

Service Officers Report
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By: Robert G. Mitchell

Shinseki Nominated as VA Secretary

Former Army chief of Staff Eric Shinseki has been selected to lead VA in the Obama Administration. The 66-year-old Shinseki, who retired as a four-star general, vowed to improve VA services for disabled veterans.

“Veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular are confronting serious, severe wounds – some seen, some unseen – making it difficult for them to get on with their lives in this struggling economy,” he said. “They deserve a smooth, error-free, no-fail, benefits-assured transition into our ranks as veterans.”

VFW commander-in-chief Glen Gardner was cautiously optimistic about the pick.

“Running VA will be far different than leading troops into battle,” Gardner said. “But we hope he possesses the leadership, management and accountability traits that we demand from all VA secretaries. VFW looks forward to working with him.”

Shinseki served two tours in Vietnam as an artillery forward observer with the 9th and 25th Infantry divisions. He also commanded A Troop, 3rd Sqdrn., 5th Cavalry, and was wounded by a land mine, losing part of a foot.

More Vets in Federal Jobs

The number of veterans working in federal agencies showed a modest increase recently. In fiscal year 2007, the total grew to 462,744 civil service jobs, up nearly 5,000 from the previous year.

According to statistics compiled by the Office of Personnel Management, 23 out of every 100 federal workers have some military service.

According to the Federal Managers Association (FMA), the Air Force, Army and Navy have the highest percentages of veterans in their civilian workforces. They are followed by the departments of Defense, Transportation, VA and Homeland Security.

Independent federal agencies with the highest percentages of veterans are the Office of Personnel management, General Services Administration and the Government Printing Office. However, the FMA also reported that non-veterans have a higher percentage of federal promotions than veterans.

Veterans Law Clinic

Widener University was the first law school in the U.S. to start a clinical program for disabled veterans. Located on campuses in Wilmington, Del., and Harrisburg, PA., its veterans Law Clinic assists with VA compensation claims and appeals to the Board of Veterans Appeals. Attorneys and student interns work pro bono. To learn more visit www.law.widener.edu.

VA Assisting Veterans with Health Care Costs

For veterans struggling financially due to a job loss or decreased income, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers an assortment of programs that can relieve the costs of health care or provide care at no cost.

“With the downturn in the economy, VA recognizes that many veterans will feel the effects,” said former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake. “Therefore, it is important that eligible veterans learn of the many ways VA has to help them afford the health care they have earned.”

Veterans whose previous income was ruled too high for VA health care may be able to enter the VA system based upon a hardship if their current year’s income is projected to fall below federal income thresholds due to job loss, separation from service or some other financial setback. Veterans determined eligible due to hardship can avoid co pays applied to higher-income veterans. Qualifying veterans may be eligible for enrollment and receive health care at no cost.

Also eligible for no-cost VA care are most veterans who recently returned from a combat zone. They are entitled to five years of free VA care. The five-year “clock” begins with their discharge from the military, not their departure from the combat zone.

Each VA medical center across the country has an enrollment coordinator available to provide veterans information about these programs. Veterans may also contact VA’s Health Benefits Service Center at 1-877-222-VETS (8387) or visit the VA health eligibility website at www.va.gov/healtheligibility.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) outreach

An outreach letter will be sent to approximately 32,000 veterans currently service-connected for TBI to advise that VA has developed new criteria for evaluating TBI disability levels and the compensation payments associated with them. The letter also provides information on how the veteran may request a review examination based on the new criteria.

This outreach is expected to result in additional compensation claims and an increased number of TBI-related inquiries. VBA personnel serving in a public contact role, including OIF/OEF and SI/VSI Coordinators, should be familiar with the outreach letter.

The schedule for rating disabilities was recently revised to provide detailed and updated criteria for evaluation residuals of TBI. A data match of C&P record systems was conducted to identify those living veterans who were awarded service connection for diagnostic code 8045 (TBI), approximately 32,000 veterans were identified for this outreach effort.

The Hines Automation Center is scheduled to mail approximately 32,000 outreach letter in late January 2009.

To re-open your claim contact this office at 884-4115.