

Plattsburgh, NY (May 15, 2014)

Contact: Peg Bergeron – [mbergeron@amra1973.org](mailto:mbergeron@amra1973.org) (800-424-2969)

## STATEMENT OF THE AMERICAN MILITARY RETIREES ASSOCIATION (AMRA)

### **VA Appointment Delays**

Veterans have long reported difficulties in scheduling appointments at the VA – but this is different. Some delays in scheduling due to lack of capacity are one thing, though surely capacity issues should be high on the priority list of any VA Medical Center Director, but allegations that the scheduling system is stacked against veterans in order to “keep the numbers up” are deeply troubling. This is not a numbers game – we’re dealing with lives here!

Secretary Shinseki has issued statements and appeared on television with regards to this crisis in VA care. The Secretary has asked for patience as the Inspector General conducts a nationwide review of access to VA facilities. National President Ronald K. Kneppshield believes that “in light of all that he has done for veterans during his tenure, the American Military Retirees Association (AMRA) is willing to give the Secretary the opportunity to investigate and make the necessary changes to the scheduling process that will end the long delays and resulting health consequences for veterans. Of course, that will also mean taking firm measures to eradicate the problem, making the necessary staff corrections, and ensuring that the veterans under VA care are receiving the best care possible **‘when they need it’** – they deserve it and the American public expects it.”

However, new allegations are now coming from Durham and Cheyenne so this is likely a systemic problem and could grow exponentially as the investigation digs into every hospital’s practices. It is critical for VA to quickly re-train all schedulers and require strict adherence to scheduling procedures. No scheduler should be encouraged or allowed to “fudge the numbers” in order to end up with an untruthful, unrealistic report – nor should the scheduler be given a poor rating if capacity is the problem, as long as scheduling procedures have been followed to the letter. How can VA possibly correct capacity problems if the data is tainted?

In short, AMRA is willing to give credit where credit is due. Secretary Shinseki has tackled veteran homelessness and the claims backlog; he has set new presumption of service connection for conditions related to Agent Orange and for Gulf War vets; provided educational opportunities for Post 9/11 vets and tackled PTSD, TBI and suicide rates. All of these are huge issues and while many need still more attention, the Secretary works hard every day at these issues. One important milestone is that the American Customer Satisfaction Index, an independent customer service survey, reports that veteran patients rank VA among the best in the nation and equal to or better than private sector hospitals.

However, AMRA is also willing to criticize when the occasion warrants. It has always been our duty to seek the best medical care for military retirees and veterans and to protect the benefits they earned through service to the nation – in our association, that is 20+ career service – and we will not hesitate to fight for anyone who is forced to wait six months for an appointment.

###