

# VA boss says number of homeless vets declining

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By DAN ELLIOTT Associated Press

DENVER—The number of homeless veterans is declining as the Veterans Affairs Department works to eliminate the problem by 2015, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki said Tuesday.

Shinseki visited a VA Community Resource and Referral Center for homeless veterans in Denver, shaking hands and listening as one man offered advice on how to help.

"They're in some of the toughest straits any of us will ever see," Shinseki said.

A 2011 survey found about 67,000 homeless veterans on a single night, down by 12 percent from the previous year, the VA said. Officials said 2012 numbers will not be available until later this year.

Numbers of homeless veterans in the Denver area were not immediately available.

The Denver homeless veterans center, which opened last spring, is one of 17 nationwide. They help veterans and their families find community agencies with services they need.

The VA previously announced \$3.1 million in grants this year for Colorado programs that help homeless veterans. The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless will get \$1.2 million to shelter homeless veterans in Denver. Volunteers of America in Colorado will receive \$977,000, and Denver Options about \$933,000.

The VA has been under pressure from Congress to improve services to veterans who need permanent homes or mental health care.

In May, an inspector general's report said nearly half of veterans who seek mental health care for the first time waited about 50 days before receiving a full evaluation. The VA had been saying 95 percent got a full evaluation within 14 days.

Just before the inspector general's report was released, the department said it would hire 1,900 more mental health care workers. Shinseki said Tuesday he expects to meet that goal by the middle of next year but declined to say how many of the new positions had been filled.

Shinseki's visit to Denver coincides with intense campaigning in Colorado, considered a swing state in the 2012 presidential race.

He also came to Colorado in March, attending a winter sports clinic for veterans and meeting with staff and patients at the Denver VA Medical Center.

The VA's homelessness program includes partnering with local homelessness groups, finding jobs, housing and education for homeless vets and providing medical or psychiatric care.