

VA MISSION Act of 2018: Section 505 – Personnel Transparency Quarter Ending June 30, 2021

Executive Summary

September 17, 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 action 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.¹ 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 or 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 June 30, 2021, VA had 402,473 onboard employees (includes full-time, part-time and seasonal employees), representing a total of 393,653 onboard FTEs.² VA estimates that as of June 30, 2021, there were almost 7,000 additional employees funded through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) that are excluded from the MISSION Act reports,³ and this quarterly report adds details on the numbers of employees hired using specific CARES Act funding. VA’s budget plans supported 395,932 FTEs and VA had funding for 2,279 vacant FTEs at the end of the 3rd quarter of FY 2021.⁴ Overall, the current FTE level represents a fill rate of 99.4% for the funded FTEs provided by Congress (not including CARES Act funding).

¹ The FY 2021 third quarter report excludes ~19,800 vacant positions that are undergoing a validation review.

² Department of Veterans Affairs, MISSION Act Section 505 Data. <https://www.va.gov/Employee/va-mission-act-section-505-data/>. Excludes Office of the Inspector General, Veteran Canteen Service (VCS), intermittent employees, residents, interns, fellows, students, trainees, non-pay status, fee-based employees, and COVID-19 positions/employees.

³ This report does not include the employees hired using the CARES Act funding as these funds are intended to meet a temporary demand for workload versus an ongoing capacity requirement.

⁴ Funded vacant FTEs are the difference between funded FTEs reflected in VA’s operating plans and the onboard FTEs as of the end of the day on June 30, 2021. VA plans to complete an analysis to determine the appropriate number of allowable HRSmart funded vacant FTEs above the operating plans to account for staff turnover.

During the 3rd quarter of FY 2021, VA had a net increase of 1,866 onboard employees, reflecting successful hiring, low turnover rates and additional funding for FTEs.⁵ As with the employee counts, these figures represent a point in time and may not align with the change in onboard employee counts. 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 9.6% annually for the past 5 years, VA has consistently hired between 40 to 50K new employees per year and continues to grow at a rate of 2 to 4% annually.

Last quarter, VA added additional details on time to hire for certain VHA employees to comply with the requirements of section 3008 of the Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315), which amended the quarterly reporting requirement regarding the duration of the hiring process to require data on the number and percentage of employees exceeding certain time to hire metrics (from validation of a hiring need (i.e., a validated vacancy) to an actual start date) and the average number of days new employees spend in each part of the hiring phase.

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. VA is continuing the position validation process and establishing 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/>.

⁵ Net new employees are determined by the difference between new employee accessions of 9,395 and 7,529 losses, representing a net increase of 1,866 employees.

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.⁶ Separations are personnel actions resulting in the loss of an employee from VA (i.e., transfers-out, resignations, retirements, terminations or removals, death and other separations).

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 counts do not include employee categories excluded from MISSION Act reports (intermittent staff, non-salaried health professional trainees, COVID-19, employees in a non-pay status or other volunteers).

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). In Q2 FY 2021, VA added additional data on time to hire to comply with requirements in Section 3008 of the Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-315).

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

⁶ Accessions and separations exclude COVID-19 and other MISSION Act exclusion criteria.

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 2021) 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/>.