

**SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
SPEECH: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB  
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**Good afternoon!**

**Thank you, Lisa, for that kind introduction and for your steadfast leadership of the National Press Club. It's great to be here.**

**There are so many people with us today deserving of our gratitude and recognition.**

- **The great journalists who cover Veterans, servicemembers, and VA day-in and day-out;**
- **The folks from the press club who set this event up so we could gather safely amid the pandemic;**
- **The Veterans and Military Service Organizations and advocacy groups, who look out for Vets 24-7;**
- **Everyone who is watching online, or listening on the radio—including VA employees, my colleagues, who do incredible work every day;**
- **And, most of all, all of the Veterans who are with us today—in person or online.**

**It's an honor to be here with all of you.**

**...**

**You know, we're just two days away from Veterans Day—the day when America pauses to remember and recognize the**

**millions of brave men and women who fought our nation's wars and defended us during periods of restless peace.**

**Veterans Day is, of course, a day to honor those Veterans.**

**A day to remember all they've done—and sacrificed—for our country.**

**A day to recognize that when those Veterans serve and sacrifice, so do their families, survivors, and caregivers.**

**But—critically—Veterans Day is also a call to action.**

**...a reminder that it is our responsibility as Americans to serve those who have served our country.**

**... to fight for those, who have fought for us.**

**Fulfilling that obligation can come in many forms.**

**For most Americans listening today, it can mean something as simple as reaching out to the Vets in their lives and lending a hand.**

**For the great reporters in the room today, it means telling the stories of Veterans and servicemembers—of the wars they fought and of the challenges they face ...**

**... stories that, in many cases, otherwise wouldn't be told at all.**

**And at VA, it means providing Veterans with world-class health care; with the benefits they have earned and so rightly deserve; and with a lasting resting place that is a tribute to their service.**

**The point is that we all have a part to play, no matter who we are or what position we hold.**

**So, as we approach Veterans Day, I ask that everyone watching or listening today renew their commitment to serving Veterans and serving them well.**

**Because that is our most sacred responsibility as Americans, on this Veterans Day and every day.**

**[pause]**

**This afternoon, I'd like to give you an update on what we at VA are doing to keep that promise to our Veterans, their families, survivors, and caregivers.**

**And it all starts with responding to the pandemic.**

**This pandemic has been devastating for all of us. We've lost so many of the Veterans we serve, the colleagues we work with, and the family and friends that we love.**

**But serving Veterans well means stepping up in the times when they need us most—and that’s what VA’s incredible employees have done during the pandemic.**

**I am, admittedly, quite biased on this topic, so don’t take it from me...**

**... just ask Marine Corps Veteran Ronald Pipkins.**

**At the beginning of the pandemic, Ronald walked into the Las Vegas VA Medical Center with a mild fever and cough—but his symptoms quickly worsened.**

**His doctors had to act fast, so they put him onto a ventilator and into a medically induced coma—where he would remain for a full month.**

**Fortunately, VA doctors and nurses were able to pull him back from edge.**

**And six weeks after he entered the hospital, he was able to go home.**

**Later, when Ronald was asked if he was nervous about returning to the medical center where he’d been in a coma, he said, “No—the people who saved my life are here.”**

**“I’m always excited to be here—because this is where heroes work.”**

**I tell that story because Ronald is right: VA's employees have been nothing short of heroic during the pandemic, often risking their own lives to save the lives of Veterans.**

**When COVID first hit, they worked late nights, early mornings, and everything in between to make sure our Vets received the excellent care they deserved.**

**When PPE was running low, they invented reusable, 3D-printed PPE and got it straight to the front lines.**

**When it wasn't safe for Vets to come to the hospital, they cared for our Vets online—ramping up telehealth appointments from 2,500 per day last March to 45,000 per day a year later.**

**When the vaccine became available, they sprang into action—vaccinating more than 4 million people and implementing the first vaccine requirement in the federal government.**

**And when non-Vets needed help, they stepped up as a part of our 4th mission—deploying to hotspots and providing beds for hundreds of COVID patients in need... all while never once denying a bed to a Veteran.**

**All of that work translates into the one statistic that matters most: lives saved, and improved, by the great work VA employees do.**

...

**And look: all of that work has also made VA into something different—something new.**

**We all want our lives to get back to normal after the pandemic, of course—but at VA, there is no going back to the old normal.**

**Because the work we've done to respond to the pandemic has forged us into a stronger, better department for our Nation's Veterans.**

**Tele-health, tele-appeals, the Veterans Legacy Memorial, and our new VA mobile app are allowing us to meet Vets where they want, when they want, in unprecedented ways.**

**Outpatient trust scores among Vets rose to 90% this year—which in my mind, should be the floor, not the ceiling.**

**We've seen more patients, and held more benefits hearings, than in any previous year in VA's history—a result of our goal to make sure Vets get their care and benefits on time, every time.**

**And our cemeteries not only stayed open during the pandemic, but expanded to six new locations.**

**All in all?**

**We are now providing more care, more services, and more benefits to more Veterans than ever before.**

**So, as we look to the future, we're not trying to build a VA that goes back to the old normal.**

**Instead, we're going to continue to do better for Vets.**

**We're going to continue to be better for Vets.**

**And we're going to do that by driving toward the four fundamental principles that shape our vision for the future: Advocacy, Access, Outcomes, and Excellence.**

...

## **ADVOCACY**

**First, advocacy. We're working to make sure VA is the nation's premier advocate for Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.**

**And when it comes to advocacy, it starts at the top.**

**Our shared mission could not be a higher priority for this administration, nor could it be closer to President Biden's heart.**

**When President Biden nominated me to lead VA, he told me to "fight like hell" for our Vets.**

**That's exactly what we're doing, and this administration and Congress are doing the same...**

**... delivering for our Vets with the American Rescue Plan, which allocated 17 billion dollars to help us care for Vets during the pandemic;**

**With the proposed reconciliation package, which will provide 5 billion dollars to help Vets thrive in the future.**

**With the Save Lives ACT, which empowered us to vaccinate Veteran caregivers and spouses;**

**... and with the [x] Act, update which just passed through [x] last week.**

**I urge all of Congress to get this to President Biden's desk as soon as possible, so Vets and their spouses can get flu shots at VA when they come in for their boosters.**

**And there's much more where that came from.**

**All of which is to say: every part of this administration is focused on fighting for Veterans, every day.**

## **ACCESS**

**Second, access. We'll move heaven and earth to get Veterans timely access to their VA resources.**

**A major part of that equation is making sure that Veterans have the best possible experience wherever they access VA benefits and services...**

**At home, in the community, or at VA.**

**That's why we're meeting Vets where they are—by expanding tele-health and tele-appeals and by supporting our caregivers.**

**Let me say this clearly: Caregivers are not an afterthought for us—they're a top priority.**

**That's why I've appointed Meg Kabat to be VA's first ever senior advisor for caregivers.**

**And it's why the program of comprehensive assistance has enrolled more than 30,000 unique caregivers and Veterans in the last year alone.**

**For Vets who are getting care in the community, we've built networks that have the right providers, in the right locations, to meet their needs—no matter where they live.**

**And most importantly, we are dedicated to delivering a world-class experience for Vets who get direct care from VA.**

**That means finding the right balance between direct care and community care—putting the direct care system on a sustainable path to ensure that future generations of**

Veterans enjoy the same, great VA healthcare that past generations did.

It means building an electronic health records system that allows Vets to seamlessly access their records wherever they receive care, from the first day they put on their uniforms to the last day of their lives.

And it means rebuilding, repairing, realigning, and modernizing VA's healthcare infrastructure to meet all Veterans' needs.

Because that infrastructure is critical for the health of our Nation's Vets and the health of our nation.

VA is the backstop and innovator at the heart of the entire US healthcare system—training America's physicians, researching tomorrow's challenges, and innovating today to overcome them.

That is never going to change—and it sure won't change on my watch.

## OUTCOMES

Next, I want to talk about Veterans' outcomes.

Outcomes drive everything we do—because Vets, not us, are the ultimate judges of our success.

And there is no more important outcome than preventing Veteran suicide—because one Veteran who dies by suicide is one too many.

Mental health services are critical for suicide prevention, so keeping them going during the pandemic has been one of our primary focuses.

Fortunately, Vets have adapted seamlessly to tele-mental health sessions—attending 5.6 million sessions already this year, more than doubling their total from all of 2020.

We've also massively ramped up our lethal means safety efforts, putting time and space between Veterans in crisis and firearms by passing out more than 9,500 gun locks this year and by launching an awareness campaign that's garnered over 1.7 billion impressions.

And—in the aftermath of the war in Afghanistan—we've reached out to every Veteran in our network to remind them that their service matters, and that we are here for them.

Whether they want to speak to another Veteran, talk to a therapist, call our crisis line at 1-800-273-8255, text us at 838-255, visit one of our Vet centers, or access any of VA's mental health services online at [www.MentalHealth.va.gov](http://www.MentalHealth.va.gov), we are standing by and ready to help.

Today and every day.

**Because mental health care is health care. As the Secretary of Defense has said, mental health is health. And Veterans' health is our top priority.**

**Another major focus here is toxic exposures.**

**We are not waiting for Congress to act on this—we are going ahead and acting ourselves, and we've already announced three major updates:**

**First, we are creating a new, comprehensive decision-making model for determining presumptive conditions—a model that will be guided by one core principle: getting Vets the benefits they have earned and therefore deserve.**

**Second, Veterans suffering from bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, and Parkinsonism due to Agent Orange can now be paid the benefits they're owed.**

**And third, for the first time in VA history, we are presumptively paying toxic exposures claims to Gulf War Veterans—specifically to those who suffer from Asthma, Sinusitis, and Rhinitis—and we've delivered millions of dollars of benefits already.**

**Veterans have waited for these benefits for far too long—and we're doing everything in our power to make sure they won't have to wait any longer.**

**This is just the beginning, not the end, of our efforts on toxic exposure—and [x].**

**Lastly on outcomes, we are laser-focused on ending Veterans' homelessness.**

**You know, earlier this summer, at a homeless Vets vaccination event outside VA headquarters, a Veteran came to get his shot.**

**And he wasn't wearing shoes.**

**So, we got him vaccinated, and our canteen staff got him a new pair of shoes.**

**On the one hand, that story is heartwarming—a job well done.**

**On the other, it's heartbreaking.**

**Because that man served our country.**

**He should have shoes on his feet. He should have a roof over his head.**

**In fact, there should be no such thing as a homeless Veteran.**

**Not here.**

**Not in the greatest country in the world.**

So I assure you: we will do whatever it takes to get this country's 40,000 homeless Veterans into homes—and keep them there.

## **EXCELLENCE**

Finally, excellence.

We're seeking excellence in all we do for Veterans by leveraging the strength and diversity that defines the Veteran population, our VA workforce, and this amazing country.

Our diversity is a strength, never a weakness.

Every person entering a VA facility must feel safe, free of harassment and discrimination. And we will welcome all Veterans.

One of my first actions as VA Secretary was ordering a top-down review of all of our policies to determine how we can make VA a more welcoming place for LGBTQ plus Veterans, Women Veterans, Veterans of color, MST survivors, and all others.

Now, there's so much I could say here, but it all boils down to this:

For too long, too many Veterans who fought to protect our rights and freedoms have had to fight brutal battles here at home for their own rights and freedoms.

**Tragically, many of those fights continue to this day.**

**But at VA, those fights are over.**

**Let me repeat: at VA, those fights are over.**

**In this administration, nobody is going to have to fight to get the quality care, benefits, and services they earned—no matter who they are or who they love.**

...

**So that's where VA is headed—continuing to deliver more care, more benefits, and more services to more Veterans than ever before.**

**And being here at the National Press Club reminds us that we cannot do that great work without you...the journalists who tell Veterans' stories.**

**Nobody better exemplified that fact than Joe Galloway.**

**I'm sure many of you knew Joe—he was the only civilian to receive the Bronze Star for heroism in Vietnam, and he passed away earlier this year.**

**He was incredible man—an exceptional reporter—who went to greater lengths than just about anyone to tell the stories of Veterans and servicemembers.**

**And of that work, he once said, “You pay the price to tell the story.”**

**But “The story is worth telling,”**

**“The story is worth telling.”**

**He’s so right about that—and it’s a reminder that we wouldn’t know so many Veterans’ stories if not for the journalists who tell them.**

**Journalists like Kelly Kennedy, an Army Vet who has pioneered reporting on burn pits...**

**Like Jim LaPorta, a Marine Veteran who has done groundbreaking reporting on military sexual assault and harassment...**

**Like Austin Tice, a Marine Veteran who risked everything to tell the world what was happening in Syria—and whose mother, Debra, is here with us today.**

**Austin is in our hearts and on our minds every day, and as Secretary Blinken has said, we are committed to bringing him home.**

**I could go on and on and on. There are so many courageous journalists here with us in this room, and all across the country and the world.**

**And the stories that all of you tell—the truths that all of you tell—are not often easy.**

**Sometimes they require that you brave bullets, and sometimes they require that you brave backlash here at home.**

**But they're always important.**

**... both for the American public to hear, and for us at VA to hear.**

**... because those stories make us better—they help us better understand what Veterans experienced in war, what they're going through here at home, and how best we can help them.**

**So thank you for your magnificent work, for your partnership, for putting up with me, and—most of all—for telling those stories.**

**I promise to always be transparent with you and to learn from you. And on this Veterans Day and every day, I promise to fight like hell for the Vets who have fought for us.**

**God bless you, and God bless our Nation's troops, our Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors.**

**And may we always give them our very best.**

**Thank you.**