

**PROMISING PRACTICES
FOR IMPROVING
RESEARCHER SATISFACTION:**

***LESSONS FROM
EIGHT VISNS***

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PROMISING PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING RESEARCHER SATISFACTION: LESSONS FROM EIGHT VISNS

HIGHLIGHTS

The FY2001 Network Performance Plans required each Network to analyze the results of the national research survey and to develop an action plan that addressed opportunities to improve researcher satisfaction. To support VA's priority of being an employer of choice, the Office of Research and Development (ORD) is interested in building on these Network efforts by sharing promising practices for improving researcher satisfaction across the system.

To this end, ORD asked the HSR&D Management Decision and Research Center (MDRC) to identify promising practices. Drawing from information provided in the Network plans and from the results of the ORD researcher satisfaction survey, MDRC staff identified eight VISNs with strong performance on one or more of three dimensions: satisfaction scores higher than the national average, score improvement since 1998, and an explicitly detailed action plan. The eight VISNs offered a variety of promising approaches to working with researchers. MDRC staff conducted telephone interviews with representatives of these VISNs to augment the information in the written plans. The results are presented in this report. While the report focuses on eight Networks, we know that there are other promising practices in use throughout the system. We hope that as this review circulates, others will add ideas and share their stories.

The report provides information about promising practices in two ways:

- **Network profiles: two examples**

Profiles of VISNs 3 and 4 are presented as examples of Networks that have undertaken a wide array of activities to support research. In these two Networks, VISN leaders are strong, visible supporters of research and have integrated strategies for promoting research. Both Networks had researcher satisfaction scores that were higher than the national average on two or more scales in 2001, and had improved their scores between 1998 and 2001.

- **Strategies for supporting research**

The key informants in the eight Networks described a wide variety of activities for supporting research. These activities can be clustered under 10 strategies. Specific activities undertaken under each strategy are outlined in the full report. The strategies are to:

1. *Express strong and clear interest at the Network Director and leadership levels.*
2. *Enhance research opportunities.*
3. *Sponsor ongoing research discussions and educational sessions across the Network.*
4. *Engage researchers in VISN decision making.*
5. *Facilitate local administrative support of research.*
6. *Use seed grants, incentives, and funding to help new and established investigators develop resources to facilitate success in the grant application process.*

7. *Collect information and use it to educate and inform the key players.*
8. *Recognize the researchers' contributions.*
9. *Systematically identify researcher satisfaction issues appropriate for attention.*
10. *Address issues related to IRB, ORCA, NCQA and other compliance issues.*

PROMISING PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING RESEARCHER SATISFACTION: LESSONS FROM EIGHT VISNS

BACKGROUND

The FY2001 Network Performance Plans included a performance measure on researcher satisfaction. Each Network was required to analyze the results of the national research survey and to develop an action plan that addressed opportunities to improve researcher satisfaction. The Office of Research and Development (ORD) is interested in building on these Network efforts to share promising practices for improving researcher satisfaction across the system to support VA's priority of being an employer of choice.

At the request of the VHA's Office of Research & Development, the MDRC reviewed the action plans for their adequacy and for best practices. In an earlier report, they summarized the findings about adequacy.

To enhance information about best practices, MDRC staff conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of eight VISNs about their action plans. The VISNs were selected on the basis of their strong performance and to offer a variety of approaches to working with researchers. Performance was measured on three dimensions: satisfaction scores higher than the national average, score improvement since 1998, and/or an explicitly detailed action plan.

While this report will summarize promising practices identified by these eight Networks, we know that there are other promising practices in use throughout the system. What we hope is that as this review circulates, others will add ideas and share their stories.

We wanted to better understand:

- why strategies were chosen
- what enhanced success and
- what barriers to improvement existed.

Although there were commonalities across these selected VISNs, specific activities varied.

This report, first, profiles two VISNs that emphasize VISN-level attention to research or have an integrated VISN strategy. Second, it provides examples across VISNs of action steps and promising practices they had used or planned to use to address researcher satisfaction. Last, it reviews concerns noted by respondents.

NETWORK PROFILES: TWO EXAMPLES

In both Networks 3 and 4, researcher satisfaction scores were higher than the national average and had improved between FY 1998 and FY2001. What stands out in these two examples is how strongly committed the Network Director is to research and how this commitment is implemented in the Network as demonstrated by both the staff's efforts and the structures put in place.

VISN 4: VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

In VISN 4, the Network Director owns the emphasis on researcher satisfaction. He makes research, academic activities and education prominent issues for discussion, even in the midst of budget cuts. Not only does the Network Director emphasize the importance of research; he also emphasizes the strong relationship between infrastructure, staff recruitment and patient care. For example, he made a commitment that VERA income from research will go back into infrastructure funding. By knowing that there will be financial resources available, plans can be developed to make infrastructure improvements that will support the research efforts. Clearly specified budgets are developed to support the two main arms of the research program (infrastructure and research). This came after a network-wide effort to explore a variety of methods to develop allocations in a way that made sense. In addition, the Network Director expects that this VISN's research program will meet a standard that is "second to none," that research will be conducted in a safe and reliable manner, and that success will be measured by using productivity and compliance measures. The researchers' credentials are expected to meet or exceed community standards yet make room for the less experienced researcher. New researchers are encouraged to apply for and use pilot funds to develop their expertise, knowledge and ability to succeed in grant writing and development.

The Network Director participates in "town meetings" at the individual medical centers several times a year. He meets directly with researchers to provide a forum for dialogue between the local and VISN levels. Discussions at these meetings focus on new and interesting information, reports about ongoing research efforts, compliance/IRB/NCQA/ORCA issues, and other issues as identified for further discussion. The Network Director also actively participates in important events, such as the site visits that are part of the grant application process.

Other key people and structures within the VISN reinforce the Network Director's stance in a variety of ways. For example, the VISN sponsored an ORCA-led Senior Executive Training Session for IRB staff, ACOS/Research, facility directors and assistant directors, and others to address the multiple issues raised by the research review process.

The VISN builds on its own centers of excellence and emphasizes organizing the separate research pieces into a more unified whole. The VISN uses the Competitive Pilot Project Fund (\$50,000 per person for up to 3 years for new investigators) to enhance beginning efforts. For example, to develop expertise, the VISN provided two seed grants to two sites to focus each site on development of the best model for a MIRECC. After evaluation, the more successful model was chosen, and the separate teams worked collaboratively to develop a MIRECC proposal on a VISN-wide basis using that model. Once the MIRECC grant was awarded, the VISN continued to give the new MIRECC seed money to support the momentum. This momentum has carried over, and this VISN now has Rehab and PADRECC programs, and an HSR&D Center of Excellence. Thus, out of a competitive process came collaboration, and with collaboration, a chance to use VISN expertise to develop other centers of excellence.

Strong VISN administrative support was also evident during the time when information on researcher satisfaction was collected. The VISN decided to use its own satisfaction survey with questions focused on issues the VISN considered important. One of the most highly regarded researchers took an active role in the survey process (i.e.

distribution, collating, reporting). The Network used the Gallup Q¹²™ Survey with all VISN 4 staff and added a question specifically relevant to researchers. The survey measures the extent to which employees are engaged in their work. One interesting finding noted by the key informant was that the higher the satisfaction the higher the return rate.

A variety of meetings were held at both the Network and local level and are described in the second half of this report. An example, though, of using a meeting to develop collaboration is the Research Roundtable meeting that addressed increasing productivity. Discussion focused on current ways to measure productivity and other alternatives. The idea was to identify typical measures, such as the amount of funded research, and to address situations in which the usual measures would not reflect work effort or where the research program is too limited to provide mentoring for new investigators. After discussion of options, a plan was made for the key staff to review these and other options and come back with a direction.

VISN 3: VA NY/NJ Veterans Healthcare Network

VISN 3 told a similar story. The Network Director wants research, academic activities and education to be prominent even within the context of budget constraints. He views research as a critical component of the VA mission because it has a very direct effect on improving the health of the veterans. The former CMO described a strong, collaborative and healthy relationship with the affiliates, which has led to improved satisfaction at the local level. To achieve balance, he emphasized that if the affiliates want something from VA facilities, then it is important that VA facilities should be an equal partner in this process and receive something as well. In addition, the budgeting process must address issues important to the missions of the academic affiliates ensuring, over the long run, the provision of quality care.

To carry out the Network Director's mission, VISN staff took an active role in enhancing collaboration and mentoring researchers. As in VISN 4, the Network Director participated in meetings with researchers and site visits for proposal reviews. The CMO had a very active role and described himself as the one who could get into the middle of development efforts as they were happening and provide assistance as needed. For example, the CMO took an active role in the development of the proposals for the GRECC and MIRECC. At times, he also took an active role in the research program's operation. Increased collaboration was a result.

VISN 3 took a variety of other action steps to support research. For example, it provided seed money to fund pilot studies that resulted in two REAP awards. Seed monies were also used to hire administrative assistants. The Executive Leadership Committee addressed topics of concern to researchers such as the VERA allocation process and ways to enhance academic-medical center collaborations. Another VISN-wide approach was the development of a Clinical Data Users Group allowing researchers to discuss research opportunities and questions that could make use of the administrative data available in VA databases.

Symposia and educational forums were developed focusing on the ethics of research, and the protection of human and animal subjects. Through these efforts, researchers became better acquainted with the expectations about the protection of human and animal subjects and more willing to participate in the research compliance processes.

The message to researchers was that it is good to have a review process that clearly lays out the expectations of how things should be uniformly done, and not just when there is an adverse event. This model also reinforces that research is a vital mission of VA. To support the compliance work effort, VISN 3 purchased computer software to facilitate the IRB review process and assist facilities in meeting the NCQA research compliance standards.

VISN leadership also encouraged a dialogue between researchers and Human Resources Management to facilitate collaborative problem solving about personnel issues. The staff also explored ways to more closely coordinate Information Resource Management hardware and software support for research services.

Recognition of work effort is important and there were a variety of actions taken or planned. Brochures, newsletters, web pages and the media are all part of the effort to publicize the VISN's successful research efforts. Target groups include veterans, the general public, key stakeholders, and funding sources. Also planned was the establishment of a Research Day or some other type of annual appreciation day when among other activities, awards would be given.

Recognition of work effort also includes addressing the issue of protected time. Though there is no specific network-wide strategy to address protected research time, there is a clear expectation that funded time should be honored. The CMO described trying to keep discussions about protected time as a collegial and collaborative effort to avoid the gaming that might otherwise occur. He noted that one of the local sites had developed plans specific to that facility.

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING RESEARCH

There were a variety of strategies and action steps identified by the VISNs. Some were very specific and others reflected a stance to take or an approach to be further developed over time. This section describes a number of strategies and the action steps that were identified. We looked for themes in the specifics of the action plans and grouped them into ten strategies. Some action plans were directly related to the findings in the Survey of Researchers. Others were based on findings of network-specific surveys of the researchers or other information gathering processes, such as staff planning days or strategic planning processes. The numbers at the end of statements reflect the VISNs that report use of this type of action step.

One approach is of particular interest across strategies. To develop and implement its action plan, VISN 1 identified three categories of action steps:

- no additional resources required (e.g., e-mail group focused on NCQA issues)
- minimal resources required (e.g., Network Director and CMO visit with researchers), and
- higher level of support needed and/or VISN initiative (e.g., commitment to share VISN dollars in conjunction with local facility request for equipment/infrastructure support).

1. Express strong and clear interest in research at Network Director and leadership levels.

In this strategy, the Network Director sets the direction with respect to the conduct of and regard for research within the VISN. A strongly supportive stance underlies all of the strategies identified in this report. The idea is that research is a core mission of VA and has been instrumental in improving the health of veterans. It is important, therefore, to ensure that the research program is of high quality and highly productive. Well-functioning collaborations with academic affiliates, among the researchers, and between research and other VA functional units are essential. Collaborative dialogue about issues such as the budget allocation process, infrastructure support, patient/animal safety, productivity standards, enhancement of the expertise within the VISN, and areas for growth and development were all topics of concern to the Network Directors who made research a priority. The Network Director's priorities can be communicated in a number of ways:

- Meet with the local staff to allow information sharing both about current research efforts, development initiatives, resource needs, compliance with NCQA/IRB/ORCA standards, barriers to success, educational needs and any other applicable issues. In one VISN, town meetings were held a few times a year at individual facilities; and in another VISN the Network Director and CMO plan to include the researchers in their scheduled twice a year meetings at the local facilities (1, 3, 4, 13).
- Participate in the site visits that are part of the proposal review process (3, 4).
- Demonstrate knowledge and interest in research to communicate the Network Director's emphasis on research. CMOs demonstrated their interest by being active participants in research efforts, such as QUERI or MIRECC, developing databases to answer questions relevant to researcher satisfaction, and finding funding for symposia, etc. (1, 3).
- Demonstrate active collaboration between the Network Director, Network leadership and the Research Product Line Director (13).
- Make a commitment to the proper allocation of VERA dollars and include plans to direct financial resources to infrastructure support, thus including research in the Network planning process (1, 3, 4). For example, as new research staff are recruited, space renovation becomes a priority in the strategic planning process. VISNs have also used seed grants in a planned way to enhance the research portfolio (3, 4).

2. Enhance research opportunities.

To have a strong research program, structural and process mechanisms must focus on creating and enhancing research opportunities. These mechanisms facilitate the development of centers of excellence, as well as productive collaboration both within and outside VA. To do this:

- Develop centers of excellence that address VA special programs and populations, such as the aging veterans (GRECC), veterans living in rural areas, persons with mental illness (MIRECC), people with Parkinson's Disease (PADRECC) and other illnesses requiring a disease management model. These centers may be started with seed monies and then become the structures upon which new efforts are built (3, 4, 12). Establishing VISN-wide priorities for research integration at an early stage facilitates this development process (4, 20).
- Develop and use a research service line focused on integrating research into the Network so that research efforts are vital and dynamic and address new

opportunities. Helpful steps within the service line include holding an annual retreat and using a process to develop a service line plan with actionable steps. Goals of this type of plan might include those related to productivity and performance, staff recruitment and retention, and staff development (7).

- Develop a Career Development Program and provide partial support through seed money as a way to recruit and retain both young and established investigators. For example, one Network encourages people who are not VA employees to apply for Career Development Awards. If the project is approved, the investigator is hired into a VA position (3, 4, 7).
- Recognize the benefits to come for someone doing work in a setting that is not a fully-developed research program. It educates them about the research mission of VA and about the processes involved in obtaining funding and carrying out a research project (4).
- Facilitate the close and positive working relationship between the local facilities and the university affiliates. With a seamless process and higher collaboration comes a win-win situation for all (3).
- Collaborate with people outside the VISN on research requests (7).
- Develop methods to publicize VA research. Stakeholders, funding sources, other VA and non-VA researchers, academic affiliates, other VA and VISN staff, the public and veterans can be informed about research efforts, capabilities and resources, publications, key findings, and new funding through e-mail, web pages, brochures, newsletters, and conferences (1, 3, 12.)

3. Sponsor ongoing research discussions and educational sessions across the Network.

Ongoing exchange of information is beneficial not only to raise levels of knowledge but also to create forums for communication and contribute to a sense of community. To do this:

- Hold regularly scheduled meetings/conference calls with the ACOS/Research staff to discuss research-related issues such as funding, accomplishments, peer reviewed research efforts, coop studies, compliance, staffing planning, the political process, the Network approach to issues, concerns, researcher satisfaction and best practices (1, 4, 10, 13).
- Develop work or user groups with a specific focus, such as a Clinical Data Users Group to encourage use of the administrative data available in Austin (3).
- Discuss recommendations and findings with researchers at a general meeting after reviewing the Deans/Affiliates meeting minutes (13).
- Provide educational and training resources through VISN-wide symposia (1, 3, 4).
- Conduct meetings with differing memberships. In addition to meeting just with VISN staff and ACOS/Research, a number of different people and positions can be included including the Research Coordinators, clinical chiefs, facility researchers, and affiliate representatives (1, 4, 10, 13). One VISN enlarged the Academic Advisory Committee from the Deans of the Medical School to include ACOS/Research and Education, researchers, and anybody expressing dissatisfaction about an issue (4).
- Identify researchers' concerns and look for ways to further understand and address them (1).
- Develop and/or use methods other than the VACO Survey of Researchers to assess researcher satisfaction (4, 7, 10).

- Focus the Executive Leadership Committee (ELC) on VERA research adjustments and methods to encourage research collaborations and alliances. For example, by having the Academic Affiliations Officer report on a regular basis about research related issues to the ELC, issues of research development and alliance building can be addressed at the highest levels of management (3).
- Hold a VISN business meeting by videoconference and develop cooperative efforts to address indirect costs allocations, space issues, and to develop renovation plans. This allows the VISN to respond to opportunities that arise, to involve smaller facilities in useful processes, and to identify areas needing assistance (20).
- Use an e-mail group to communicate about key issues. E-mail groups have discussed respective responsibilities of local, VISN and Central Office management structures as well as the findings of formal and informal efforts to assess researcher satisfaction. Outcomes include an increased comfort level among the researchers and active encouragement to pursue more collaborative work (1, 10, 12).

4. Engage researchers in VISN decision making.

By using the skills of people in the local facility and Network, progress can be made towards addressing Network goals. Key informants identified several approaches:

- Because the VISN 7 Research Service Line Administrative Officer has experience in the research area and is well regarded, he represents the VISN on task groups, is a member of the ORCA training and education module, and is beta testing the VERA budget process (7).
- Engage researchers in a dialogue about measures of productivity, and use this information to develop appropriate measures (4).
- Work with the researchers and sites to develop and implement initiatives consistent with the Network's mission (3).

5. Facilitate local administrative support for research.

Research administration is a local function, but VISN initiatives can support the local efforts in a number of ways. Among them are to:

- Provide financial support to a facility so an ACOS/Research can be hired and put in place to encourage research program development (20).
- Ensure that the ACOS/Research, the principal leaders of the accreditation and human/animal/biohazards safety initiatives; and facility directors and service chiefs, the principal advocates for infrastructure improvements, work closely (1).
- Support protected time for research. This is a concern of researchers, administrators and affiliate representatives (1, 3, 7, 10). Though often seen as a local issue, some VISNs communicated a clear expectation to the facilities that funded time should be honored.
 - In one there was a VISN-wide mandate to assign protected time to IRB committee chair persons and members (1);
 - In another, although the Network leadership did not issue mandates and looked to collaboration as a tool to address this issue, some local facilities focused on developing a plan (3);
 - Another VISN sought input on how to address protected time from the Research Council and invited researchers to participate in the Strategic Planning process (10).
- Develop space renovation options and renovate as funding is available (1, 3, 20).

- Develop strategies to streamline the hiring process. VISN 7 plans to develop an open registry out of OPM approved Atlanta Delegated Examining Unit for GS 5-9 biological lab technicians and GS 5,7,9 Research Health Scientists Specialists (7).
- Negotiate with the business office to get better financial support for lab staffing (7).
- Encourage collaboration between research and Human Resources for joint problem solving on issues unique to the research setting (3).
- Explore mechanisms to more closely coordinate IRM hardware and software support for research services (3).
- Address the concerns about the large amount of paperwork. Several action steps were identified including:
 - identifying the source of paperwork expectations (10),
 - enforcing the importance of specifically identifying the need for it (13),
 - reducing VISN contribution to the demands (10), and
 - using a computer-based system of data collection/retention and/or reporting (13).
- Address the lack of available clerical support. Networks plan to review of areas of need, current availability, and possible funding from VISN and REAP resources, as well as from local not-for-profit research corporations (10, 13).
- Increase Internet access with use of REAP funding (10).

6. Use seed grants/incentives/funding to help new and established investigators develop resources to facilitate success in the grant application process.

By providing support to both new and experienced researchers, Networks can develop the organizational structures, knowledge and other resources needed to be successful developing a successful research program.

- Use the Competitive Pilot Project Fund to fund new investigators and to enhance the momentum in sites that have already developed an ongoing research program. By providing funding at \$50,000 per year for up to three years, a Network can establish a base of knowledge, develop skilled researchers, and identify successful research program models to use in comprehensive research funding applications. This effort can be locally based or can be used as a model to develop Network-wide programs. The VISN 4 example describes a process using competition and collaboration to develop a Network-wide MIRECC application. After the funding had been approved, seed monies have continued to be given to the program to enhance the current strengths in a planned way (4).
- Use seed money to hire assistants or use it for a variety of efforts leading, in some cases, to the successful awards of REAPs (3, 10, 12).

7. Collect information and use it to educate and inform the key players.

Some key informants reported many requests for information and data. Others felt it was important to know about the status of research within the VISN. They identified a number of techniques:

- Develop an inventory of researchers, funded projects, and available resources, including those related to the infrastructure. This allows for the assessment of strengths and deficiencies (1, 7, 12). This information can be used to:
 - enhance communication and collaboration among researchers,
 - identify priorities for action,
 - measure a Network's standing nationally on level of research funding,

- assess the distribution of research within service lines leading to the identification of goals and the ability to measure the future impact of care lines on the research mission. This allows for assessment of the research dollars within a service line and can show gaps and opportunities among the service lines.
- Hire an informatics manager (7).
- Use the data to assist budget development. A number of models have been used, some more successfully than others. One approach has the local facility directors review quarterly reports of CDR information on research expenditures with the ACOS/Research followed by a quarterly report to the VISN (12). Another Network developed a “mythical database” using information from PROMISE and other sources to identify income coming from research efforts (4).

8. Recognize the researchers’ contributions.

There are a number of ways to recognize the work of the researchers within the local facility and the VISN, and their efforts associated with the affiliated university. Using multiple sources of information including the researchers’ own reports of current work and accomplishments, several options are possible:

- Develop a Research Day or other annual appreciation ceremony in which awards may be given (3, 10).
- Work with the local facility and/or VISN Public Affairs Offices to issue a newsletter on a regular basis (e.g. quarterly) (10).
- Develop a standardized Power Point presentation outlining research service line accomplishments to use for marketing efforts with stakeholders (7).
- Allow researchers to attend affiliated university functions (13).
- Work with the Research Council to develop other recognition mechanisms (10, 13).

9. Systematically identify researcher satisfaction issues appropriate for attention.

In addition to using the results of the ORD researcher satisfaction survey, some VISNs conducted their own surveys.

- Develop your own version of the survey to clarify issues of particular interest in your VISN. Some VISNs used the information from these surveys in their own planning process with ACOS/Research, Administrative Officers, service line site directors, clinical operations managers, and other staff from each facility (7, 10).
- Use the Gallup Q¹²TM Survey with all VISN employees to measure the extent to which employees are engaged in their work. VISN 4 added one item specific to researchers (4).

10. Address issues related to IRB/NCQA/ORCA and other compliance issues.

There are new expectations in this area, and for some, a higher workload. Some Networks emphasized that research is a vital mission of VA, and that some of the best developments in medicine have come from VA, so the patients have a right to a research review process that is accredited and ethical. Although it is the facility director’s personal responsibility to ensure patient protection, it is necessary to educate staff about the ethics of research and to establish a culture that says that the review process is good. This type of process identifies expectations on a day-to-day basis, not just when there is an adverse event (1, 3, 7). Action plans identified a number of steps to address human subjects protection and research ethics:

- Provide education (1, 3, 7).

- Include the Research Compliance Officer as a member of the quality management structure to ensure that he or she is seen as providing assistance to the process (1). In one Network, this experienced officer assisted the medical centers to build the structures, develop standard operating procedures and manage the process. At first, she was sent out to the facilities; now her assistance is sought. She has developed educational materials and is part of PRIMER. Finally, she is one of the main liaisons to the IRB (7).
- Identify systematic compliance processes that can enhance operational efficiency (12).
- Provide personnel and administrative support to assist in the compliance process (12).
- Purchase software to facilitate the IRB review process and to assist facilities in meeting NCQA research compliance standards (3).
- Work with ORCA to establish a VISN-wide IRB to facilitate full participation in research (20).
- Indicate that compliance is a high priority by participating in the beta testing of a NCQA evaluation of one of the Network facilities. Results of this evaluation were to be shared with other facilities to allow for quality improvement and provide an opportunity for the facilities to have input into the design of the NCQA evaluation process (7).

CONCERNS

Throughout the telephone conversations, some concerns and barriers to successful implementation of action plans were noted. The respondents said these concerns should be considered whenever issues related to researcher satisfaction were addressed.

- Some Networks reported difficulty establishing new centers of excellence. It is difficult to recruit the experienced researchers one needs for the core group to start.
- Despite the intentions of the VISN representatives, collaboration between local and VISN leadership around the issue of protected time does not happen as often as one would wish. One reason is that the researchers see themselves in competition with each other and seek to protect their own situations. Some noted that the current budget constraints put stress on research programs.
- Communications between the VISN and the local facilities can be difficult because, as some described, investigators want to focus on their research, to work closely with affiliates, and to have few requirements for sharing information with the network office. They value VISN resources such as money that allow them the time to pursue their research efforts; thus communication flows more freely around these issues.
- Another communication and collaboration concern is that the addition of service line directors to the Academic Council raises the issue of including people who are neither physicians nor in academic positions.
- There was a suggestion that it would be useful if VACO could display an attitude that reinforces collaboration and sublimates self-interest for a greater goal.
- There was also a request for VACO education on the Merit Review award process, compliance programs and how to develop a not-for-profit institute.
- The usefulness of a centralized process to develop the agreement between VA and affiliates was questioned. It was suggested that the process start at the local level and work its way up. Local facilities want to manage the affiliates themselves, while

acknowledging that the politics among the local affiliates often impact research and education efforts within VA.

- Some did not know the source of paperwork overload and, therefore, had no sense of how to address this problem.

Acknowledgements

In preparing this report, we reviewed the Action Plans developed by each of the 22 VISNs. These were very helpful in identifying the major areas of concern and pathways to addressing them. We used these plans to identify the eight Networks from which we sought additional details in telephone interviews. The key informants are identified below. We wish to acknowledge their willingness to participate, and the openness with which they shared information. They expressed interest in hearing about what others are doing in other parts of the country and looked forward to their perceptions being passed on to both researchers and key leaders. Each expressed appreciation for being able to participate in the discussion. We also want to thank Thomas Deschaine in our MDRC office for assisting all of us in setting up the telephone appointments and to Carol Girard for editing advice.

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