of July!



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