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Bethesda research office tackles Vietnam vets' PTSD

Federal contracts fuel growth at Abt Associates

by Kevin James Shay | Staff Writer

A research and consulting company with a large presence in Bethesda has landed multimillion-dollar contracts to study the long-term health effects of military service on Vietnam veterans, market U.S. government substance abuse and mental health programs, and evaluate federal training and employment programs.

A three-year, \$6.6 million contract with the Department of Veterans Affairs will pick up where the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study left off in 1986 and 1987, said William Schlenger, a principal scientist at Abt Associates of Cambridge, Mass., and director of the new study. Schlenger also worked on that earlier study when he was with Research Triangle Institute in North Carolina, which has a Rockville office.

The new survey, called the National Vietnam Veterans Longitudinal Study, will delve into questions such as whether combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder relates to chronic physical illnesses, and will have a critical bearing on veterans fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan along with those who served in Vietnam, he said.

"It will provide empirical evidence needed to answer the many questions we have about the course and impact of PTSD and other combat-related mental disorders, and also help [the federal government] better plan health services for these service members over the short- and long-term," Schlenger said.

The 1980s study surveyed 2,348 Vietnam veterans and concluded that almost two decades after the war, 15.2 percent of male veterans and 8.6 percent of female veterans still had PTSD. "For these half-million veterans, the war had not ended," Schlenger said.

Abt researchers will try to track down and interview as many of those veterans as possible. That shouldn't be too difficult for most, although a certain percentage have died, Schlenger said.

"Most everyone has a credit card, so we can track down addresses that way," he said. The Internet and e-mail are other tools not available for the 1980s study.

Researchers also will check the National Death Index to make sure they don't try to contact someone who has died, Schlenger said.

"We expect from 400 to 600 to have passed away," he said. "That still leaves a substantial number of those living."

Some employees in the Bethesda office, as well as in the Massachusetts and North Carolina offices, will work on the study. Schlenger, who is in Abt's North Carolina office, is joined by co-leaders Richard Kulka, a group vice president for survey research at Abt, and Charles Marmar, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at New York University.

Abt's Bethesda office opened in 1968 and has grown from about a dozen employees to some 350, said Mary F. Maguire, senior vice president for strategic communications.

Founded in Cambridge in 1965, Abt has more than 1,700 employees worldwide and has added more than 300 workers in the past year, Maguire said. Revenues in fiscal 2010 grew by 14 percent from 2009, to \$302 million. The company has an employee stock ownership plan.

Other contracts

Abt also recently landed two five-year contracts from the Department of Health and Human Services, worth a total of \$29.4 million. The company will provide marketing and communications support for the Center for Substance Abuse and Prevention's efforts to prevent abuse of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, and for the department's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Such marketing efforts help reduce substance abuse, Maguire said.

"Looking at tobacco as part of the substance abuse problem, we've certainly seen the impact of sustained communications campaigns in reducing the number of smokers," she said.

In addition, Abt is working on a five-year, \$8 million contract from the Department of Labor to study the effectiveness of two training and employment programs, Pathways out of Poverty and the High Growth Job Training initiative. Those programs target high-growth industries, such as health care and clean energy.

Abt recently completed a job training and creation project in Pakistan with Care International funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. The project trained more than 6,800 people, placing many of them in professional positions in the private sector.

Last year, the Department of Housing and Urban Development released an interim report based on research by Abt that concluded that most of the initial increase in foreclosures was driven by subprime loans.

Abt also is among the research firms evaluating the effectiveness of a Department of Agriculture program that recently awarded demonstration grants to Connecticut, Missouri and other states to test new ways to provide nutrition assistance and access to healthful foods to low-income children during the summer months, when children aren't in school.

Numerous officials praise Abt's work.

"The lessons we learn ... will help shape the nutrition assistance safety net for the future, and have the potential to be a welcome additional resource for families worried about feeding their children," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement.

Abt does not focus exclusively on the public sector. Corporate clients have included Bethesda hotelier Marriott International, according to Abt's website.

A Marriott spokeswoman said she was checking on what Abt did for the company. The work that Abt did for Marriott was performed by a division that was sold years ago, and the company did not have any other information about that relationship, Abt officials said Wednesday.

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