

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
HISTORY PROJECT

CENTER FOR MINORITY VETERANS

The Center for Minority Veterans was established as a result of The Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 1994, Public Law 103-446, § 509, dated November 2, 1994, and is now codified in Title 38 United States Code § 317. An amendment in Public Law 104-275 § 501(a), (b), (c) further delineated the responsibilities of the Center. The Center for Minority veterans was preceded by the Office of the Chief Minority Affairs Officer (CMAO) that was established under Public Law 102-218, The Chief Minority Affairs Office Act of 1992. The CMAO was a designated Assistant Secretary that reported to the Secretary on issues and concerns of minority veterans in addition to his/her principal assignment. The CMAO was responsible for six minority groups, which included women veterans.

Public Law 103-446 created two Centers and an Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans. The other Center created was the Center for Women Veterans that is discussed in another part of this document.

A Senior Executive Service (SES) level Director who reports directly to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs heads the Center for Minority Veterans. The Director, who can be career or non-career (SES) is appointed by the President for a six year term. The Director can be reappointed for an additional term. He is the principal advisor to the Secretary or Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs on the adoption and implementation of policies and programs affecting veterans who are minorities. The first Director appointed was Mr. Willie L. Hensley, a 23-year, retired Army Lieutenant Colonel. Over the past five years, Mr. Hensley has developed a viable and energetic program designed to encourage the use of VA benefits and services by minority veterans. He has gained the support of top VA officials and officials at other federal agencies to improve the delivery of services and benefits to minority veterans. He has improved communication with minority veterans and minority veterans' service organizations using the Internet and telephone conferencing to inform them of the latest information about VA benefits and services. He has provided these groups with a medium for addressing their concerns about VA policies, programs, services and activities.

The greatest challenge that the Center has had to overcome was the mistrust that many minority veterans had concerning the Department of Veterans Affairs or the Veterans Administration. The other challenge was identifying and reaching out to minority veterans groups and community-based organizations

that serve minority populations. The Center has successfully accomplished this with the assistance of a cadre of Minority Veterans Program Coordinators who are located at almost all VA field facilities. Many of the coordinators are collateral duty assignments.

The Center's goals and objectives include vigorous advocacy on behalf of minority veterans, identifying barriers to service, conducting outreach, promoting the use of veteran's benefits, developing and analyzing statistical data, and encouraging medical research on diseases and health problems affecting minority veterans.

The Center's work focuses on five distinct minority groups. They are African American or Black, Asian American, Hispanic, Native American to include: Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and American Indians, and Pacific Island Americans. The Center has identified major issues and concerns of the five distinct minority groups and has devised strategies and initiatives to address each concern. Many of these strategies include cooperation with the Department's three Administrations and staff offices. The Center has also entered into partnership with the Office of Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) of the Department of Labor; the Indian Health Service (I.H.S.); Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA); the Office of Minority Health (OMH); the Office of Aging, and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) of the Department of Health and Human Services; the Small Business Administration (SBA); the Department of Defense; and the Department of Interior to address the needs of minority veterans.

As a result of these efforts, VA has established five new veterans counseling centers on Indian Reservations and VA and tribal governments have entered into sharing agreements to improve the delivery of health care to veterans living on trust lands. In 1998, the Center's work with NCI resulted in a grant (from NCI) to develop treatment protocols for African American veterans suffering with cancer. More research focused on disparities in care at VA and other medical facilities is being conducted. A VA initiative to publish benefits pamphlets and other brochures in languages other than English, such as Spanish, Navajo and Cherokee is under way.

Since the establishment of the Center for Minority Veterans, a greater awareness of minority veterans issues and health care concerns has been achieved within the VA health care provider ranks and within the veteran's community at large. There has been a significant increase in VA's outreach efforts and more sensitivity toward providing services to minority veterans and their dependents.