

[Login](#). Not a member? [Join now](#)

» [Get the Military.com Toolbar](#)

▶ [Home](#) ▶ [Benefits](#) ▶ [News](#) ▶ [Entertainment](#) ▶ [Shop](#) ▶ [Finance](#) ▶ [Careers](#) ▶ [Education](#) ▶ [Join the Military](#) ▶ [Community](#)

Search for Military News:

HEADLINES

[News Home](#) | [Video News](#) | [Early Brief](#) | [Forum](#) | [Passdown](#) | [Discussions](#) | [Benefit Updates](#) | [Defense Tech](#)

Disability Claim Surge Strains VA

Associated Press | September 19, 2007



Outgoing Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson, center, speaks with veterans on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, Tuesday, Sept. 18, 2007, prior to [President Bush](#) speaking to Military Support Organizations. AP Photo/Charles Dharapak

WASHINGTON - Outgoing VA Secretary [Jim Nicholson](#) acknowledged Tuesday that he's struggling to reduce surging disability claims from injured Iraq war veterans.

Addressing [Congress](#) for a final time before stepping down Oct. 1, Nicholson suggested to a House committee that the VA has yet to find a clear solution for long waits.

Nicholson also said, though, he's proud of many accomplishments during his 2 1/2 years as head of the Veterans Affairs Department, pushing forward initiatives such as requiring screenings for brain-related injury, adding storefront walk-in clinics and boosting mental health counselors.

But citing in part growing demands from a prolonged Iraq war, Nicholson also said the VA faces difficulties in meeting challenges and expressed sympathy to injured veterans who might have unfairly suffered as a result of unnecessary red tape.

"We have learned that, in many instances, we were not as sensitive to those needs as we could have been - and we have tried to adjust, while at the same time caring for veterans of different wars and different eras," Nicholson said in testimony prepared for delivery to the House Veterans Affairs Committee. "My heart has gone out to service members or veterans who seem to have slipped through the cracks."

[Take Action: Veterans' Disability Reform](#)

Regarding the claims backlog, Nicholson said the department has hired 1,100 new processors to reduce delays of up to 177 days in processing disability payments. But he predicted another rise in compensation and pension claims this year, citing the additional applications pouring in during "the midst of war."

The increase, he said, is coming from Iraq war veterans as well as veterans from previous conflicts who were prompted to file additional

▼ advertisement

WHAT'S HOT »»

- [Chapels Remove Faith-Specific Symbols](#)
- [Muslims Protest Air Force Academy Guest](#)
- [Angelina Jolie Visits Baghdad](#)
- Weekend Shock: [July 4 EOD Style](#)
- Free Music: [Tripdavon's Latest Album](#)
- Podcast: [The New Face of Rock](#)
- Discount: [Save on TurboTax](#)
- [Easy Way to be an Informed Voter](#)

▼ advertisement

claims for new or additional benefits amid the current public focus on war-related injuries in Iraq.

"The claims backlog is an issue that has bedeviled me and many that have come before me," Nicholson said. "In fact, VA can influence the output - claims decided - of its work product, but it cannot control the input - claims filed."

He also blamed gaps in VA's mental health care partly on "areas of the country where certain specialty health care providers simply can't be hired, no matter what you would pay them."

[Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Overview](#)

Nicholson abruptly announced in July that he was resigning. His appearance Tuesday comes amid intense political and public scrutiny following reports of substandard outpatient treatment at the Pentagon-run Walter Reed Army Medical Center and at VA facilities.

In recent weeks, injured Iraq war veterans have filed a lawsuit against the VA alleging undue delays in health care, particularly in mental health coverage. The VA inspector general's office also found the VA repeatedly understated wait times for injured veterans seeking medical care and in many serious cases forced them to wait more than 30 days, counter to department policy.

The report also concluded that Nicholson and VA Undersecretary for Health Michael Kussman earlier this year falsely reported to Congress that 95 percent of veterans' outpatient appointments - rather than 75 percent, as the IG found - were timely.

In his prepared remarks, Nicholson did not mention the IG report while repeating his belief that the VA still offered the best [health care](#) system in the world. The VA has questioned the IG report's methodology and said it would hire a contractor to do another study.

"To be sure there have been disappointments, but I believe we have made tremendous progress," Nicholson said. "Together we have made VA a stronger, more focused organization - focused on the very real needs of all of our veterans, especially those currently engaged as warriors in the Global War on Terror."

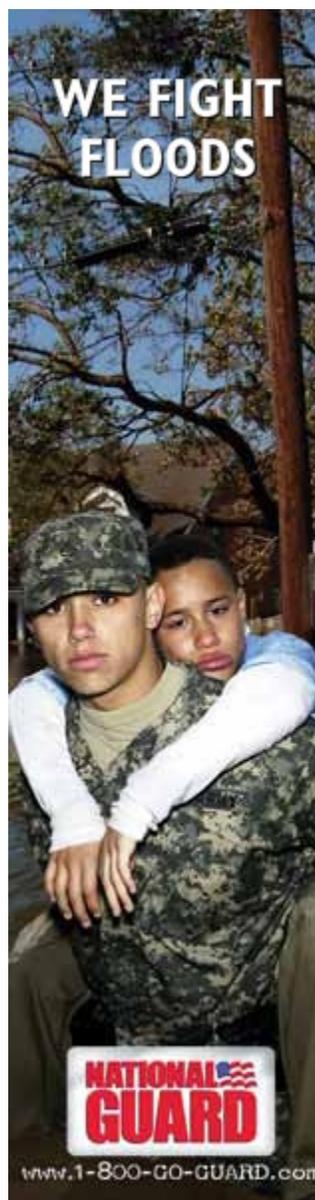
Among the achievements Nicholson cited:

- Launching a campaign to reduce high rates of obesity and diabetes in veterans. Some 25 percent of veterans under VA care suffer from adult-onset Type II diabetes, which can lead to blindness, renal failure or amputations.

- Creating a new multi-campus academy in partnership with U.S. nursing schools to address a nursing shortage and encourage nurses to work for the VA.

- Hiring suicide prevention counselors at each of VA's 153 hospitals and creating a 24-hour prevention hotline in July.

- Centralizing the VA's information technology system to minimize the risk of data loss. That came after nearly 26.5 million veterans' personal



information was put at risk of identity theft last year after a VA employee lost a computer hard drive.

Sound Off...What do you think? [Join the discussion.](#)

Copyright 2008 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

MORE MILITARY HEADLINES >>

- [Murtha Bill Swaps Funds for Withdrawal](#)
- [Hayden: Waterboarding May Be Illegal](#)
- [Budget Outlines for Fiscal Year 2009](#)
- [Army Partners With KU for the Wounded](#)
- [Foreign Language Tools for Sailors](#)

[Va Disability Loans](#)

Get Benefits Exclusive to Military & Vets - 4 out of 5 Loans Approved.

Search for Military News:

GO

[Military.com](#) | [About Us](#) | [Press](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Affiliate Program](#) | [Monster Network](#) | [Help & Feedback](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#)

[Site Map](#) | [Spouse Buzz](#) | [Fred's Place](#) | [MilBlogging](#) | [GI Bill Express](#) | [Kit Up!](#) | [Military Videos](#) | © 2008 Military Advantage

monster® A Monster Company.