

# Breaking Government

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CITIZEN SERVICES

## Private Hospitals To Gain Access to Vets' Medical Records

By JUDI HASSON  
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The Department of Veterans Affairs has reached the final stretch of what's been a long effort to employ technology that allows private hospitals access to veterans' medical records that can be used to evaluate health history and deliver better care.

The move is one of many within the VA as it strives to overhaul its image and provide the best care for America's veterans and protect the security of their records.

"It is a huge step. We expect to turn that on nationwide in 2012," VA CIO Roger Baker told Breaking Gov.

Baker said pilot projects for the Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) have been ongoing for more than a year, opening the door for private hospitals in 11 cities to gather VA medical information. The hospitals are located in San Diego, Indianapolis, Richmond, Va., Hampton, Va., Spokane, Wash., Moab, Utah, Asheville, N.C., Buffalo, N.Y., Charleston, S.C., Minneapolis and Puget Sound, Wash.

The things we do here today will affect veterans for the rest of their lives.” – Roger Baker

Next year, doctors at hospitals in those test cities and many others throughout the U.S. will be able to have the complete medical record of an admitted veteran through VistA, the VA’s electronic database of veteran records. The information will be available through the nationwide Health Information Network, a national network that is part of VLER. The hospital must have the veteran’s approval before accessing the records.

“This new technology will enhance our ability to continue providing veterans with high quality health care,” said VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki.

Art Wu, a champion of veterans’ issues who worked for the House Veterans Affairs Committee for 16 years, most recently as the deputy staff director, said the VA is taking the right steps in helping veterans.

“They certainly got the VA out of the inertia of the status quo. And they forced the DoD to be at the table,” Wu said.

The VA and the Defense Department, which operate the two largest healthcare systems in the country, are building a single, seamless electronic record arsenal. When veterans retire from the military, DoD will send their medical records to VistA.

The VA is the nation’s largest single payer system with 152 hospitals that see over 6 million patients a year. Combined with the DoD’s medical records, the two agencies are the custodians of between 15 and 20 million electronic patient records that can be used to evaluate the history of a veteran’s health problems and deliver better care.

Baker said the complete project will be operational and both agencies will be running “common software across the board” in the next few years.

The following capabilities are already under way:

- Some information is already being shared by DOD for the VA such as a patient’s prescriptions, lab results and images.
- The VA and DOD officially launched the Open Source Electronic Health Record Agent (OSEHRA) in September to help unify their electronic records.
- A tight cybersecurity system is being embedded in the network to make sure veterans’ medical records are always protected.
- Every veteran can choose how much medical information to make available on the network.

“The real focus is on the Virtual Lifetime Record and doing a stronger job of sharing information from DOD and the VA,” Baker said, adding that VA Secretary Shinseki has been the driving force behind VA’s IT transparency.

“The things we do here today will affect veterans for the rest of their lives. You think about the service these individuals rendered to their country, and you know exactly why you do this job,” he said.

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