

Responding to queries and addressing concerns at the national level, the NCPO held monthly group meetings with VSOs, as well as dozens of individual CARES briefings for VSO leaders. Concerns related to local issues were relayed to CARES Communication Coordinators at the VISN level, who followed up with information or made other appropriate responses. While the NCPO endeavored to conduct vigorous outreach concerning CARES, many key aspects of the communication process were designed in response to discussions held at monthly VSO meetings. Examples included sharing monthly summaries of communications and outreach with VSOs; providing VSOs with real time planning initiative data selection information; and modifying the CARES forecasting contract to explore methodologies that could improve future forecasts of veteran demand for specific services.

The VSOs designated local points-of-contact to interact with VA counterparts (VHA's CARES points-of-contacts), helping to get information to key veteran constituents. Clearly, the National VSOs' assistance with CARES information distribution was critical to a successful communication effort at the local level.

As previously noted, National VSOs were provided with the data used to select the planning initiatives at the same time internal VA teams received the data. Subsequently, they received the planning initiative results to ensure that there was a clear understanding of the process and its results. As each VISN submitted its Market Plan, the NCPO provided copies to the VSOs, soliciting their views and comments.

#### U.S. Congress

CARES briefings were provided directly to the member, or to key staff, in the offices of 37 Senators and 80 Representatives. In some instances, these briefings were presented directly to the member by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs or the Deputy, or by the NCPO and VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs. Special emphasis was placed on briefings for the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. Representatives of national VSOs were present at many of these briefings. Congressional offices were encouraged to access the CARES web site for specific information about their local areas. A complete listing of congressional contacts in Washington, DC and the field is included in the Reference Section.

#### Affiliates

Following the announcement of the planning initiatives, VA's Office of Academic Affiliations, in conjunction with the NCPO, sent letters to VISN directors and the deans of VA's medical school affiliates encouraging discussion of CARES impact on academic issues. The letters emphasized the importance of timely participation in CARES, noting that some affiliation stakeholders in the Chicago area felt they had missed the opportunity to contribute advice in Phase I of CARES because they came late to the process.

Additionally, NCPO and the Office of Academic Affiliations kept the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) informed and helped prepare an AAMC Presidential Memo for distribution to deans. The CARES process was the subject of briefings at two AAMC meetings.

Appendix M details affiliate outreach efforts conducted by individual VISNs.

#### Unions

A Memorandum of Understanding between VA and AFGE was developed to establish local union representation on all CARES planning committees. This commitment was honored, and VISN Market Plans were submitted to the union's Partnership Council members. See Appendix M for a description of individual VISN union outreach.

#### Employees

Extensive efforts were made at both VA Central Office and in the field to keep employees informed and up-to-date on CARES. At the time this Plan was published by the Under Secretary for Health, this was an on-going process.

When CARES was launched in 2002, a brief message announcing the program was printed on the biweekly Pay and Leave Slip delivered to each VA employee. Articles about CARES were published in the VA's national "Vanguard" employee newsletter, and the VA Satellite Telecast, "Newscast to Employees," reported the launching of CARES. Several abbreviated update messages on CARES were transmitted over the intranet systems carrying VA's All Employee Daily Email.

VISN and facility level newsletters reported the birth of CARES and provided periodic updates. In addition, two, all employee Townhall meetings on CARES were held in VACO, and every VA hospital and VISN office held one or more Townhall CARES discussions with employees.

#### National Communication and Outreach Support

The VHA Office of Communications, in conjunction with the NCPO, worked with 20 VISN CARES Communications Coordinators across the country, disseminating information and answering queries about the process. Information and guidance was provided to the public affairs officers who were responsible for CARES communications at individual VA facilities. VHA Communications produced and distributed more than 40 national products, such as news releases, question and answer sets, fact sheets, videos, posters, brochures, and other products to help VA communicators in the field tell the CARES story in an accurate, thorough and consistent manner.

VHA and the VA's Office of Public Affairs jointly conducted three intensive training conferences on CARES communications, attended by VISN and facility directors and other key VHA field personnel charged with publicizing CARES, answering inquiries about it, etc. More than 300 people attended these two-and-a-half day sessions, learning techniques and sharing expertise to improve outreach and responsiveness to CARES stakeholders. In addition, NCPO sponsored three major conferences and seminars specifically designed to provide CARES information to Central Office employees, veterans service organizations and congressional staff.

Five shorter training sessions for facility-level public affairs officers were held in Dallas, New York, Durham, Boston and Los Angeles. More than 75 of these local VA communicators received a day of training and several products to help them publicize and explain CARES to stakeholders.

VA public affairs specialists discussed CARES outreach techniques in national conference calls, with 70-90 CARES Communications Coordinators participating every week. The VHA Office of Communications coordinated the calls, and regional staff of VA's Office of Public Affairs contributed ideas and expertise.

#### Millions of Communications Contacts

Many millions of stakeholders received some information about CARES through general reporting in print and broadcast media, but VA has no precise means of estimating these contacts. Some tangible indicators are, however, available.

VHA produces a monthly report that tracks actual contacts with stakeholders. A compilation of these monthly reports