

VA MISSION Act of 2018: Section 505 – Personnel Transparency Quarter Ending December 31, 2020

Executive Summary

February 23, 2021

This report is submitted under Section 505 of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (VA MISSION Act) (P.L. 115-182), regarding “Personnel Transparency.” Under Section 505(a), the VA Secretary shall make publicly available on a quarterly basis information pertaining to staffing and vacancies, specifically including the number of personnel encumbering positions, the number of accessions and separation actions processed during the prior quarter, the number of vacancies by occupation and the percentage of new hires hired within the time-to-hire target of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

In fiscal year (FY) 2020, VA began distinguishing between funded and unfunded vacant full-time equivalent employees (FTEs) in the MISSION Act reports to reconcile vacancies with the enacted President’s budget. During the 4th quarter of FY 2020, VA directed Administrations and Staff Offices to validate vacant positions and bring funded positions reported in VA’s authoritative data source for employees and positions (HR•Smart) into balance with funding levels. Significant progress was made to resolve data quality issues with positions created in error due to manual processes. VA is continuing the validation process to promote more precise reporting. Notably, as a result of additional funded FTEs in the FY 2021 budget and anticipation of increased surge hiring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Veterans Health Administration had purposefully added positions, which currently appear as vacancies. As noted in the 2020 MISSION Act Annual Report, vacancies do not necessarily represent staffing gaps or shortages, nor do they represent the true unfunded need of the organization nor the number of positions that could be filled at any given time, as there are many variables to staffing capacity. Rather, vacancies reflect the turnover that is constantly occurring in the organization and funded levels of growth in FTE.

As of December 31, 2020, VA had 400,682 employees onboard (includes full-time, part-time and seasonal employees), representing a total of 390,446 onboard FTEs in pay status.¹ With funding for 401,176 FTEs in VA’s FY 2021 appropriation, VA had funding for 10,730 vacant FTEs² at the end of the 1st quarter of FY 2021.³ This FTE level represents a fill rate of 97.3% for the funded FTEs provided by Congress.

Additionally, during the 1st quarter of FY 2021, VA had a net increase of 3,148 onboard

¹ Employees and FTE counts do not include ~8,200 COVID-19 employees and MISSION Act exclusions but do include employees in a non-pay status.

² The data in the MISSION Act reflects 10,628 vacant funded positions. This slightly lower number is due to a temporary under execution of available funding in staff offices resulting from a delay in FY2021 appropriations.

³ Funded vacant FTEs are the difference between funded FTEs appropriated by Congress and the onboard FTEs at a point in time, which for this report is the end of the day on December 31, 2020. No funding is associated with positions encumbered by employees in a non-pay status; funding for these positions offset other FTEs and recruitment actions.

employees, reflecting successful hiring, low turnover rates and additional funding for FTEs.⁴ These figures represent a point in time. While VA has been successful in attracting and retaining talent, VA continues to aggressively hire to meet expanding demand and to minimize any staffing gaps to ensure the department is providing top-quality health care and services. With a competitive turnover rate at or below 9.4% annually for the past five years, VA has consistently hired between 40 to 50K employees per year and continues to grow at a rate of at least 3.2% per year.

VA employs a wide variety of recruitment and retention tools to achieve full staffing capacity, including direct hiring authorities, recruitment, and retention flexibilities and incentives, hiring initiatives, virtual trainee recruitment events, improved employee engagement, HR modernization, workforce planning, targeted recruitment of military spouses and Service members transitioning from the Department of Defense, national recruiter programs for hard-to-fill occupations and specialties and strategies for filling director positions throughout the Department.

VA facilities have the authority to use recruitment, retention, and relocation incentives to attract and attain high-quality talent for specialized occupations. These incentives can be used to fill title 5, title 38 or hybrid title 38 positions, which are often hard to fill or necessary to retain due to being mission-critical or shortage occupations. VA maximizes the use of many other compensation flexibilities, e.g., superior qualifications appointments, also known as appointments above the minimum rate, special salary rates, student loan repayment, education debt reduction program, and incentives for health care occupations, nurses, and police officers across VA medical centers who have demonstrated recruitment and retention needs.

VA is committed to accurate position management together with efficient staffing to fill vacancies and increase the size of the workforce to meet Veteran demand for health care, benefits, and memorial services. During the 1st quarter of FY 2021, VA continued the validation process and established a sound foundation for position management to ensure position data accurately reflect VA's budget and requirements. Historical staffing and vacancy data are available on VA's Web site at <https://www.va.gov/employee/va-mission-act-section-505-data/>.

How do I interpret the data?

Accessions (Hiring) and Separations

Accessions are personnel actions that result in an employee's addition to VA (i.e., transfers-in from another agency and new hires to the federal government) and contribute to increases in onboards. Separations are personnel actions resulting in the loss of an employee from VA (i.e., transfers-out, quits, retirements, terminations or removals, death, and other separations).

⁴ Net increase in employees reflects 8,974 total gains and 5,826 total losses.

Full-time equivalents (FTEs)

Full-Time Equivalent refers to the total number of regular straight-time hours worked by employees divided by the number of compensable hours applicable to each fiscal year (regular method), or the total regular hours worked in a fiscal year (2,080 hours) divided by 26 biweekly pay periods (pay period method). OMB A-11 Circular § 85.5(c).

Onboard Employees

Onboards (i.e., the number of personnel encumbering positions) are the number of employees (i.e., headcount) onboard when the data are reported. Note that “onboards” differ from “FTE,” which is a budgetary term based on compensable hours as opposed to headcount; as VA hires some part-time employees (i.e., partial FTEs), onboard figures consistently exceed FTE figures. Onboard does not include intermittent staff, non-salaried health professional trainees, or other volunteers. Onboard counts include employees in both pay and non-pay status.

Time-To-Hire

Time-To-Hire represents the percentage of new hires for the Department hired within the 80 calendar-day time-to-hire targets of the OPM, disaggregated by Administration. Per OPM's new Mission Critical Occupation (MCO) Resource Chart guidance, all hires in USA Staffing are now included in the time-to-hire calculation, including New Hires that are simply onboarded in USA Staffing and are not associated with an announcement (i.e., non-competitive hiring actions).

Vacant FTE

Positions that do not have an employee in the position, measured by the total number of compensable hours associated with that position (with one FTE equaling 2,080 hours). Vacant FTE does not include positions where the incumbent is in a non-pay status. Vacant positions may be funded or unfunded. As referenced earlier in this executive summary, work is ongoing to put controls in place to enhance position management processes with better data integrity and gain fidelity in the reported positions, particularly vacant positions. This work will improve the data quality of manpower and funding data.

Applying for a position at VA

Section 505(b) MISSION Act Annual Report (June 2020) identifies the steps VA is taking to achieve full staffing capacity. VA is continuously recruiting committed professionals who are dedicated to serving our Nation's Veterans. Employment at VA provides a competitive salary and benefits package and a strong work/life balance. Above all else, the highest honor in working at VA is the opportunity to serve the brave men and women who have served our Nation. Additional information regarding careers at VA can be found at <https://www.vacareers.va.gov/>.