

**STATEMENT OF
FREDERICK DOWNS, JR
CHIEF PROSTHETICS AND CLINICAL LOGISTICS OFFICER
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONTRACTING AND TECHNOLOGY
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JULY 16, 2008**

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) relationship with independent prosthetic contractors and our efforts to ensure continuity of care for veteran amputees returning from combat.

INTRODUCTION

VA provides prosthetic services to a wide range of eligible veterans. VA furnishes prosthetic services to enrolled veterans as part of the Department's medical benefits package. This includes sensory aids for those who meet VA's eligibility criteria, e.g., veterans visually or hearing impaired so severely that the provision of sensori-neural aids is necessary to permit active participation in their own medical treatment.

Veteran prosthetic devices include an array of items from appliances, parts or accessories that are necessary to replace, support, or substitute for a deformed, weakened, or missing anatomical portion of the body.

VA's Office of Prosthetics has a long tradition of using an extensive network of VA laboratories and contract prosthetic labs to provide prosthetic and orthotic devices. This network provided limbs or repairs to 11,023 veterans with amputations in 2007 at a cost of more than \$61,470,000. VA operates 61 prosthetic labs, each accredited by one of the two national accrediting bodies: the American Board for Certification in Orthotics, Prosthetics, and Pedorthics (ABC), and the Board for Orthotist/Prosthetist Certification (BOC). We also hold our independent contractors to the same accreditation standards.

RELATIONSHIP WITH INDEPENDENT PROSTHETIC CONTRACTORS

VA contracts with independent prosthetists to provide ninety-seven percent of all prosthetic and orthotic devices for veterans. To continue and enhance this relationship between VA and independent prosthetic contractors, VA's Prosthetics and Clinical Logistics Office holds conferences concurrent with and endorsed by the American Academy of Orthotists and Prosthetists during their annual meeting and scientific symposium. This annual meeting is attended by approximately 2,000 prosthetists. Many of these are small business owners and VA contractors. Our goal is to improve communication and interaction with all members of the independent prosthetic community.

Since most small business owners in the field of prosthetics are members and supporters of the annual conference, it is a unique opportunity to enhance the relationship between the private sector and VA. Small businesses, including VA contractors within the field of prosthetics and orthotics, are invited to present their products and attend scientific presentations. Businesses are provided exhibit tables or space that enables them to meet and interact directly with VA physicians, administrators, therapists, orthotists and prosthetists. We believe it is a model of professional and business interaction with government.

VA also works with prosthetic contractors in hosting conferences around the country where there is a mix of VA attendees and prosthetic small businesses. The seminars are typically organized on a local or regional basis as outreach to contractors and an opportunity for mutually beneficial collaboration between VA and small businesses.

Our efforts to build and maintain relationships with independent prosthetic contractors also include, but are not limited to, working with the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) and the American Orthotic, Prosthetic Association (AOPA) and we also participate in their annual meetings. We also publish articles in several media outlets such as *Federal Practitioner*, *O&P Business News*, *ACA's First Step*, Northwestern University's *Capabilities* and others. The VA Office of Small and Disadvantaged

Business Utilization has several other initiatives and conferences that aid in our outreach efforts.

ACCESS TO PROSTHETICS IN RURAL AREAS

VA's network of providers reaches the most rural areas throughout the country to bring quality care to the veteran. Currently, we have over 600 contracts across the country to reach our veterans and provide access to necessary care close to their home, whether in a rural or urban area.

VA has created a contract template to help ensure veterans are receiving consistent care across the country from contractors adhering to the same high standards of accreditation by ABC or BOC. The contracting process allows us to receive prices below the Medicare fee schedule reimbursement rate. We provide premium access to the quality care with cost savings for the government through our current processes.

NATIONAL CONTRACTS

VA has two national contracts that provide specialized services in the area of upper extremity amputations. Amputations involving upper limbs are not common, and expertise in this area is difficult to maintain for any prosthetist, whether in VA or in the private sector. To address this issue, VA awarded two contracts in January 2007 to provide a team of specialists to facilities to assist the amputee clinic team in the prescription of a device. The veteran, as always, has the option of using a VA laboratory or any of our contractors, including the upper limb specialist assisting in the prescription, to fabricate and deliver the artificial limb.

VA also uses national contracts for specific devices, such as orthotics soft goods, through the Acquisition and Logistics Center in Denver, Colorado. The bidding process for these items includes alerting potential contract providers through the use of the Federal Business Opportunities website at FedBizOPPS.Gov. In this process, contracts are awarded based on multiple factors, including quality of the item, size of the company (small or large business), whether the business is veteran- or minority-

owned, previous experiences with the vendor (if applicable), and cost. This process prevents cost from being the final determinant in awarding contract items that will be provided to those we serve. VA now has statutory authority in giving preference to service-disabled, veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses.

CONTINUITY OF CARE FOR VETERAN AMPUTEES RETURNING FROM COMBAT

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2007, VA provided prosthetic services to more than 1,606,000 unique veteran patients for the following.

- 8,058 legs
- 380 arms
- 86,945 wheelchairs, scooters, and accessories
- 678,401 orthotics
- 391,531 orthotic shoes
- 769,522 eyeglasses
- 348,920 hearing aids
- 241,805 surgical implants
- 2.2 million pieces of medical equipment and supplies

From the beginning of OEF through FY 2007, out of almost 300,000 veterans who have returned from OEF/OIF and sought care from VA, 701 veterans were treated for major amputations, according to the Department of Defense. We anticipate the number of OEF/OIF veterans requiring prosthetics to increase slightly in FY 2008.

VA has implemented several initiatives and provided substantial resources to assist OEF/OIF service members as they transition into VA care. VA has placed social workers at Military Treatment Facilities (MTF) across the country and identified OEF/OIF Case Managers, Transition Patient Advocates, and Federal Recovery Coordinators at VA and Department of Defense (DoD) facilities. VA's Prosthetics staff, case managers, and social workers have regular contact with the program offices responsible for the various benefits a veteran may be eligible to receive.

The VA Prosthetics staff is also involved in the discharge process so that coordination can be made between the MTF and the local VA medical center. Upon discharge, veterans are provided information describing VA services, along with instructions and contact information. VA has also developed a website with valuable tools that can be used and easily accessed by any veteran interested in VA Prosthetic Care (www.prosthetics.va.gov).

The Army's Center for the Intrepid is a complete rehabilitation facility that provides the continuum of care from the military to VA. VA has placed staff members that assist service members with their transition from the DoD to VA. This personalized assistance ensures that continuity of care will be maintained as veterans and their families move to this next phase of their lives. VA liaisons at the Center for the Intrepid, Brooke Army Medical Center, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and the Comprehensive Combat Casualty Care Center (C5) at the National Naval Medical Center in San Diego, work closely with local and national VA Prosthetics staff. Future plans include a more formal placement of a prosthetic representative at C5 in San Diego. Overall, such integration ensures active duty service members know and understand VA is ready to help.

In addition, VA works in concert with DoD to provide specialized items such as hand cycles, personal digital assistants and vehicle modifications. VA may repair and replace other items issued by DoD. This is particularly important as new veterans or active duty service members move around the country. If a service member goes home on convalescent leave, VA Prosthetics staff can assist with repairs. These repairs are completed at either a VA lab or at a private sector lab with whom VA has contracted.

MEETING THE FUTURE NEEDS OF VETERAN AMPUTEES

VHA will continue to use and support new and emerging technologies to enhance the quality of life for veterans as they age and experience life-changing events requiring, in some cases, innovative prostheses and orthoses. When new technology is introduced, VA prosthetists and orthotists receive training from the manufacturer. In 2000, VA was the first organization in the United States to fit a C-Leg (a microprocessor controlled

knee), and we have worked to maintain our lead in issuing the latest technologies to veterans of all wars. VA offers an extensive range of training opportunities for its prosthetists. Previous training has included workshops held by manufacturers such as Fillauer, Liberating Technologies, Ossur, and Otto Bock.

It is important that all VA and contract prosthetists and orthotists obtain and maintain a high level of continuing education. With that in mind, VA is working with one of the nation's leading prosthetic schools, California State University, Dominguez Hills to develop a Veterans Institute for Prosthetic and Orthotic Sciences at the VA Long Beach Healthcare System. We anticipate this Institute will be ready for VA prosthetists and contractors to begin taking classes in February 2009. It will be a model for basic and continuing education based on significant collaboration with the private sector, including contract prosthetists.

CONCLUSION

VA bears a responsibility to those who have bravely served our country, and we will proudly care for all those in need. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement and I am pleased to respond to any questions you or the Committee members may have.