

VA ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORICAL PROJECT Office of Public Affairs (80)

The Office of Public Affairs is the department's centralized communications organization, providing a range of information and guidance to a wide variety of audiences and organizations. Within the office, several organizations share responsibility for communicating with groups of special importance to veterans and their families. What follows is a summary of each office's major accomplishments:

Corporate Communications Staff (80B): The appointment of the Hon. Jesse Brown as the first African American veteran to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs marked the beginning of a period of strong advocacy for veterans. Secretary Brown communicated to all VA employees that they would "put veterans first" in everything they did on behalf of the department. He also spoke of his role as Secretary for Veterans Affairs, with the emphasis on the word for. The Hon. Togo D. West, Jr. replaced Secretary Brown on January 3, 1998. In his speeches, Secretary West continued the emphasis on the importance of veterans to our nation. As Acting Secretary in both 1997 and 2000, and Deputy Secretary at other times in the past eight years, the Hon. Hershel Gober made hundreds of speeches on behalf of the Department. Many of his speeches dealt with the importance of "One VA," which may be his legacy to the Department.

Information Systems Staff (80C): Among the major accomplishments of the Information Systems Staff have been publishing all relevant Public Affairs printed products on the Internet. This has included publications like the Federal Benefits for Veterans And Dependents booklet, which currently is downloaded by 2,000 people every day. The office has also used the Internet in an effective manner to squelch misinformation on the VA health care enrollment project. This information, on the web site, received approximately 1,000 "hits" per day for several months.

Internal Communications and Special Projects Service (80D): Every year, this service provides principal support for the Veterans Day National Committee and its Presidentially-directed tasks of staging the national Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, supporting regional observances, and extending awareness of Veterans Day and its meaning through the school systems to the nation's youth. OPA took on principal responsibility for coordinating and administering VA support for VDNC in 1993. Highlights include selecting the first woman and first African American to serve as master of ceremonies for the event in 1994; creating a Veterans Day web site to increase the distribution of teacher's materials on the day in 1997, and reformatting the teacher's guide in 2000 for easier downloading and local reproduction to meet a dramatic increase in demand.

Other service accomplishments include:

- Directing a public information campaign and a national celebration event featuring President Clinton for the 50th anniversary of the GI Bill in 1994.

- Publishing the first Spanish version of "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents" in 1995, and placing the benefits booklet on the web site in 1997.
- Implementing comprehensive media outreach efforts to reach Gulf War veterans in 1996 and 1997 through public service spots, satellite media tours and facility outreach plans; and another to reach women veterans regarding sexual harassment counseling services and other VA programs, using the same tools and national TV network interviews in 1997 and 1998.
- Providing public information support for the Stand Down 2000 campaign to reach homeless veterans, including radio and Television public service spots featuring Tipper Gore, facility support plans and print materials in 1999 and 2000.

Field Operations Service (80E): In the past eight years, Field Operations Service, with regional field offices in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, DC has been an essential part of the communications process of the Department. Field Operations Service Regional Offices are the conduit to an array of services including guidance on a variety of internal and external issues that affect the Department; the annual OPA National Training Conference, which provides the most complete public affairs training available to field public affairs officers; and Public Affairs Council meetings, which provide small workgroup support to regional areas. Other accomplishments include:

- Developing seven "centers of excellence", one at each OPA regional office. New York OPA further developed the National Story Program. Washington, D.C. is responsible for Marketing. Atlanta is the authority on Crises Communications, particularly responding to hurricanes and bombs. Chicago serves as the liaison between VA and national health associations. Denver is in charge of national Customer Service training and serves as the national Native American Veterans Liaison office. Los Angeles is VA's liaison to the Film Industry, and Dallas is the Database Education center for OPA field staff.
- Preparing a survey on the needs and preferences of minority media outlets.
- Making more than 1,500 story placements in national, international and local media through the National Story Program (NSP).

Media Relations Service (80F): Changes in technology influenced both how VA's media relations office gathered information and how it was distributed. In 1992, OPA relied upon Associated Press "tele-type" machines to track ongoing developments. By 2000, a variety of Internet-based news services were in use. OPA started the period relying upon the postal service to transmit press releases. Subsequently, the office moved to fax machines, the Internet, e-mail and, in the near future, to a self-subscribing computerized "server." In November 1997, the media relations office began using a computerized database to track press queries.

In an administrative change, in February 1999, public affairs officers traditionally assigned to VA's three major administrations were transferred to the service, along with all responsibility for external communications and significant portions of the internal-communications mission.

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS HISTORY ATTACHMENTS

Vanguards (the Department's employee magazine) issued 1992 through 2000. Magazine publishes 10 times a year, monthly with combined Jan/Feb and June/July issues.

VA Reports (the Department's employee news video) issued 1992 through 2000 (the video is issued four times a year – winter, spring, summer, fall editions)

One VA videos. Three videotapes produced to support and implement the objectives of the VA One VA program launched in 1999 at four regional conferences.

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Office of Public Affairs (80)

The Department of Veterans Affairs is virtually unique among cabinet agencies in that the services we provide are delivered directly by us to those who Congress has directed by law to receive them—our nation's veterans and their families. Because of this, it is important that VA is able to communicate the benefits and services it offers on behalf of a grateful nation to those who may be eligible for them. It is also important that Veterans know how to apply for and receive the benefits they have earned through their service to our nation. Finally, it is important for all Americans to know how the resources they have entrusted to our department for the care of veterans and their families are being used, and how well we are succeeding at meeting their expectations in caring for the very special men and women our department is privileged to serve.

The Office of Public Affairs is the department's centralized communications organization, providing a range of information and guidance to a wide variety of audiences and organizations. Within the office, several organizations share responsibility for communicating with groups of special importance to veterans and their families.

Our Corporate Communications Staff (80B) supports the Secretary and Deputy Secretary and other senior officials in their communications needs, especially speeches and bylined articles.

Our information Systems Staff (80C) provides support to the office and others in its information and technology requirements, including the Internet.

Our Internal Communications and Special Projects Service (80D) keeps VA employees informed of agency policies and decisions, and the accomplishments and achievements of their fellow employees. It also coordinates and provides public affairs support for special events of national importance, including Veterans Day.

Our Field Operations Service (80E) provides broad-based professional advice, training and counsel to VA field facilities on communication issues, and provides a field perspective for headquarters officials and policy makers.

Our Media Relations and Administration Liaison Service (80F) is the department's designated liaison with national news media organizations, and with all news media on topics of special importance to veterans. This service also maintains close liaisons with VA's three administrations to provide internal and external public support.

What follows is a summary of each office's major accomplishments in the past eight years:

Corporate Communications Staff (80B)

The appointment of the Hon. Jesse Brown as the first African American veteran to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs marked the beginning of a period of strong advocacy for veterans. Secretary Brown communicated to all VA employees that they would "put veterans first" in everything they did on behalf of the department. He also spoke of his role as Secretary for Veterans Affairs, with the emphasis on the word for. As he stated in remarks before the National Press Club on May 13, 1993: "I am first, foremost, and I always will be an advocate for veterans. That will not change."

Among his most significant speeches were:

- An August 30, 1993 speech, in which he marked the 75th anniversary of World War I with the inauguration and presentation of a special medal honoring the 4.7 million Americans who served during that conflict in remarks delivered at Cantigny, IL.
- An October 17, 1994 speech, before the U.S. Court of Veterans Appeals' Third Judicial Conference, where he took great exception to allegations presented by the Chief Judge earlier in the day.
- A June 25, 1995 speech dedicating the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center, the first completely new medical center constructed since 1973.
- A November 8, 1995 speech in Los Angeles before 5,000 invited guests in tribute to Japanese-American Veterans, recognizing their patriotism and sacrifices during World War II in spite of the internment of many of their family members.
- A May 28, 1996 White House News Conference, at which he announced recommendations to the President on a new policy on the association between Agent Orange and prostate cancer, acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy, and spina bifida in children of Vietnam veterans. The President agreed that these should be added to the seven diseases already presumptively associated with exposure to Agent Orange.

The Hon. Togo D. West, Jr. replaced Secretary Brown on January 3, 1998. In his speeches, Secretary West continued the emphasis on the importance of veterans to our nation. His significant speeches included:

- The dedication of VBA's Veterans Museum in New York City, where he first described his conception of VA's mission and the role of VA employees in fulfilling that mission.

Internal Communications and Special Projects Service (80D)

Every year, this service provides principal support for the Veterans Day National Committee and its Presidentially-directed tasks of staging the national Veterans Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, supporting regional observances, and extending awareness of Veterans Day and its meaning through the school systems to the nation's youth. OPA took on principal responsibility for coordinating and administering VA support for VDNC in 1993. Highlights include selecting the first woman and first African American to serve as master of ceremonies for the event in 1994; creating a Veterans Day web site to increase the distribution of teacher's materials on the day in 1997, and reformatting the teacher's guide in 2000 for easier downloading and local reproduction to meet a dramatic increase in demand for the product.

Other service accomplishments include:

- Instituting the Secretary's Daily Message to all employees via e-mail to allow VA top management direct, real-time communication with VA's work force in 1993.
- Managing a national outreach campaign which generated thousands of requests for presentation of a 75th anniversary commemoration medal to living World War I veterans in 1994-95.
- Directing a public information campaign and a national celebration event featuring President Clinton for the 50th anniversary of the GI Bill in 1994.
- Initiating a partnership with the Armed Forces Information Service to produce an annual series of veterans benefits radio and television spots for the AFRTS overseas military networks in 1993.
- Publishing the first Spanish version of "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents" in 1995, and placing the benefits booklet on the web site in 1997.
- Conducting the first statistically valid comprehensive employee survey on VAnguard (VA's employee magazine) readership in 1996. VAnguard special issues included one on the federal employee furlough, and another on the White House Conference on aging.
- Implementing comprehensive media outreach efforts to reach Gulf War veterans in 1996 and 1997 through public service spots, satellite media tours and facility outreach plans; and another to reach women veterans regarding sexual harassment counseling services and other VA programs, using the same tools and national TV network interviews in 1997 and 1998.
- Providing public information support for the Stand Down 2000 campaign to reach homeless veterans, including radio and Television public service spots featuring Tipper Gore, facility support plans and print materials in 1999 and 2000.
- Supporting the Secretary's One VA program, by providing communications planning and team support for four One VA conferences; continuous internal media coverage; and a new "One VA in Action" earnings and leave statement program to reach all employees in 1999.

Field Operations Service (80E)

In the past eight years, Field Operations Service, with regional field offices in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, DC has been an essential part of the communications process of the Department. Field Operations Service Regional Offices are the conduit to an array of services including guidance on a variety of internal and external issues that affect the Department; the annual OPA National Training Conference, which provides the most complete public affairs training available to field public affairs officers; and Public Affairs Council meetings, which provide small workgroup support to regional areas.

Other accomplishments include:

- Developing seven "centers of excellence", one at each OPA regional office. New York OPA further developed the National Story Program. Washington, D.C. is responsible for Marketing. Atlanta is the authority on Crises Communications, particularly responding to hurricanes and bombs. Chicago serves as the liaison between VA and national health associations (American Hospital Association, American Health Care Executives, American Medical Association, etc.) Denver is in charge of national Customer Service training and serves as the national Native American Veterans Liaison office. Los Angeles is VA's liaison to the Film Industry, and Dallas is the Database Education center for OPA field staff.
- Preparing a survey to determine the needs and preferences of minority media outlets. The results of that survey prompted the creation of a national minority media database, which helped PAOs to reach veterans served by national and local minority media outlets. Other efforts geared towards serving minority veterans included direct mailings, attendance to minority geared conference and special events, inclusion of minority-related information in regional newsletters, and development of close ties with minority media reporters and service groups. Also, since 1999 Dallas OPA has written a column addressing numerous topics regarding veterans and VA health care initiatives and research. This column is shared with the other six regional offices and published across the country by Hispanic publications.
- Providing guidance to field facilities on how to host special events and arrange details in ensuring the events' success as well as media coverage. OPA Regional staff provided public affairs support for more than 750 stand-downs and 146 homeless grant presentations in the past eight years. They also supported five national cemetery dedications and multiple town hall meetings, health fairs, French Legion of Honor and Medal of Honor presentations. Field Operations Service promoted Miss America 2000's appearances at VA functions. Her platform was helping America's homeless veterans.
- Making more than 1,500 story placements in national, international and local media through the National Story Program (NSP). NSP brought news about VA research, services, benefits and accomplishments to millions of veterans, their families, Congressional leaders, veterans' service organizations and the general public.

- Working with key contacts at the Ann Landers Column to secure stories in support of VA activities. Thanks to their efforts, the column has published a letter from the Secretary promoting National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans each year.

Through the years, Field Operations Service has promoted various department-wide initiatives. One example of this public affairs support is the placement of a PSA about the enrollment project with the Kaleidoscope TV Network, which generated free airtime worth tens of thousands of dollars with the potential of reaching 96 million TV households in the US. Field Operations also developed enrollment TV spokesperson briefings and training sessions across the country. When OPA Field Operations first became involved in the enrollment project, its mission was to augment an existing communication strategy developed by a committee composed of senior OPA staffers, VHA officials and a contractor. OPA Field Operations requested to participate and facilitate in the test markets of Spokane and Lexington. In these test markets, OPA staffers, in conjunction with field public affairs officers, distributed news releases and public service announcements, monitored interviews and conducted TV training sessions. Following the test market initiation, Field Operations Service staff continued to coordinate the development of communications strategies that supported the October 1, 1998 rollout of VHA's enrollment program.

Media Relations Service (80F)

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In an administrative change, in February 1999, public affairs officers traditionally assigned to VA's three major administrations were transferred to the service, along with all responsibility for external communications and significant portions of the internal-communications mission.

As the department's principal spokespersons, the service had a major role in the far-reaching array of issues that confronted the veterans' community in the last decade of the 20th century, including:

- Health care reform (1993-94)
- Agent Orange
- Gulf War Syndrome
- The 50th anniversary of the GI Bill (1994)
- VA eligibility reform
- The creation of 22 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (1994-95)

- Hepatitis C
- Patient Safety

The Office of Public Affairs is proud of its accomplishments on behalf of veterans during the Clinton administration, and looks forward to even greater challenges and successes in the years to come.

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