

VFW National Convention - VA Secretary Peake Updates Audience on VA Progress

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ORLANDO, Fla. — VA Secretary James Peake provided an update on his department at today's Business Session. He noted that VA's budget will be \$93.7 billion for 2009, and that VA's budget has increased nearly 91% since 2001.

"It's more than a matter of money," he said, "it's about offering the best care in the world. We have an uncompromising responsibility toward our vets."

As an example of areas in which VA is a leader in medical care, he offered VA's spinal cord research and care for amputees, for which he estimated that VA has spent \$1.3 billion on prosthetic research and equipment.

On the subject of health care for veterans who live in rural areas, Peake said VA will add four mobile "mental health vans" in 36 counties to take services directly to vets.

He also said that in 2009, VA plans to open 44 new community-based outpatient clinics and 39 Vet Centers. VA will expand care for blind vets with 55 new "continuum of care" facilities. Peake also mentioned VA's new "My HealtheVet," a Web-based program that enables participants to view appointments, copay balances and key portions of their VA medical records online. Peake said it also would provide private doctors with a "full picture" of a veteran's medical history.

Saying "any one suicide is one too many, and it bothers me personally," Peake outlined steps VA has taken to prevent suicides. It has hired 4,000 new suicide prevention coordinators, doubling the previous total. The department's Suicide Prevention Health Line (1-800-273-TALK) has fielded 25,000 calls to date, resulting in 1,400 suicide "rescues."

VA has spent nearly \$1 billion on research, education, consultation and treatment of PTSD since 2007. "We have to be the leader in this area," he said. "So we're pushing mental health care into primary care."

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Through July 1, 2008, Peake said VA has screened nearly 192,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans for TBI, with 37,420 testing positive. He added that VA doctors have treated 522 severe TBI cases at four polytrauma centers. Overall, some 348,000 discharged Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have used VA care. This includes 14,743 hospital patients and 1,700 severely wounded. He added that 30,091 U.S. troops have earned Purple Hearts in Iraq and Afghanistan.