

This Week at VA

Episode # 19

Dr. Dave Shulkin – Secretary of Veterans Affairs

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/35431/david-shulkin-secretary-va/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:] PSA:

Man 1: The VA has made it extremely easy to access information, to get out there and find benefits that are there for you.

Woman: Veterans might be eligible for things that they have no idea they are eligible for, no matter what age you are.

Man 2: That's your benefit. That's what you've earned. Take advantage of it.

Man 3: And the only reason I am sitting here today talking to anybody is because of the VA.

Man 4: Explore the many ways VA benefits can help you purchase a home, earn a degree, advance your career, and so much more. Learn about VA benefits you may be eligible for. Visit [explore.va.gov](https://www.explore.va.gov) [link to the VA website] today.

[00:00:36] Music

[00:00:47] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Timothy Lawson (TL): Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of *This Week at VA*. I am your host, Timothy Lawson. If this is your first time listening, after the show I highly recommend going back and listening to some of our previous episodes. Our most popular guests, to date, have been Kayla Williams, Blayne Smith, and John Lee Dumas so I suggest starting with those. Today is Friday, February 24. I want to take a moment to mention a digital town hall that Secretary Shulkin will be conducting later today, at 2:45pm, eastern standard time, on YouTube Live. For more information, visit [blogs.va.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov) [link to the VA blog page] where you can find the story explaining more about the event and how to submit questions for Dr. Shulkin to answer. Are you an active duty service member, Veteran, or military spouse pursuing your higher

education? The Tillman Scholar's Program unites the best talent and leadership in the military community to make a significant impact in the field of medicine, law, business, policy, technology, education, and the arts. The application to become a 2017 Tillman Scholar opened at the beginning of the month and will close soon, at 11:59 PST on March 1st. It's not far away. So visit Pattillmanfoundation.org/apply [link to Tillman Scholar Program website] to submit your application or email scholarships@pattillmanfoundation.org with any further questions. Today's interview is with our new Secretary, Dr. David Shulkin. My colleague, Melissa Hines sat down with Dr. Shulkin last week, for his first exclusive interview as Secretary. The video of the interview will be available on *The American Veteran* and on our YouTube page, shortly. Secretary Shulkin talks about taking the position, his commitment to Veterans, and continuing to improve care for Veterans. Enjoy.

[00:02:37] Music

[00:02:41] INTERVIEW

Melissa Hines (MH): Dr. Shulkin, thank you for sitting down and speaking with me today and congratulations on your confirmation. Um, let's just dive into the questions we have for you today: Why did you take this job?

David Shulkin (DS): Well, I like to think I'm not different than any other American. Um, everyone that I know feels strongly about making sure that our Veterans get the very best services that they deserve. And when I was asked by the President whether I'd be willing to step up and to help, I didn't hesitate. Absolutely. Anything that I could do be part of helping make sure that our Veterans get these services, I wanted to be part of. I know health care, and I've been in the service business, both as a physician and also as an executive – as a manager, and so being able to put in systems and be able to help people...that's what really drives me, that's what my passion is.

MH: Why is the Veteran community so important to you? What connects you to them, and what motivates you to serve them?

DS: I think that why the Veteran community is so important to me is for several reasons. First of all, I feel very connected to the Veteran community. I was born into their army. My dad was an Army officer and that was a part of my life. Uh, service has always been important to my

family and to me. My grandfathers, who both were Veterans...uh, my paternal grandfather was the first pharmacist at the Madison, Wisconsin, VA, and we would sit around the table and hear stories about the wonderful people that he had the chance to serve. So that was important. When I was going through medical school, the VA hospitals were critical. I trained in three different hospitals, and the people that I met there—the Veterans that I had the chance to take care of—were – uh, such wonderful people who had given so much. So, this has always been a very, very important – uh, piece of my history. And as an American, feeling so grateful to those who have served us and have really created the freedoms that we have – um, when you put both of those together, your personal history and your feeling as a citizen, this just becomes so important.

MH: How to do empathize with Veterans to best understand their needs, first as a caregiver and then now as the head of this agency?

DS: Now that I'm secretary— uh, I had been undersecretary for the past 18 months, so that was really a great opportunity for me to get to know the Veteran community; and I'm so grateful as undersecretary that so many members of the Veteran community reached out to me and really allowed me to understand what they're needs were and what was important to them. So, I feel like I got the best training by really listening and being part of that community. Um, and so now moving forward, I'm gonna to rely upon those same people and groups that have counselled me to actually step up and make sure that I am being responsive to the community and that we're designing a system that truly is Veteran-centric.

MH: In your confirmation hearing, you spoke about your commitment to VA's value in the medical community. Please articulate again what you feel the VA has to offer to Veterans that can't be matched in the private sector.

DS: Yeah. Well – um, I'd spent my career, about 25 years, being in the private sector, both as a physician and also running some of the larger health systems in the country. And so, when I came to VA, I was actually surprised at how different care in the private sector was from VA care. And the real difference was the comprehensive nature of the services that we offer in the VA that you don't normally find in the private sector. And so when you work in healthcare in the private sector, you're generally focusing on the physical issues of a patient: where they hurt, how to get them better, get them through maybe an acute or – illness

or manage a chronic condition; but in the VA system, it actually is much more than that. It's treating the physical component, but also the social component, the psychological component, the economic component, and integrating all of that. So if a Veteran comes and they don't have a place to live—in other words, they're homeless—we don't just worry about getting their medical condition better, but we recognize if you don't have a home you're not likely to be able to have medications sent any place, and follow up; you're not able to feel comfortable and have psychological safety at night. And so, we provide, and we find you a home. And I think that this sort of holistic approach to well-being is much broader than what you find in the private sector.

MH: What are some of the biggest challenges that face VA as you take on this position, and how do you plan to address them?

DS: Well, I think some of our challenges result directly from our crisis that happened in April 2014, which was really a crisis along many fronts. Uh, but the end result was, was that we lost the trust of the people that we serve, and that truly is a crisis. Any company, any organization, government that loses the trust of those that they're serving really has to fundamentally rebuild itself, and I think that's where we are. It's much easier to lose trust than to build trust and so it's taking us a while...although I believe that we are making important progress in regaining that trust of the Veteran community. In part, when you overlie that issue of our crisis with the great demand on VA services...these are really our challenges. Many, many people—many Veterans—want to use the VA, and we've been challenged on both the benefit side and the health care side to be able to accommodate the numbers of people who want to use us and to give 'em the type experience and quality of service that they deserve. So, it's really along dual front: it's making sure that we have the capacity to be able to do the job that we know that we need to do; and secondly, to continue to build upon that confidence that they have that we're really here for them and that we have their backs.

MH: Your time as undersecretary for health and as a health care provider will clearly help you in continuing the transformation of VA. What do you anticipate will be your initial focus when it comes to VA's mission as it relates to providing benefits, compensation, and services to Veterans, their families, and their survivors?

DS: Well, I think that overall we want Veterans to see us as a single VA and not as separate administrations in cemetery benefits and health. So, I

think we're trying to create a singular experience for Veterans where they feel like we understand them, we're here for them, and we're responsive to their needs. When it comes to benefits in particular, I think that we have to make the process easier. It's still is too burdensome, too complex, and people feel like it's a system that they're fighting rather than a system that's supporting them, and we need to make the decisions quicker. Part of that is, is that we need to have some legislative relief and we're hoping to – uh, soon be able to pass a appeals legislation that would modernize the process; but part of it is, we need to continue to look internally to find ways that we can do this better. I think our cemeteries actually show us a way forward. This is a part of the organization that most people don't recognize, rates number one in satisfaction, and that really means satisfaction to the families in terms of giving their loved ones the respect and the service that they know that they deserve. And I think they are leading the way in showing us that this can be done within VA. And, of course health, which is so important, has the same challenges. But I know that we can meet the needs, and that we can do better and that we will continue to do better because this is so important for us and for the country.

MH: What do you think about the current public narrative of VA. Do you wish to see a shift from spotlighting VA shortcomings to celebrating its successes?

DS: Yeah, I think that it's time to stop beating us up, and I think that it's really gotten to be an old story. I'm disappointed that – um, there seems to be an obsession with finding our failings. We are a large organization. We deal with serious problems day in and day out. There are always going to be difficult circumstances and failings when you have such a large organization dealing with such complex problems. And, frankly, when we make the s – mistakes, we deserve to be held accountable. And I'm not looking to hide our mistakes, but this constant berating about that VA is filled with – uh, you know, unethical people and people that are doing things that they shouldn't do is really painting a picture that, frankly, is a disservice to the hundreds-of-thousands of our employees who come to work because they believe and care and have passion for serving Veterans. And it's a disservice to our Veterans because it breaks down their confidence in the system. And I worry that there are people who need help who don't come to us because they hear this narrative in the community. So, I'm looking for a fair and accurate balance. Uh, and I'm really – uh, believe that it's time that we stop the constant berating on VA by public officials, by the media, and everybody else, and that we join together – uh, with a singular commitment to making this a better organization.

MH: You were confirmed by the U.S. Senate 100-0. What does that mean for the Veteran community?

DS: Well, I think it's a really important message that we heard; and what it says is, is that when it comes to Veterans, there aren't Republicans and there aren't Democrats—that we're talking about Americans who have all put their life on the – on the line for this country. And what that vote says to me is, is that the country understands that when it comes to Veterans, we're going to stick together, and this is an issue that unites us. And we may not see many issues where everybody agrees, but this is one. And I see it as a mandate: a mandate for us to do what it takes to make sure that we're providing them with the very best service and that everyone is going to stand behind us, from the President, the Congress, and the American people; and I think it's a great message for us.

MH: As undersecretary for health, you were seeing patients in the VA healthcare system. Is this something you plan to continue as secretary of VA?

DS: I do. I think it's important for me, to make sure that I stay connected with the type of services that we deliver, and I get tremendous value from being able to actually take care of Veterans and hear from them and work with staff and see the basic environment that we're all trying to build and to improve...and also see when there are deficiencies. I'll be heading up – uh, later today actually, to spend time on Presidents Day, when I round with our doctors and nurses taking care of patients in our hospital. I think that's an important part, for me, of making sure that I'm contributing back and for me to make sure that I'm grounded in what's important to do for us to provide the very best care to our Veterans.

MH: What are some of the sentiments that the Veterans feel when they see you treating them—do they even know who you are?

DS: Well no, they don't know who I am. Uh, you know, call it “undercover boss”. I'm just a doctor. I'm there to help Veterans, and -um, I don't want anybody to – uh, view me any differently than one more person who's there to serve them.

MH: Is there anything else that you want to say to the Veteran community?

DS: Well, I do want to share that -um, I am here because of the Pres – the President’s commitment to making sure that we actually do better than what we’re doing. So, I am here to make sure that the changes that need to happen, even if they are tough changes and are going to be – uh, very difficult decisions to make, are going to be made. That together, we’re gonna get – uh, to make this system a system that once again, all of us are proud of: the people who work in VA, the Veterans who get there care in VA, and the American public because we cannot settle for any less

MH: Dr. Shulkin, thank you so much again for joining us, and taking the time to speak with our Veterans

DS: Thank you. It was a pleasure to be here.

[00:15:42] Music

[00:15:47] PSA:

Man 1: I served in Vietnam.

Man 2: I served in World War II.

Woman: I served in Afghanistan.

Man 1: And VA serves us all.

Man 2: No matter when you served...

Woman: No matter if you saw combat or not...

Man 3: There are benefits for Veterans of every generation.

Woman: See what VA can do for you.

Man 4: To see what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov. That’s www.va.gov [link to the VA website].

[00:16:13] Music

[00:16:18] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

TL:

If you'd like to follow Secretary Shulkin in his endeavors, you can find him on Twitter @secshulkin [Link to the Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/secshulkin?lang=en>], that's s-e-c [spelling out] Shulkin. Be sure to check in at blogs.va.gov as well, where we will be covering the Secretary's progress and leadership. Today's Veteran of the Day is Army Veteran Sharon Vargas. Sharon served from 1972 to 1992, and she was one of the first female recruiters after the integration of WAC into the Army. Thank you for your service, Sharon. To see Sharon's full write up and to learn how to nominate your own Veteran of the Day, visit blogs.va.gov. That wraps up Episode 19. I want to thank Secretary Shulkin for collaborating with our team and addressing the Veteran community and I want to thank you, our audience, for taking the time to listen. There are a lot of options out there for entertainment, so I appreciate you taking the time to listen to these important interviews. Be sure to follow us on Twitter @deptvetaffairs, [Link to the VA's Twitter page: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor] for more stories from our community. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:17:15] Music Out

(Text Transcript Ends)