



HR Highlights

March 1, 2001

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Dear Colleagues:

Welcome to March HR Highlights!

In the beginning of my tenure, I promised to provide Headquarters and the Administrations with flexible HR policies, policies that would readily adapt to the workplace needs of the future. To that end, my staff, in conjunction with VHA, VBA, and NCA, has formed HR legislative workgroups to examine legislative possibilities to effect positive change. Two of those initiatives have already been passed into law. This month's *Highlights* report will focus on legislative initiatives and their impact on you.

Lately, we have been busy assisting the Administrations with their workforce planning initiatives by helping to identify potential personnel policy changes that will assist their recruitment and retention efforts. Our primary focus is to identify the flexibilities in such policies, rather than the restrictions, and to modify the policies accordingly. OHRM's goal is to be as responsive as possible in helping the Administrations achieve their goals and objectives.

As promised, we continue to implement new tools to recruit and retain employees. One tool is the repayment of student loans. Another is the Child Care Subsidy Program. 89% of respondents surveyed said that the availability of the Child Care Subsidy Program would be a determining factor in their recruitment or retention in VA.

We're keeping our promise to you as we continue to discover and eradicate obstacles to improving our service to you. Together, we WILL make a difference in the lives of our Nation's veterans, whom we proudly serve.

/s/

Ventris C. Gibson
Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Human Resources Management

New Recruitment Tool

OPM has issued final regulations on the Re-payment of Student Loans. They will be effective April 12. This allows agencies to repay federally insured student loans when necessary to recruit or retain highly qualified professional, technical, or administrative employees. Agencies may provide up to \$6,000 per employee per calendar year and a maximum of \$40,000 per employee. A workgroup has recently been established to review the OPM regulation and develop a VA Directive.

**For additional service, call
Deborah Allen, 202-273-9700**

Workforce Planning

VA's workforce planning activities have received much attention from the press this month! Mel Sessa, Director of the Workforce Planning Team, was interviewed by the *Veterans Health System Journal* regarding VA's workforce planning efforts and how these efforts will help VA continue to provide top quality services to our nation's veterans. In addition, the Workforce Planning Team will be highlighted in the March/April 2001 edition of *Vanguard*. The article will help educate VA employees on workforce planning, explain why it is so critical, and describe VA's current and future efforts.

**For additional service, call
Laura Shugrue, 202-273-9925**

Child Care Subsidy Stats

The number of applications received by the Program Administrator, FEEA, reached 863 as of February 20, 2001. Thus far, 653 children of



510 VA employees have been approved for the VA Child Care Tuition Assistance Pilot Program; 101 applications are pending; 96 applications were returned to employees and not yet resubmitted; and 13 employees were ineligible.

The cost projection for the 653 children through the duration of the pilot program is \$660,000. Participation figures for VA's program exceeds all other Federal agencies combined. Survey results taken from the Child Care Website as of February 27, 2001 indicate:

- 37% are male
- 63% are female
- 63% work in VHA

8% work in VBA
11% work in Central Office

- 89% reported that if they were considering a job change the availability of this program would be a factor in their decision to continue employment with VA.
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- 77% of respondents stated that the application was clear and understandable
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- 63% felt that the program met their needs.
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- 62% of the respondents felt that the "pilot program" should be made permanent.
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- 59% of respondents indicated that they would continue to use the program if it was made permanent.

**For additional service, call
Julie Mostellar, 202-273-9704**

Legislative Initiatives

OHRM has been engaged in an effort for some time to partner with the VA Administrations to remove barriers to mission accomplishment inadvertently created by HR laws, rules and regulations, and policies. That effort has taken a number of forms, including the examination of HR legislative possibilities to effect positive change. OHRM formed an HR legislative work group in 1999 comprised of members from OHRM and the Administrations. The group's efforts have evolved to focus on a number of legislative initiatives that have and will impact VHA and VBA. Two of those initiatives affecting VHA have already been passed into law (P. L. 106-419).

**For additional service, contact
Bob Pirie, 202-273-9752**

Paving the Way for VHA to Attract

Previously, PAs were not required to be certified and once certification became a requirement, the only available appointment authority for uncertified graduate PAs was a one-year, non-renewable authority. Because the certification test is given so infrequently, many PAs have not been able to gain certification in the one-year period and had to be terminated. This raised issues of equity with registered nurses and employees in Hybrid Title 38 occupations, all of whom have two years to meet their credentialing requirements. It also made it difficult for VHA to attract graduate PAs awaiting certification. Being able to appoint such individuals as "graduate technicians" for a two-year period while they complete certification requirements should eliminate both problems for an occupation that is increasingly critical to VHA's mission accomplishment.

**For additional service, contact
Bob Pirie, 202-273-9752**

Relief for Medical Support Personnel

Public Law 106-419 provides for three-year temporary, renewable appointments for medical support personnel. The medical support personnel authority is used to appoint those in Title 5 occupations that support medical care programs, when the use of Title 5 appointment procedures is impractical. Under previous law, VHA was usually limited to use of one-year, non-renewable temporary appointments. Even four-year term appointments weren't usually long enough to accommodate VHA's needs, particularly for lower-graded support personnel engaged in research projects. If VHA was unable to appoint such individuals competitively prior to expiration of their time-limited appointments, they were forced to terminate them – a very disruptive process. Under the medical support personnel authority in P.L. 106-419, VHA will be able to appoint these individuals to three-year temporary appointments that can be renewed for like periods. Not only will this deal effectively with problems VHA has experienced on research projects, but can also provide additional time for VHA to work through the Title 5 competitive hiring process for individuals engaged in other medical support work. Thus, this authority can help enhance VHA's care of veterans by allowing them to hire medical support personnel much more quickly and by allowing for more time to convert these temporary appointees to permanent status, minimizing the disruptions that terminations have been causing.

**For additional service, contact
Bob Pirie, 202-273-9752**

Monthly Conference Call

Wednesday, March 14, 2001, 3 PM

Phone #1-800-767-1750

(Agenda items accepted through 3/6)



**For additional service, contact
Ken Quantock, 202-273-9753**

Legislative Initiatives (continued)

An OHRM and VBA collaborative request has been forwarded to OPM requesting that VA be given a 5-year authority to waive the dual compensation reduction that currently prevents VBA from re-employing retired veterans claims examiners without off-setting their salaries by the amount of their annuities. Although final approval from OPM has not been received yet, conversations with them about the request have been so positive that we believe OPM soon will approve some form of relief for us on this matter. Being able to re-hire retired veterans claims examiners without reductions in their salaries should help VBA attract those retirees who can best serve as mentors to and trainers of the new, inexperienced veterans claims examiners hired.

For additional service, contact
Bob Pirie, 202-273-9752

Future Legislative Initiatives

We continue to develop and refine initiatives for the 107th Congress. Two initiatives propose improvements to aspects of physician and dentist special pay that should help VHA continue to transform the way it delivers health care services to veterans. Pending OPM's approval of our request for waiver authority regarding re-employed veterans claims examiner retirees (mentioned above), we will continue to seek legislative relief on this matter. Perhaps the most ambitious legislative initiative we are pursuing with VHA is to convert more Title 5 health care occupations to Hybrid Title 38 status. If successful, this initiative will allow VHA to markedly reduce hiring times from 60+ days, which is the norm under the Title 5 process, to

something closer to 2 weeks. Under this proposal, the Secretary would have discretionary authority to convert additional occupations in accordance with certain criteria after a 45-day report and wait period to the Congress, OMB, and other interested groups. VHA and OHRM employees recently completed a field survey on this matter, the results of which will lend additional support to the proposal. Collaborative efforts such as these can only help enhance VA's ability to care for and serve veterans.

**For additional service, contact
Bob Pirie, 202-273-9752**

Recruiting Students with Disabilities

The Recruitment and Hiring Inter-Agency Sub-Committee (consisting of multiple federal agencies) met to develop strategies for improving recruitment of students with disabilities. One recommendation that resulted from this meeting was an OPM sponsored national level conference to provide college coordinators and coordinators from other associations working with potential candidates with disabilities, tools to assist them in preparing their constituents for federal jobs. Another recommendation resulting from the inter-agency sub-committee meeting was that OPM develop a disability-friendly Web site that would make it easier for perspective employee job searches.

**For additional service, contact
Chuck McClellan, 202-273-8262**

Directives and Handbooks

The finishing touches are in place for the One-VA HR series of directives and handbooks by the Strategic Opportunity Group #2. The series replaces the 90 plus Title 5 and Title 38 policy chapters/supplements contained in MP-5, (Parts I and II) as well as all existing HR related Directives and Handbooks already issued. The 14 directives/handbooks that are created will improve reference access, readability, and maintenance; and provide the basis for preparing toolboxes and training courses for VA. It is anticipated that the project will be ready for final review process within the next few months. Begun as an initiative to provide necessary HR policies and ancillary products for management and human resources offices to effectively respond to VA mission requirement, SOG#2 is also championing the electronic availability of the policies as a virtual library for anyone in VA to use.

**For additional service, contact
Ken Quantock, 202-273-9753**

OPM Approves VA's Request for Temporary Authority to Waive Dual Compensation Reduction

OHRM and VBA collaboratively requested OPM give VA temporary authority to waive the dual compensation reduction that currently prevents VBA from re-employing retired veterans claims examiners without offsetting their salaries by the amount of their annuities. OPM approved VA's request. OPM has also outlined the conditions under which the delegated authority may be exercised. Being able to rehire retired veterans claims examiners without reductions in their salaries should help VBA attract retirees who can best serve as mentors to and trainers of new, inexperienced veterans claims examiners. This should enhance VBA's ability to serve veterans through the claims examining process.

**For additional service, contact
Bob Pirie, 202-273-9752**