ABOUT CAREGIVERS

• Increasingly, America is becoming a nation of caregivers. According to a 2015 report from AARP, an estimated 43.5 million adults in the United States provided unpaid care to an adult or a child in the prior 12 months.

• Whether supervising a spouse to help keep him or her from wandering, assisting with activities of daily living, helping to develop and implement treatment plans, or managing a loved one's behavioral symptoms, caregivers face multiple demands on their time and emotional and physical energy, and as a result may be at risk for becoming anxious, depressed, or susceptible to chronic illness themselves.

• In 2010, legislation authorized VA to establish a wide range of new services to support certain caregivers of eligible Veterans who served after Sept. 11, 2001. These caregivers are now entitled to access to a toll-free caregiver support line (1-855-260-3274), expanded education and training on caring for Veterans at home, and other support services such as counseling and support groups.

• VA facilities also offer programs including in-home care; specialized education and training; respite care; equipment, home, and automobile modification; and financial assistance for eligible Veterans. Every VA medical center has a caregiver support coordinator to help link up caregivers and Veterans with available VA and non-VA support resources.

VA RESEARCH ON CAREGIVERS: OVERVIEW

• VA experts are developing and refining questionnaires and survey tools, as well as cross-cutting strategies that can be used to implement and test programs across a wide variety of caregiving situations.

• Several VA studies are looking at the impact of caregiver education and stress-reduction programs on the health and wellness of both the Veteran and the caregiver. Other studies are focusing on both the short- and long-term needs of caregivers, as many of these individuals will be providing care for years or even decades.

• VA investigators are continuing to improve their understanding of the care caregivers provide and the support they need. They also are learning how caregiving has affected the caregiver, the Veteran receiving care, and the Veteran’s entire family.

SELECTED MILESTONES AND MAJOR EVENTS

2007 – Introduced the Resources for Enhancing Alzheimer’s Caregiver Health (REACH VA) program to reduce stress on caregivers for Veterans with Alzheimer’s disease

2009 – Developed the VA Family Care map, to ensure family members are fully involved in the care of Veterans with polytrauma

2010 – Completed VA’s Family and Caregiver Experience (FACES) study, which provided significant information on who provides care to seriously injured Veterans, what kinds of services and support they provide, and what help they need

2013 – Determined that in families using a VA-developed home safety toolkit, there was less caregiver strain, better home safety, and fewer accidents and risky behaviors among those with Alzheimer’s

2015 – Found that the blame and anger associated with the grief of caring for a loved one with a traumatic brain injury (TBI) may be related to inflammation and certain chronic diseases including heart disease, cancer, and diabetes

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VA experts are developing and evaluating programs and interventions across a wide range of caregiving situations.