



Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

19 October 2015

[1. Access to Benefits/Care](#)

1.1 - The Washington Times (AP): [VA to hold town hall meeting in White River Junction](#) (18 October, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Officials from Vermont's White River Junction Veterans Affairs Medical Center are going to be co-hosting a town hall meeting to get feedback from veterans, family members and other beneficiaries on how to improve operations.

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1.3 - TribLive (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review): [Top Veterans Affairs official to take over Butler Healthcare](#) (18 October, Jodi Weigand, 1.7M online visitors/mo; Warrendale, PA)

A top Veterans Affairs official who served at VA Pittsburgh during the deadly Legionnaires' outbreak will take over VA Butler Healthcare next month. David Cord served as deputy director of the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System from 2012 to 2014, until he was promoted last October to director of the Erie VA Medical Center.

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1.4 - Las Vegas Review-Journal: [Editorial: Huge construction cost overruns show need to privatize VA](#) (18 October, 857k online visitors/mo; Las Vegas, NV)

There is perhaps no bigger example of federal bloat and incompetence than the Department of Veterans Affairs. In case you're keeping score at home, the VA has neglected our veterans through routine delays in processing disability and compensation claims, harmed them by making them wait months for appointments for routine care, and then covered up excessive wait times.

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1.5 - Military Times: [Vets dismayed by VA payback rules on separation pay](#) (18 October, Andrew Tilghman, 540k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

About 17,000 troops each year have been granted involuntary separation pay in 2014 and 2015, mostly soldiers and Marines, according to Pentagon data. Thousands of such vets likely face recoupment of separation pay, although the VA was unable to say precisely how many veterans currently have benefits blocked for this reason.

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1.6 - Tucson News Now (KOLD-TV/CBS-13, Video): [Nam Jam connects veterans of all ages in Tucson](#) (19 October, Craig Reck, 461k online visitors/mo; Tucson, AZ)

Saturday's rain storm couldn't stop the 28th annual Nam Jam in Tucson. The event, hosted by Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 106, gathers organizations and service groups for veterans into one location and adds a few live bands for entertainment.

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1.7 - South Bend Tribune: [Serving those who served our country](#) (18 October, Stan Maddux, 389k online visitors/mo; South Bend, IN)

Pat Short has a big heart for disabled veterans, and her actions prove it. She gets up before sunrise once or twice a week and heads from her home near Hudson Lake to South Bend then drives all over northern Indiana, taking the former servicemen and women to medical appointments.

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1.8 - Wicked Local – Bedford: [Clinical psychologist to speak at Veterans Breakfast](#) (18 October, 336k online visitors/mo; Westford, MA)

Sandra Diaz, a clinical psychologist at the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial VA Medical Center in Bedford, will speak about hope and compassion as the keynote speaker at the fourth annual Veterans Breakfast on Oct. 31 at Keilty Hall.

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1.9 - BizTimes: [Digital avatar 'Sophie' brings intelligence, compassion to interactions](#) (19 October, Hilary Dickinson, 180k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

Sophie is an avatar created by Mequon-based Intelligent Digital Avatars Inc., better known as iDAvatars. The avatars' function is to observe, perform assessments and record interactions in personal health records, but founder and chief executive officer Norrie Daroga wants the avatars to be more than that.

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1.10 - Longview News-Journal: [Letters on Veterans Choice, Pine Tree drill, unsafe streets](#) (18 October, T.N. Sampson, 86k online visitors/mo; Longview, TX)

I am a veteran supposedly covered by the new Veterans Choice medical services program. I suffer from Crohn's disease and have trouble traveling because of it. Last year I needed cataract surgery, but after numerous phone calls to doctor's offices here, the closest provider that could be found that would accept the program was in Tyler.

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1.11 - The Daily Citizen: [Not all scars are visible](#) (18 October, Charles Oliver, 47k online visitors/mo; Dalton, GA)

Wounded in combat in Iraq more than a decade ago, J.R. Martinez says he doesn't focus on what the nation owes him but on what he owes his fellow veterans. "I recently spoke at an event in D.C.," he said in a telephone interview last week. "And I pointed out that when we talk about soldiers who have been wounded, we often focus on those of us who have had physical wounds..."

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1.12 - Lompoc Record: [Veteran recalls horrors of last patrol](#) (18 October, Kenny Lindberg, 35k online visitors/mo; Lompoc, CA)

Vandenberg Village resident Chris Brooks said he was fed into the meat grinder in 1969 when an anti-personnel device got the best of him just three weeks into his Vietnam tour... The Department of Veterans Affairs then medically retired him in July 1970, giving him access to benefits. "I am a story of the government and the VA taking care of its soldiers," he said.

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1.13 - KSAZ-TV (Fox-10, Video): [Fox10 Newsmaker Sunday](#) (18 October, 4k broadcast viewers; Phoenix, AZ)

In this two-minute excerpt from an interview with Sen. John McCain, topics raised include the "VA is Lying" billboard in Phoenix, the Choice Program, the size of the VA bureaucracy, and cost overruns at the Denver VA.

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2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

2.1 - WABI-TV (CBS-5, Video): [Homeless Veteran Stand Down a Success](#) (17 October, Brenna Kelly, 199k online visitors/mo; Bangor, ME)

Education was the message Saturday at Togus. A couple hundred volunteers in Augusta lent a hand to homeless veterans across the state. They were provided clothes, products, and several services to anyone who qualified. About 70 showed up for the 18th Homeless Veteran Stand Down.

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2.2 - Redlands Daily Facts (San Bernardino Sun): [San Bernardino County mulls homeless veteran housing funding](#) (18 October, Joe Nelson, 94k online visitors/mo; Redlands, CA)

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday will consider allocating \$332,100 to support temporary and permanent housing for homeless veterans. It is part of the county's efforts to have its remaining 196 homeless veterans in housing by the end of the year.

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2.3 - East Valley Tribune: [Mesa continuing push to end veteran homelessness](#) (18 October, Eric Smith, 55k online visitors/mo; Tempe, AZ)

Veteran homelessness continues to be an issue, but organizations in the East Valley and Phoenix are continuing to work to do something about it. Recently, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) awarded a \$1.012 million grant to the United States Veterans Initiative's (U.S. VETS) Phoenix branch to develop two transitional housing models in downtown Phoenix.

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3. Ending the Claims Backlog – No coverage

[4. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill](#) – No coverage

[5. Women Veterans](#)

5.1 - Las Vegas Sun: [Pageant contestants are 'fully woman and fully warrior'](#) (18 October, Jeanne Brei, 902k online visitors/mo; Henderson, NV)

There are evening gowns, a talent competition, an interview question, a tiara and a sash — but don't call Ms. Veteran America a beauty pageant. The judges don't consider age, marital status or how a woman looks in a swimsuit when determining a winner.

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[6. Other](#)

6.1 - The New York Times (AP): [Small-Dollar Donors Flock to Trump, Help Power His Campaign](#) (18 October, 80.4M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

Donald Trump likes to boast about his enormous wealth and how he doesn't need anyone else's money to pay for his presidential campaign. That hasn't stopped tens of thousands of people from chipping in with checks as small as \$10 to let the Republican candidate know they're behind him.

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6.2 - The Washington Post (Morning Mix): [A combat dog who earned Bronze Stars in Iraq was killed in Wyoming. His owner wants to know why](#) (18 October, Peter Holley, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

During two tours in Iraq, "Mike," a bomb-sniffing Belgian Malinois, spent his days alongside Special Forces soldiers, performing patrols, tracking insurgents and looking for improvised explosive devices... Eight days ago, Mike was fatally shot by a 59-year-old man on a bicycle near Bessler's property, according to the Billings Gazette.

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6.3 - KMGH-TV (ABC-7): [Veterans reshape the image of VFW #1 in Denver with yoga, art and natural therapeutic methods](#) (18 October, Mark Boyle, 1.4M online visitors/mo; Denver, CO)

When you see this particular room on the first floor of a building in the heart of the Santa Fe Arts District in Denver, a VFW post is the last thing you would expect. Hardwood covers the ground, artwork covers the walls, a weekly yoga schedule hangs nearby and a wooden table built over a pair of old heaters sits in the center of the floor.

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6.4 - The Republic (AP): [War of 1812 veteran with storied history finally gets gravestone in Massachusetts](#) (18 October, 159k online visitors/mo; Columbus, IN)

A Boston man who carried a storied history as a veteran of the War of 1812 has finally gotten a gravestone — 159 years after a promise was made to put a monument there. The Boston Herald reports (<http://bit.ly/1kgnf07>) a local historian and a veteran's agent unveiled the

gravestone for Lt. Josiah Bacon on Saturday in front of nearly 100 people at Everett's Woodlawn Cemetery.

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6.5 - WIBW-TV (CBS-13): [VA arrests man for slashing tires and breaking windows on VA's vehicle](#) (18 October, Ariana Cohen, 153k online visitors/mo; Topeka, KS)

VA police arrested a suspect after one of their vehicles had slashed tires and broken windows. Federal Chief of Police Department of Veteran Affairs for Eastern Kansas Sparky Edwards says Saturday morning, police noticed a VA police vehicle had multiple slashes to its tires and cracked windows from bricks.

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6.6 - The News-Times: [Danbury honors WWII vet in Walk of Honor](#) (18 October, Katrina Koerting, 146k online visitors/mo; Danbury, CT)

Noreika and her two brothers said they are proud of Yakacki, describing him as their hero and a great father. His service was honored Sunday afternoon as this year's recipient of the Warrior Award. He was recognized during the eighth annual Walk of Honor, held at the Danbury War Memorial to honor veterans of present and past American wars.

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6.7 - Herald & Review: [Legionnaires' outbreak requires water system fix at veterans home](#) (18 October, Kurt Erickson, 113k online visitors/mo; Decatur, IL)

Illinois is spending at least \$2.3 million to fix a water system linked to a deadly outbreak of Legionnaires' disease at its largest veterans nursing home... In late September, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., requested a formal investigation into the outbreak by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. An official response has not yet been issued.

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6.8 - Daily News: [Weight loss surgery connection to suicide?](#) (17 October, Scott Marcus, 30k online visitors/mo; Red Bluff, CA)

"While we are clear and confident about the medical benefits of weight loss, especially through weight-loss surgery, I think we're not as attentive to the potential psychological benefits or harms of it," said Dr. Amir Ghaferi, director of bariatric surgery at the Ann Arbor Veterans Administration Healthcare System in Michigan.

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6.9 - Full Measure (Video): [VA Art Spending](#) (18 October, 1k online visitors/day; Washington, DC)

This week, Full Measure 'Follows the Money' and the trail of wasteful spending leads straight to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Lawmakers are criticizing the agency, saying the VA took some artistic liberty on some very pricey purchases.

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1. Access to Benefits/Care

1.1 - The Washington Times (AP): [VA to hold town hall meeting in White River Junction](#) (18 October, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

WHITE RIVER JUNCTION, Vt. (AP) - Officials from Vermont's White River Junction Veterans Affairs Medical Center are going to be co-hosting a town hall meeting to get feedback from veterans, family members and other beneficiaries on how to improve operations.

The meeting will be held on Tuesday from 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the VA Medical Center. Organizers say they also welcome input from Congressional stakeholders, veteran service organizations, non-governmental organizations, and community partners.

Organizers say the meeting is part of a national VA effort to improve communication with veterans.

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1.2 - San Jose Mercury News: [Palo Alto: 200 cycling vets take off on recovery ride](#) (18 October, Sharon Noguchi, 2.4M online visitors/mo; San Jose, CA)

PALO ALTO -- A year ago, injured veteran Blair Reels Jr. of San Jose tucked himself into a recumbent bicycle and rode from Palo Alto to Los Angeles -- with companions helping push him up the steeper inclines of the muscle-burning 516-mile route.

On Sunday, Reels, 33, who was told he would never walk again after surviving a suicide bomb attack in Baghdad 10 years ago, climbed onto a regular upright bike and took off on the same trek. A year of arduous and dedicated physical and mental training accelerated a remarkable recovery, putting within reach his goal: to grab a bicycle's specially designed support bar and provide the added oomph up hills for the race's recumbent cyclists -- who rely solely on arm and shoulder power along the challenging course.

Reels was one of more than 200 intrepid cyclists on the Ride 2 Recovery, who have traveled a journey far more arduous than climbing a total of 30,000 feet along the scenic, hilly course over the Santa Cruz Mountains then southward along the California coast. Many have battled post-service enemies of broken bones and spirits, missing limbs, paraplegia and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"This project has saved my life," Reels said. "I was at the lowest of lows," relying in morphine and psychiatric meds to control pain and cope with PTSD, the result of injuries to his brain, back and spinal cord. He has no sensation below his chest.

Ranging from seasoned cycling veterans to newcomers, the riders took off Sunday morning under cloudy and mild weather, perfect for attacking the grueling course that led over Highway 9 in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

"I love witnessing the transformation" -- the confidence and healing that comes from taking on the cycling challenge, ride co-founder Melissa Puckett, 44, said before climbing on her bike. A recreational therapist at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto hospital, she and VA counselor Gil

Ramirez began running short bike rides as therapy for vets, then worked with professional cyclist John Wordin of Southern California to create the Ride 2 Recovery.

The goal, Wordin said, was a vital one: to reduce the number of military suicides.

"This program is something that helps our vets get back to normalcy," said Mitch Heroman, chief medical officer for military and veterans at United Healthcare, which has sponsored the ride for six years, covering all the participants' costs. The organized ride offers much of what injured vets need: a mission, camaraderie, friendship, outdoor exercise and excitement.

The first ride in 2008 attracted about five dozen riders, Puckett said. For this week's ride, 600 applied for 200 slots. Six other similar weeklong rides take place annually in various states and in Europe, and the organization sponsors many more daylong rides. Ride 2 Recovery has 30 regional offices and 70 supporting Project HEROs, like the South Bay one Reels co-chairs, to offer shorter bike rides during the week.

"For visible or invisible injuries, we encourage vets to join," Ride 2 Recovery spokeswoman Sheri Goldberg said. "This is their medicine."

Reels was riding in the gunner's hatch of a Humvee in Baghdad in June 2005 when a car bomb exploded. He suffered a traumatic brain injury and a spinal cord injury. He underwent years of therapy, and after moving to the Bay Area three years ago, he learned to walk at the Palo Alto Veterans hospital. He got rid of the wheelchair, walker and cane. Guided by therapists at the Palo Alto Veterans hospital, and supported by his black lab service dog Radar -- who helps Reels up when he falls -- he's labored with determination to heal.

Bicycling, he said, turned his life around. "Before, I felt trapped in my own body, because nobody understood me," he said. Today, it is hard to see that former being in the ebullient and articulate Reels, who said the ride program has helped him overcome fears. It's not just the physical challenge; it's also being part of a group that surrounds and supports one another.

PTSD is an insidious disease that he said keeps people locked inside of themselves. Talking about what happened and how you feel helps someone else share, Reels said. "Somebody is there to take you through it, or there to offer comfort."

In the group, he said, everyone is in a different stage of healing. Regardless of where they are, "I can meet another vet and be able to trust them," he said. "It's a mutual respect."

Now, "I'm done with my dark moments," Reels said. "I live every day with a smile."

Before Sunday's takeoff, the riders heard a sobering reminder that cycling isn't a risk-free endeavor. While addressing the vets, Wordin dialed up veteran Velette Webb, who crashed while training for a ride two months ago and was partially paralyzed.

As riders shouted encouragement into Wordin's cell phone, Webb said she's started riding a hand-powered cycle. The group posed for a pre-ride photo with arms raised in a V -- for Velette.

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1.3 - TribLive (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review): [Top Veterans Affairs official to take over Butler Healthcare](#) (18 October, Jodi Weigand, 1.7M online visitors/mo; Warrendale, PA)

A top Veterans Affairs official who served at VA Pittsburgh during the deadly Legionnaires' outbreak will take over VA Butler Healthcare next month.

David Cord served as deputy director of the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System from 2012 to 2014, until he was promoted last October to director of the Erie VA Medical Center.

The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review has reported that Cord wrote in an internal email that he wanted the Pittsburgh agency to keep the Legionnaires' disease outbreak quiet rather than disclose it to the public.

The VA reported two days later that the outbreak killed at least six veterans and sickened 16 others.

Cord has repeatedly denied trying to hide information from Congress or the public.

He said he took steps when he was first appointed to Erie to meet with veterans and allay any concerns they might have.

Cord said he doesn't believe his connection to the Legionnaires' outbreak in Pittsburgh will discourage veterans' use of the Butler facility.

"I can understand, so when I came to Erie a year ago the first thing I did was host a town hall meeting," he said.

"I invited any of the veterans to come in and talk and get to know me; to take the opportunity to know me and see what I can do and form your own opinion of me as a leader."

He said he'll likely do the same thing when he arrives in Butler.

"I think that the veterans there will find that my sole focus will be on doing what's best," Cord said.

His tentative start date at VA Butler is Nov. 15. He succeeds John Gennaro, who was recently appointed as the director of the Cincinnati VA Medical Center.

Cord, a Pittsburgh native, joined the VA more than 14 years ago and spent five years on active duty in the Air Force, including serving as a Judge Advocate General's Officer.

He has some experience at the Butler VA, having worked in the human resources department there for about two years, so he's familiar with the system, he said.

"I'm excited to be coming to Butler," Cord said. "I think the facility is a real gem in the organization."

U.S. Rep. Mike Kelly's congressional district includes the Erie and Butler VA healthcare systems and office staff work closely with the facilities to help veterans seeking care.

District director Brad Moore said they've had a good working relationship with Cord and that the allegations Cord faced in Pittsburgh haven't been an issue.

“Mr. Kelly and Mr. Cord talked right after he was appointed to Erie, and Mr. Cord has delivered on his promise to operate a transparent and open operation,” Moore said.

The Butler VA's main facility is in Butler Township, and the health care system has five community clinics, including one in Ford City. Outpatient facilities have a combined 176,000 visits per year.

Construction of a \$100 million VA outpatient health care facility in Center Township began last month.

With continued concern about veterans being placed on waiting lists to receive VA healthcare, Cord said Butler does “an outstanding job on access.” He said based on documents he's reviewed, the facilities ensure that about 99 percent of veterans appointments are completed in 30 days.

Cord said he wants to maintain how well the facilities are doing and identify areas for improvement.

For example, in Erie, the facility increased behavioral health program staffing and clinic hours to meet veterans' needs, Cord said.

“Certainly, it's incumbent on the leadership to pay attention to staffing ratios and that resources are being allocated where they're needed,” he said.

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1.4 - Las Vegas Review-Journal: [Editorial: Huge construction cost overruns show need to privatize VA](#) (18 October, 857k online visitors/mo; Las Vegas, NV)

There is perhaps no bigger example of federal bloat and incompetence than the Department of Veterans Affairs. In case you're keeping score at home, the VA has neglected our veterans through routine delays in processing disability and compensation claims, harmed them by making them wait months for appointments for routine care, and then covered up excessive wait times.

The agency's ineptitude is also on full display when it comes to building hospitals. According to members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs' Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, major VA medical facility construction projects typically run an average of 35 months late and \$360 million over budget — each. This dysfunction has led to a congressional battle regarding mismanagement of VA construction projects across the country.

The latest chapter in this saga involves the funding for a \$1.675 billion VA hospital in Aurora, Colorado, which is years behind schedule, and now carries a price tag nearly three times its original projected amount.

Last month, the Senate agreed to a bill that would allow the VA to spend an additional \$625 million to finish the project, but only after U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller, a Florida Republican and the powerful chairman of the House veterans committee, tried to get the agency to cover \$200 million of the needed funds by using money from a fund used to pay employee bonuses. He initially successfully blocked the Senate bill from going forward in the House, but later reluctantly relented — but not without lambasting the agency for its waste and incompetence.

The fact that Rep. Miller was virtually alone in sticking his neck out on this matter is simply more proof that there is no accountability within the VA, and that even a supposedly reform-minded GOP Congress has no desire to tackle this agency's considerable shortcomings.

If Congress was going to throw another \$625 million at a hospital that was supposed to cost less than that in total, couldn't lawmakers at least leverage some big changes? Like dumping the bonus pool, as Rep. Miller proposed. Or blocking the VA from ever being in charge of another construction project ever again. Or including in the bill the elimination of hundreds of high-level positions.

Nope. Congress was too happy to shovel a huge pile of money at a project that, for all we know, still might not be finished. At a time when lawmakers groan at every opportunity about the country's infrastructure needs and their inability to pay for them, they just dumped another \$625 million on one of the worst-managed federal construction projects in U.S. history. Are lawmakers so spineless that they're willing to spend huge new sums of money on a project that could have been built by the private sector for 10 percent of the cost, simply because they've already spent a lot of money on it?

How many times do we have to say this? Shut down the VA and privatize the whole shebang.

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1.5 - Military Times: [Vets dismayed by VA payback rules on separation pay](#) (18 October, Andrew Tilghman, 540k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Stephen, a Marine Corps staff sergeant, agreed to leave service a few years ago when the Corps offered him voluntary separation pay in an effort to trim its personnel ranks.

They gave him about \$80,000 to leave, and at the time it seemed like a good deal. The money helped him buy a house in Texas and get started with a job as a financial planner.

But now the government wants that money back.

That's because Stephen, who asked to be identified by his first name only, recently went to the Veterans Affairs Department and secured an 80 percent disability rating for a combination of post-traumatic stress, tinnitus and a jaw problem. The VA said he's due an \$1,800 monthly stipend.

But the VA won't send him any checks until 2018 because federal law requires veterans to pay back any separation pay received before becoming eligible for disability benefits.

"I wasn't aware of that, and that could have changed my decision altogether" about whether to accept the voluntary separation pay in the first place, Stephen said.

The 30-year-old former platoon sergeant, who deployed twice to Iraq, is now battling bureaucracy at the Pentagon and the VA in an effort to keep the money, which he has already spent.

About 17,000 troops each year have been granted involuntary separation pay in 2014 and 2015, mostly soldiers and Marines, according to Pentagon data. Thousands of such vets likely face recoupment of separation pay, although the VA was unable to say precisely how many veterans currently have benefits blocked for this reason.

And getting any relief from the Pentagon or the VA will be an uphill battle because the payback requirement is written into federal law.

Specifically, the law affects both voluntary and involuntary separation pay. VA payments are withheld, or offset, until the full amount of separation pay is repaid. In the case of voluntary separation pay, the law allows the military service secretaries to waive the debt, but such waivers are rare.

It's a common subject for complaints, said Claire Lawless, a veterans transition manager with the Washington-based advocacy group Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

"I've definitely seen a slew of veterans come in in need of financial assistance, usually related to housing or school or something, and they are reaching out because they got the disability rating they were expecting, but then were told that you have to basically wait until you've quote-unquote 'paid off your severance,'" Lawless said.

"Being told that you won't get the money that you thought you were relying on is incredibly disheartening," she went on. "And really debilitating because if you lose your housing, everything starts to fall apart.

"Most of them tell me they had no idea this was going to happen. I don't think it's properly communicated by DoD that when you separate, this will impact your ability to receive benefits down the line."

Some veterans have successfully appealed the debt and had it reduced after proving an urgent financial hardship.

But the bureaucratic process for that is complex and cumbersome and veterans usually need to contact their congressional representative to serve as their advocate, Lawless said.

"The VA, the DoD, these are bureaucracies ... and going in and battling a bureaucracy on your own without a lot of understanding is challenging and it helps to have somebody in your corner," Lawless said.

IAVA supports veterans in that process through its Rapid Response Referral Program.

The law potentially affects thousands of troops who were forced to separate recently by their service's "up-or-out" rules.

For example, Shane Collins, a 13-year Marine who was passed over for promotion to staff sergeant last year, was involuntarily separated in March.

Collins received about \$46,000 in involuntary separation pay, more specifically a check for about \$33,000 after taxes.

He moved back to Twin Falls, Idaho, and used the money to pay off some bills, buy his wife Amanda a car and set up a home purchased with a VA-backed loan.

In May, the VA awarded him a 70-percent disability rating due to post-traumatic stress and some hearing loss.

That should warrant a \$1,300 monthly benefit. But the VA told him his payments won't start until mid-2017 because he received the military separation pay.

Collins, now 32, has struggled to find work and worries he might fall behind on his \$895 monthly mortgage payment.

He has complained to the VA but was told that receiving separation pay and disability benefits is akin to "double dipping."

Collins strongly disagrees. "It's completely two different areas," he said. "Your involuntary separated, you're given that amount of money because you were denied reenlistment, and it helps you to transition back to civilian live."

Collins said he does not recall anyone from the Marine Corps telling him that the separation pay might need to be paid back.

Lawless said she has heard that refrain before.

"I think the term 'paying back' is very confusing for people because it doesn't seem like something they should have to pay back," she said. "They seem like two very separate things — your disability pay and your separation pay. I think that is what's frustrating because it doesn't seem like it should be coming from the same pot."

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1.6 - Tucson News Now (KOLD-TV/CBS-13, Video): [Nam Jam connects veterans of all ages in Tucson](#) (19 October, Craig Reck, 461k online visitors/mo; Tucson, AZ)

Saturday's rain storm couldn't stop the 28th annual Nam Jam in Tucson.

The event, hosted by Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 106, gathers organizations and service groups for veterans into one location and adds a few live bands for entertainment.

David Nuñez Valenzuela, a Vietnam veteran who has attended Nam Jam for years, said the music and dancing always take him back to his younger days, but he also takes the time to remember his friends who never returned from service.

A memorial for Southern Arizona veterans names more than 100 men lost in Vietnam, and Nuñez Valenzuela knew five of them. Now a grandfather, he makes sure to have his family by his side for the emotional day.

"They all share the day with me and that, for me, is more special," he said.

The event is meant to be shared with family, friends and other veterans, according to Jim Shilling, who helped set up the event. A Vietnam veteran himself, Shilling said the name Nam Jam shouldn't keep anyone from enjoying future events.

"It's Vietnam veterans reaching out to all vets," he said. "That's what we want to portray, and we are getting a good turnout of younger veterans."

Vets from the older generation can serve as mentors or older brothers for the more recent veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan, Shilling said. He volunteers at the Veterans Affairs Hospital and said the biggest hurdle for the younger crowd is simply admitting the need for support.

"They're having a hard time coming in, and the big thing we tell them is, don't wait 40 years like we did," he said.

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1.7 - South Bend Tribune: [Serving those who served our country](#) (18 October, Stan Maddux, 389k online visitors/mo; South Bend, IN)

Pat Short has a big heart for disabled veterans, and her actions prove it.

She gets up before sunrise once or twice a week and heads from her home near Hudson Lake to South Bend then drives all over northern Indiana, taking the former servicemen and women to medical appointments.

But, she also tries to help in other ways, something James Peterson, one of her fellow drivers, felt was deserving of recognition when he nominated her as a Hometown Hero.

"She gives a little bit extra, I think, than some of us," said Peterson, who lives in South Bend.

Short has been a volunteer driver for the Disabled American Veterans Transportation Network for nearly 12 years.

And, like all of the other drivers, the Hudson Lake area woman doesn't receive a dime, but her rewards are in the appreciation expressed by her riders along with the camaraderie shared on the trips.

"I just feel like I'm doing them a service," the 69-year-old Short said.

The network provides free rides to disabled veterans without transportation to medical facilities operated by the Veterans Administration.

After retiring as a truck driver for Emery Worldwide, Short said she took care of her mother-in-law, Julia, for a couple of years.

She later felt a need to do something productive outside the home. With her daughter, Trisha, currently in the Air Force, and her dad, Edward, serving in World War II, she jumped at the opportunity to become a volunteer driver for the network.

Her love for driving and people were also reasons Pat cited for getting involved; and so were the hours, which remind her of the regular early morning runs during her professional truck driving career.

“I love to see the morning. I like to see the world come awake,” she said.

There are 10 seats in the 2006 Ford van that Short picks up at the St. Joseph County Jail to begin her route that includes stops in larger cities such as Fort Wayne and smaller communities such as Kendallville and Ligonier.

The veterans are also driven home after their appointments.

Short said she doesn't consider her efforts worthy of special recognition, considering there are others doing exactly the same thing.

“I'm very humble about it, but I think Jim should be honored and all of them should be honored,” she said.

Peterson, 67, and a veteran himself, was trained by Short when he became a volunteer driver some three years ago after retiring as a troubled youth counselor in Mishawaka.

He feels Short goes the extra distance.

Whenever she hears that one of her passengers is having difficulty cutting through red tape to get their needs addressed by the Department of Veteran Affairs, for example, she's quick to offer advice on how to speed up the process, he said.

“She'll try to make a suggestion on who to talk to or how to do it rather than just be a driver,” Peterson said.

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1.8 - Wicked Local – Bedford: [Clinical psychologist to speak at Veterans Breakfast](#) (18 October, 336k online visitors/mo; Westford, MA)

BOLTON - Sandra Diaz, a clinical psychologist at the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial VA Medical Center in Bedford, will speak about hope and compassion as the keynote speaker at the fourth annual Veterans Breakfast on Oct. 31 at Keilty Hall, St. Brigid's Church, 2001 Massachusetts Ave.

“So often these veterans see themselves as broken,” Diaz said. “They have feelings of inadequacy, guilt or shame, not only from their war experiences, but often from their childhoods

as well. I work to help them change the way they see themselves, which gives them hope. And with hope, new beginnings are possible.”

The breakfast is open to veterans in the Lexington/Bedford area and their guests. Coffee will be available starting at 8:30 a.m., with breakfast served at 9 a.m. The Town Celebrations Committee is sponsoring the breakfast in partnership with the Lexington Rotary Club and the Lexington/Bedford Veterans Services Office. Rotary Club members will serve a full breakfast catered by Neillio’s.

“It’s a program not to be missed,” Celebrations Committee co-chair Lorain Marquis said. “In addition to having an outstanding speaker, we will give out more than 20 terrific door prizes donated by local businesses and we will offer complimentary service portraits to all veterans.”

Diaz, of Filipino heritage, grew up in Hong Kong. Her family migrated to Vancouver, British Columbia, where she completed high school and college. She earned a master’s degree from the University of Alberta in 1993 and spent 10 years in California, where she earned her doctorate in clinical psychology at Fielding Graduate University. She moved to the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial VA Medical Center for post-doctoral training in 2004 and soon concluded that by working with veterans.

“I always see the best in my clients,” Diaz said. “There is magic in finding the best in people, and helping them to see it. Hope and acceptance are powerful healers. Sometimes I have to carry this package around for them until they are able to integrate it into their own minds and make it real, to begin seeing themselves in a positive light.”

For information: grada@lexingtonma.gov; 781-861-0194.

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1.9 - BizTimes: [Digital avatar ‘Sophie’ brings intelligence, compassion to interactions](#) (19 October, Hilary Dickinson, 180k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

Sophie is compassionate and empathetic; she is smart; and she has a sense of humor.

She is much like any other person, only she is not a person.

Sophie is an avatar created by Mequon-based Intelligent Digital Avatars Inc., better known as iDAvatars.

The avatars’ function is to observe, perform assessments and record interactions in personal health records, but founder and chief executive officer Norrie Daroga wants the avatars to be more than that.

“(Sophie is) the character we created, and we can build any number of different avatars with different characteristics, but Sophie is ours,” Daroga said. “She has the characteristics we wanted her to have, which is, number one, she gets to know you rather than you have to get to know her.”

For instance, Sophie identifies personality types by picking up on the user's emotions and mood and then responds appropriately.

"So her ability to listen to you is important, and we focus on both verbal and non-verbal characteristics," Daroga said. "Her purpose is to help you achieve what you want, so sometimes it may be to answer questions and other times it may just be a shoulder to cry on."

Sophie was released in March, and so far she is being rolled out by large companies for specific uses. Bayer HealthCare in Germany, for example, is using the avatar for pain management.

An "Ask Sophie" app is currently available as well in the App Store and on Google Play.

"But our big dream is that every person will be able to have their own Sophie one day," Daroga said.

He also plans for Sophie to be applied to uses beyond health care in the future. She could be used for education and entertainment, and she could even tell you what to buy from the grocery store, he said.

Apple's Siri may be able to perform some of these same functions, but Daroga said it's not to the extent that Sophie does.

"What Siri does is she tries to be everything to everybody," he said. "Sophie's job is to understand the narrow question you're interested in. The engagement you have with Siri is nowhere close to the engagement you have with Sophie. Having a face and a visual appearance makes a big difference between a voice recognition system and something that understands you. Siri doesn't pick up your emotions."

Established two years ago by Daroga, iDAvatars has 12 employees. Seven are in Mequon, with the remainder in Los Angeles, Orlando, Portugal and India.

In addition to Bayer HealthCare, the growing startup company has partnerships with such organizations as Kaiser Permanente, Intel RealSense and IBM. In fact, iDAvatars in September was named one of the first 100 IBM Watson ecosystem partners to introduce its product to market.

iDAvatars also won a Wisconsin Innovation Award this summer, and it was recently awarded an \$800,000 subcontract to lead the interactive avatar design for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

iDAvatars will be used in the VA's Virtual Medical Center for patients with diabetes, PTSD and other conditions that require long-term management and access to educational content.

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1.10 - Longview News-Journal: [Letters on Veterans Choice, Pine Tree drill, unsafe streets](#) (18 October, T.N. Sampson, 86k online visitors/mo; Longview, TX)

Veteran's woes

I am a veteran supposedly covered by the new Veterans Choice medical services program. I suffer from Crohn's disease and have trouble traveling because of it.

Last year I needed cataract surgery, but after numerous phone calls to doctor's offices here, the closest provider that could be found that would accept the program was in Tyler.

Now I am in need of dermatology services and again the closest willing provider is in Winnsboro or the Shreveport VA.

It seems the doctors here cannot be bothered to deal with the program. Several business administrators told me in so many words, "It is too much trouble."

I am sure proud of Longview doctors for their willingness to step up for veterans.

T.N. Sampson, Longview

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1.11 - The Daily Citizen: [Not all scars are visible](#) (18 October, Charles Oliver, 47k online visitors/mo; Dalton, GA)

Wounded in combat in Iraq more than a decade ago, J.R. Martinez says he doesn't focus on what the nation owes him but on what he owes his fellow veterans.

"I recently spoke at an event in D.C.," he said in a telephone interview last week. "And I pointed out that when we talk about soldiers who have been wounded, we often focus on those of us who have had physical wounds. We are sexy. There are all these nonprofits, all these organizations that want to put us on the front of a pamphlet and pull the heartstrings of Americans and say 'Look at what this young man or this young woman is going through.'"

A 2002 Dalton High School graduate, Martinez was serving in the U.S. Army and driving a Humvee in Iraq in March 2003 when its left front tire struck a land mine. The explosion left him with severe injuries and burns over 38 percent of his body.

But he says there are veterans out there with wounds society doesn't consider "sexy."

"There are so many veterans who not only have invisible scars but feel like those scars are unworthy of being talked about, unworthy of being helped," Martinez said. "There are a lot more veterans who have PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), who have traumatic brain injury than there are of us who have visible wounds."

"I think it's my job, as a veteran with physical wounds, to speak up for those veterans whose wounds aren't visible. It's my way of continuing to serve," he said.

That's why, Martinez says, he jumped at the chance to take part in "Debt of Honor: Disabled Veterans in American History," a documentary by Ric Burns dealing with how America has treated its returning wounded warriors and on medical advances in treating wounded veterans.

It will air on PBS on Nov. 10, the night before Veterans Day, at 9 p.m. as part of its “Stories of Service” series.

Martinez, who is now an actor and author, began working as a motivational speaker and as an activist on veterans issues even as he was completing his own recovery.

“Back in 2003 when I was wounded, 2004-2005 when I first started speaking out, a lot of my sound bites were politically correct. ‘I was doing what my country required of me.’ ‘I signed on the dotted line,’” he said. “Not that I didn’t really believe that or don’t still believe that. But now, I’m taking a different approach. I’m saying it’s frustrating when you see the numbers, when 22 veterans commit suicide each day. Now, I’m issuing a call to all Americans about how we can take a stand and how we can all be a part of the solution, how we all need to serve those who have served us.”

He said “Debt of Honor” gave him a chance to stand with other veterans speaking out on those issues. The documentary features, among others, former U.S. Senator and Veterans Affairs Administrator Max Cleland, a Georgia native who lost both legs and one arm as a result of injuries he received in the Vietnam War.

“It seems that these days everyone wants to do something for veterans, especially veterans who have been wounded. But some of these projects are questionable, and I really want to associate myself with projects that are going to be informative, that are really going to be educational, that are really going to be talking about what’s going on within the veteran community now,” he said.

Martinez was born in Louisiana, and lived there and in Arkansas before moving to Dalton just before his senior year of high school. But he has said that Dalton is the first place he felt was home.

“When I go out and talk to people and give speeches in different areas, I talk about how empowering it was for me to have Dalton embrace me three months after I was injured, the first time I was out of the hospital,” he said.

But Martinez says he realizes many veterans can’t count on their communities that way.

“For those veterans, for those families, for anyone, I tell them ‘I’m sorry that your community isn’t there in the capacity that I experienced. But your community isn’t the only community. There are people out there who understand and who are supportive and have resources they want to provide to help you adopt. You might have to seek them out, but they are there,’” he said.

Martinez says that he’s glad to see that so many people want to help wounded veterans, but he offers some caution.

“These nonprofits that take veterans out to ball games or get their pictures taken with a celebrity or give them a luxury vacation? That’s not going to help them in the long run,” he said.

Martinez says people should make sure they are helping a nonprofit that is focusing on at least one of five different issues of particular concern to veterans: housing, mental health, health care, education and employment.

“Groups that are focusing on those five things are going to have a long-term impact,” he added. “On my website (jrmartinez.com), there are some nonprofits I’ve personally looked at. I’ve seen their financials, I’ve seen where the money goes. I know they are making a difference.”

And he says he really wants to encourage people to watch “Debt of Honor.”

“It’s a really great documentary. It’s one I ask everyone to watch and become a little more aware of what’s going on in your country and your own backyard,” he said.

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1.12 - Lompoc Record: [Veteran recalls horrors of last patrol](#) (18 October, Kenny Lindberg, 35k online visitors/mo; Lompoc, CA)

Vandenberg Village resident Chris Brooks said he was fed into the meat grinder in 1969 when an anti-personnel device got the best of him just three weeks into his Vietnam tour.

“The question I asked myself when I got off the plane: ‘How the hell am I going to last a year in this place?’ was answered within three weeks on that patrol,” Brooks said. “I (was) just fed into the meat grinder.”

What’s worse is that the patrol was supposed to be his last, as he had just secured a transfer into the operations intelligence division, he said.

“I had gone to school to be a (noncommissioned officer) and get the operations intelligence (military occupation skill) designation,” said the U.S. Army veteran. “I talked my way into the command center.”

But shortly thereafter, things got bad, as the anti-personnel device injured the first three people in the patrol, including Brooks.

“I was knocked unconscious and would have bled out in the field if the Army medic hadn’t sliced open my throat and done an emergency (procedure) in the field,” Brooks said. “They sliced open my neck to let blood drain out so I wouldn’t drown, but they (evacuated) me out and the other two guys. The other two survived.”

Brooks sustained injuries to his eye, head and body, he said.

“I still have shrapnel in my spine and my chest and my abdomen.”

Brooks remained in the hospital for seven months, spending time at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and the St. Albans Naval Hospital in New York City.

“I received a Purple Heart and a Combat Infantryman Badge and the usual in-theater medals and ribbons,” he said.

The Department of Veterans Affairs then medically retired him in July 1970, giving him access to benefits.

"I am a story of the government and the VA taking care of its soldiers," he said.

Overall, Books said he was proud to have served and felt fortunate that he had a chance at a life, as many didn't come back.

"(Many) didn't come home and they didn't have a chance to have a life and a chance to make it or not make it," he said. "So I've been blessed. I've been fortunate."

After the war, Brooks found a calling as a special education teacher, helping physically handicapped kids. He also became a basketball coach, spending 24 years behind the bench at Cabrillo High School.

"I took an early retirement with my wife because I could," he said. "I'm enjoying it."

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1.13 - KSAZ-TV (Fox-10, Video): [Fox10 Newsmaker Sunday](#) (18 October, 4k broadcast viewers; Phoenix, AZ)

In this two-minute excerpt from an interview with Sen. John McCain, topics raised include the "VA is Lying" billboard in Phoenix, the Choice Program, the size of the VA bureaucracy, and cost overruns at the Denver VA.

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2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

2.1 - WABI-TV (CBS-5, Video): [Homeless Veteran Stand Down a Success](#) (17 October, Brenna Kelly, 199k online visitors/mo; Bangor, ME)

"Every year I'll have veterans come up to me throughout the year and say, 'Everything changed for me at Stand Down,'" said co-chair of the event, Susie Whittington.

Education was the message Saturday at Togus.

A couple hundred volunteers in Augusta lent a hand to homeless veterans across the state. They were provided clothes, products, and several services to anyone who qualified. About 70 showed up for the 18th Homeless Veteran Stand Down.

"I was a little apprehensive. The VA hasn't always been so easy to work with so it was nice to see that this was laid-back and easygoing," said Nicholas Mulligan, who traveled from the Lewiston-Auburn area to the event.

Some learned that there's no shame in the situation. Perspectives changed by the end of the day.

“A little bit better outlook. It’s still a work in progress. One day at a time. One foot in front of the other. So that’s the only way you gotta go about doing it,” said Leroy Lotmore, who traveled from Lewiston.

Whittington said outreach and education are number one. It’s not just this day that can help veterans escape homelessness.

“It’s hard. It’s inspiring, but yes it is disheartening at times. We want our veterans to know we’re there for them every day. But whatever it takes,” she said.

“You never know what you’re going to find. If you don’t open the door you never know what’s behind it,” said Lotmore.

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2.2 - Redlands Daily Facts (San Bernardino Sun): [San Bernardino County mulls homeless veteran housing funding](#) (18 October, Joe Nelson, 94k online visitors/mo; Redlands, CA)

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday will consider allocating \$332,100 to support temporary and permanent housing for homeless veterans.

It is part of the county’s efforts to have its remaining 196 homeless veterans in housing by the end of the year.

The board will also consider Tuesday increasing the amount of its contract with two housing support service providers - Community Action Partnership and Family Service Association of Redlands - by \$116,050 in order to provide motel vouchers, security deposits, first month’s rent and utility payments for homeless veterans.

In July, the board unanimously approved a recommendation by one of the nation’s top experts on homelessness, Philip Mangano, to implement a strategy to place the county’s then 401 homeless veterans into permanent housing by Dec. 31. Since then, more than half of them, 56 percent, have been placed into housing.

A chunk of the funding, \$100,000, would be used to reimburse landlords for costs of repairs to units rented to homeless veterans when such repairs exceed the security deposit amount, according to a staff report prepared for county supervisors.

Since July, the county has partnered with other agencies and stakeholders, including Veterans Affairs, LightHouse Social Service Centers in Colton, Loma Linda University, Goodwill, United Way, the California Apartment Association, and the San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Department in leveraging sources toward its goal.

The county is working in conjunction with the Homeless Veterans Community Planning Group, which formed in November at the VA Medical Center in Loma Linda to examine the scope of the homeless veteran problem in the county.

Within the last two weeks, 16 veteran families have been placed in housing, said Karen Young-Lowe, CEO of LightHouse Social Service Centers and a member of the Homeless Veterans Community Planning Group.

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2.3 - East Valley Tribune: [Mesa continuing push to end veteran homelessness](#) (18 October, Eric Smith, 55k online visitors/mo; Tempe, AZ)

Veteran homelessness continues to be an issue, but organizations in the East Valley and Phoenix are continuing to work to do something about it.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) awarded a \$1.012 million grant to the United States Veterans Initiative's (U.S. VETS) Phoenix branch to develop two transitional housing models in downtown Phoenix.

Although not a part of the East Valley proper, the transitional housing in Phoenix is available to homeless veterans in need of a place to stay.

"They would have to relocate," said Michelle Jameson, program director for U.S. VETS Phoenix. "But if they meet the criteria and are accepted into the program, absolutely (they can live there)."

The grant from the VA to U.S. VETS was one of 20 grants totaling \$12.8 million awarded to various agencies to help provide housing for homeless veterans.

Although the VA didn't award any grants to any East Valley agencies, that doesn't mean the East Valley hasn't done its part to help veterans in need of homes.

Mesa in particular has taken steps to eradicate veteran homelessness by offering housing vouchers that veterans can use in place of rent while they attempt to get back on their feet.

Mesa City Councilmember Kevin Thompson, of Mesa District 6, said the voucher program has been doing well with 60 veterans currently taking part and 56 of them have already received the vouchers with 31 having attained residences.

Thompson also said that, despite U.S. VETS recently receiving the VA grant, Mesa hasn't yet worked with the organization.

"We're digging around to see if we can find out more about them," he said. "We don't really know a whole lot about that group but... we're looking into them because if it truly is an all of Arizona (initiative from U.S. VETS) then we certainly would like to partake in that and make sure that Mesa is successful as well."

One source of support, Thompson said, has been the Mesa business community, which has stepped up to raise awareness.

"The business community is really responding," he said. "They've been really, really great to work with."

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3. Ending the Claims Backlog – No coverage

4. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill – No coverage

5. Women Veterans

5.1 - Las Vegas Sun: [Pageant contestants are 'fully woman and fully warrior'](#) (18 October, Jeanne Brei, 902k online visitors/mo; Henderson, NV)

There are evening gowns, a talent competition, an interview question, a tiara and a sash — but don't call Ms. Veteran America a beauty pageant. The judges don't consider age, marital status or how a woman looks in a swimsuit when determining a winner.

These contestants all are active duty or military veterans using the competition to raise awareness about the challenges many women in the military face, including homelessness, post-traumatic stress disorder and sexual assault.

For instance, an estimated 55,000 female veterans are homeless, and female veterans are the fastest-growing homeless population in the United States.

The 25 finalists coming to Las Vegas for the Oct. 18 competition will be judged first on their military history and their advocacy for women in the military, then on their talent and interview answer. The pageant's mission is to honor the contestants' grace, poise and service, and raise money for Final Salute, a group that helps find housing for homeless female veterans and their children.

The competition is "a place for us to be fully woman and fully warrior with great camaraderie with our fellow sisters-in-arms," said competitor Kerri Brantley, a public affairs officer in the National Guard from Boise, Idaho.

Brantley, a mother of three, calls joining the National Guard the best decision of her adult life.

"It's the way I finished school and supported my kids as a single mom for six years," she said.

Brantley spent nine months in the Middle East but considers her most rewarding work rescuing people and recovering bodies last year after the Oso landslide in Washington.

Shan Anderson became involved in the Ms. Veteran America competition because of a direct connection to homeless veterans.

"My cousin was a homeless female veteran, and one of my sorority sisters is currently," Anderson said. "I have been assisting them for several years and never knew an organization was here to help."

Anderson, whose mother served in the Air Force, joined the Mississippi Army National Guard in 1998 at age 17. Deployments took her to Iraq in 2009, the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington, D.C., in 2010 and Afghanistan in 2013. She plans to attend law school next year.

During the first Ms. Veteran America pageant in 2012, the youngest contestant was 21 and the oldest — World War II Coast Guard veteran Gladys Hughes, of Picayune, Miss. — was 89. Hughes will serve as a judge this year, along with the U.S. Marine Corps' first black female combat pilot and the first woman in the U.S. Army Reserve to reach the rank of command sergeant major. The mistress of ceremonies is a Purple Heart recipient who lost both legs after a roadside bomb struck her armored vehicle in Baghdad.

The founder of both Final Salute and Ms. Veteran America, Jas Boothe, was based in New Orleans preparing to deploy to Iraq in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit. Less than a month later, she was diagnosed with cancer in her head, neck and throat, and was discharged from the Army Reserves. With her home washed away, she had nowhere to go. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs told her they didn't have any programs for female veterans with children, she said.

Boothe beat cancer, and once back on her feet, was determined that no other female veterans would be left behind.

Money raised during this year's pageant will pay for housing and prevention programs for female veterans, including financial assistance for utility bills and groceries. In four years, the Ms. Veteran America competition has helped Final Salute raise more than \$1 million to combat homelessness among female veterans.

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6. Other

6.1 - The New York Times (AP): [Small-Dollar Donors Flock to Trump, Help Power His Campaign](#) (18 October, 80.4M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump likes to boast about his enormous wealth and how he doesn't need anyone else's money to pay for his presidential campaign. That hasn't stopped tens of thousands of people from chipping in with checks as small as \$10 to let the Republican candidate know they're behind him.

Trump has taken in 73,942 contributions, a total that surpasses several of GOP rivals, despite the billionaire businessman's early pledge to finance his own campaign. Financial reports filed last week also show that more than 70 percent of the \$3.9 million he raised from July through September came from people giving \$200 or less. That rate of small-donor contributions is second only to Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who's in the Democratic race.

The average Trump contribution was \$50.46, his campaign said.

The contributors are in small towns, suburbs and big cities. He's raised money from hundreds of retirees, ranchers, dentists, physicians, real estate executives and financial consultants.

For Ansley Pascoli, 64, a retiree in Sandy Springs, Georgia, the money is intended as a symbol of support. She gave the Trump campaign \$25 and bought several hats and T-shirts, one of which she was wearing Friday.

"One of my reasons for wanting to support him is that even though I know that he does have a lot of money, I don't feel that it's right for him to have to bear the burden," she said in a telephone interview when asked why she was giving money to someone who has bragged about not needing campaign cash.

"And even though my contribution was small, I want him to have the feeling that there are other people that are behind him," she said.

It was a sentiment expressed by many of those who appear on Trump's contributor list and is evidence of the passion he has elicited from voters angry over the country's direction and craving a political outsider.

Pascoli said she was drawn to Trump because of his hard-line stance on immigration, his business background and the fact he's not a product of the political system.

"I really think we are in a pivotal time for the country and we need somebody who has the type of skill set that he has," she said.

Stephan Robinson, a commercial real estate broker in Pearland, Texas, said he contributed \$250 because he felt an obligation to help.

"If you support a candidate, it shouldn't matter how much money he's got," Robinson said. "He shouldn't have to spend all his money."

Robinson went on: "I know he doesn't need my money and the little bit of money I've sent, it's not going to make a big difference. But I just feel in good conscience, that if you support somebody, you should contribute to help offset some of his costs." Robinson also offered to volunteer and provide office space if the campaign wants to come to town. He's given money to another Republican in the race — Texas Sen. Ted Cruz.

Illinois retiree Beverly Perlson, who's from a military family, said she was immediately drawn to Trump because of his attention to veterans' issues and his promise to overhaul the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The first time she heard him speak about the issue, she said, "I absolutely fell in love with Donald Trump at that moment."

Her recent \$100 contribution was intended to say thank you. "My heart rejoiced because he's honestly the first person who stood up for our troops, our veterans," she said.

While Trump originally denounced the idea of contributions, he appeared to warm to the idea over the summer. His campaign now makes it easy to give, with a prominent "Donate" Button" on his website. The site also offers an online store full of campaign gear, such as \$30 hats with Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan and \$50 sweatshirts.

The latest filings show that the vast majority of Trump's campaign expenses in the last quarter were financed by contributions, not by Trump himself.

Trump's campaign manager Corey Lewandowski said in August that the campaign had received tens of thousands in small-dollar donations, but contributions would remain "a very small portion" of the campaign's funds. He did not respond to questions Friday about the extent to which the campaign's calculus had changed.

Many of the logged contributions reflect purchases from the website. Elle Koch, a semiretired business owner from Cincinnati, Ohio, made a hooded sweatshirt and bumper sticker purchase.

Koch, a frequent phone-banker, would like an eventual role with the campaign. She said she wasn't surprised by the large number of contributions.

"This is one of the things you can do right now to show your support," she said.

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6.2 - The Washington Post (Morning Mix): [A combat dog who earned Bronze Stars in Iraq was killed in Wyoming. His owner wants to know why](#) (18 October, Peter Holley, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

During two tours in Iraq, "Mike," a bomb-sniffing Belgian Malinois, spent his days alongside Special Forces soldiers, performing patrols, tracking insurgents and looking for improvised explosive devices.

He and his handler, Matthew Bessler, earned two Bronze Stars — one of the military's highest accolades.

But it was back home in small-town Wyoming, as both combat veterans lived out their days hunting and fishing, that the service dog encountered his gravest threat.

[How a presidential candidate and others helped a veteran and his combat dog after learning of their PTSD struggle]

Eight days ago, Mike was fatally shot by a 59-year-old man on a bicycle near Bessler's property, according to the Billings Gazette. The cyclist told police that he felt threatened by Mike and has not been cited for any wrongdoing. But neighbors heard no barking, the paper reported, and the entry wounds are on the dog's backside.

Now Bessler's best friend is gone and so is the steadying presence that the service dog provided him.

"I raised him and trained him as a puppy, and the ability he has to sense some of the issues that I have with seizures, with my PTSD, my TBI [traumatic brain injury] and severe anxiety disorders, how he can calm me down just by him being in my presence," Bessler, who was profiled by The Washington Post in July, told the Billings Gazette in an article published on Saturday. "He can help take the focus and help change the focus of what's going on with me and help me calm down or relax me."

Bessler told the Powell Tribune that he hopes his dog can be buried with military honors.

“Mike was a retired major in the Army that saved a number of lives because of his work in bomb detection and everything he had done,” he said.

Bessler is a 20-year Army vet who served six tours in Iraq with the 10th Special Forces Group out of Fort Carson, Colo. Since 2007, when the pair were joined in a Special Operations program to prepare dogs and their handlers for combat, his military career has been synonymous with Mike’s.

Because Bessler’s job demanded that he read Mike’s body language, the Army News Service noted, the bond between dog and handler “had to be seamless.” The duo became inseparable.

“You have to learn to speak ‘doganese,’” Bessler told the Army News Service. “If you can’t get along with the dog and can’t work the dog, you can’t find bombs in Baghdad.”

Each tour was intensely demanding, and during the pair’s final months in Iraq, Mike stopped sniffing for bombs and became increasingly distracted and anxious on the job, according to the Army News Service. He was eventually diagnosed with canine post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition that military veterinarians see in some dogs that were sent to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Back home in Wyoming, with the help of a daily dose of Prozac, Mike settled nicely into a new, peaceful rhythm with Bessler, who officially adopted the dog upon their return to the United States.

“He was very laid back,” Bessler told the Billings Gazette. “He never ... he would lean up against people, he liked being petted, he played ball. He was happy. He was a happy-go-lucky dog.”

The peace was shattered about a week ago, when Bessler was away on a hunting trip in the Bighorn Mountains, according to the Billings Gazette. The shooting occurred around 11 a.m. Oct. 10, and, as far as Bessler is concerned, the details surrounding it raise troubling questions.

As the Powell Tribune reported:

According to the account the bicyclist gave to the Sheriff’s Office, he was turning north onto Road 5 from Lane 9 when he was “attacked” by a “German shepherd-looking dog.”

The Powell man got off of his bike and began using it as a shield, circling back and forth and keeping the bike between him and the dog, he told the Sheriff’s Office. Eventually, he was able to grab a revolver from his bicycle-mounted holster, and he shot the dog. The dog ran away and the man called 911, the Sheriff’s Office said.

“(The man) said he was genuinely in fear of his life and well-being, and the dog was ‘definitely in full attack mode and not backing down at all,’” Park County Sheriff’s Office spokesman Lance Mathess summarized of the report later compiled by a deputy.

When he shot the animal, it was about 5-10 feet away, the man said. He had not thought the single round of bird shot had killed the dog, Mathess said of the man’s account.

No other people witnessed the incident, though a neighbor heard the shot and came outside to see the dog limping away.

Bessler told the paper that Mike's behavior according to the shooter's account sounded nothing like the dog he had come to know and love.

Mike wasn't territorial, he said, and would never attack a stranger. He noted that Mike didn't wander onto the road, though he would sometimes run alongside people passing by. The dog, who had chewed on rocks to cope with his anxiety, had even worn down his teeth to "little nubs," his owner noted. If Mike was in attack mode, why was he shot from behind, Bessler wonders. Why, he wants to know, does a cyclist have a gun mounted on his bike?

The more he looks into the cyclist's story, he told the Tribune, the more inconsistencies he finds.

"I believe the gentleman just shot the dog on my property," Bessler said. "I don't buy his story."

"If it went down the way the guy said it did, then so be it," he added. "But I'm disgusted with the fact that the guy hasn't even shown his face to say, 'I'm sorry this happened.'"

Lance Mathess, a spokesman for the Park County Sheriff's Office, told the Tribune that the man initially told authorities that he had been attacked by "a pack of dogs" but later changed his story to say that several other dogs came close to him but that only Mike was threatening.

The man "said he was genuinely in fear of his life and well-being, and the dog was 'definitely in full attack mode and not backing down at all,'" Mathess told the Tribune.

Bessler questions this claim, as well. He told the Tribune that none of the three other dogs involved in the incident — a Yorkshire terrier, a 10-week-old pitbull and a 2-year old pitbull-Lab mix — are aggressive.

The cyclist was not injured, police said.

Perhaps most curious, Bessler told the Billings Gazette, is that a neighbor whose window was open didn't hear barking before the gunshot.

"If the guy was actually fending the dogs off with a bicycle, [Mike] would have really been barking, and there was no barking," he said. "All there was was just a shot. The guests who were at the house, they said the same thing. There was no barking. It was just a gunshot."

After the shot, Bessler told the paper, his neighbor came outside and saw Mike limping on Bessler's property.

A GoFundMe page, created to give Mike a full military burial, has exceeded its \$10,000 goal in five days.

"We are a community coming together to mourn the loss of a brave military service dog, who deserves the honor to be laid to rest with a military funeral and burial," the page reads. "Major Mike is a former military combat dog that had served two tours of duty in Iraq. Please help us fund a funeral that will do this military war veteran the respect he deserves."

Bessler told the Billings Gazette that he intends to pursue civil action against the man who shot his dog and referred to his actions as “a wrongful use of force.” Until then, as Bessler confronts his latest trauma without his ever-present companion, he is left with a burning question for which he may never find an answer.

“I just wanted to know how,” he told the paper a few days after Mike’s death. “I couldn’t really ... I was very distraught about it. I just lost my family member, and I just, I asked ... I wanted to know how.”

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6.3 - KMGH-TV (ABC-7): [Veterans reshape the image of VFW #1 in Denver with yoga, art and natural therapeutic methods](#) (18 October, Mark Boyle, 1.4M online visitors/mo; Denver, CO)

When you see this particular room on the first floor of a building in the heart of the Santa Fe Arts District in Denver, a VFW post is the last thing you would expect.

Hardwood covers the ground, artwork covers the walls, a weekly yoga schedule hangs nearby and a wooden table built over a pair of old heaters sits in the center of the floor.

VFW Post #1, the first in the country, is changing by the day.

The post that dates back to the late 1800s is a far cry from a smoky, dark hangout, illuminated by neon bar lights and funded by the bar’s revenue.

Organizers are drawing in a younger membership by helping them with natural healing methods.

The yoga class started with seven people and is now filling up with dozens of veterans weekly.

Many of the veterans that fill that square, wooden tall top table never expected to be involved in a VFW in the first place.

John Harry spent over 10 years in the Air Force. At one point Harry flew air crew life support missions in combat.

Now, Harry is involved in the urban bee keeping that takes place on the roof of the post.

“You wouldn’t think that it would be calming, messing with several thousand bees, but I actually do find them really calming,” said Harry.

These veterans are in search of a home away from home.

Harry admits a VFW post is the last place he thought he would find it.

“This post has been a home for me. They welcomed me knowing exactly what they were getting when they brought me in and have never made me feel like a lesser veteran because of being gay,” said Harry.

He's also working as an advocate for the LGBT veteran community.

Dozens of these veterans have put down their guns for a paint brush or camera.

Curt Bean returned from combat where he served as an Army scout sniper with the 10th Mountain Division. Bean suffered severely from PTSD after returning home and has found his outlet through art and the people he's met at VFW Post #1.

"It was really great for me to see other like-minded veterans that were trying to make an impact on the veteran community and I really got involved that month," said Bean. I didn't really realize until after the inpatient PTSD program how therapeutic it is and how much it really helps me kind of dive through some of the different issues, different problems that I'm having."

Jen Burch, 28, is another young face, who's changing the image of the VFW.

Burch, a former Air Force combat medic, had PTSD when returning state-side that isn't understated.

"When I returned state-side that's when things really started unraveling and they did so for a couple of years. I suffered from really bad PTSD, almost lost my life to that two years ago," said Burch.

But then she found photography -- the images almost as stunning as her turnaround. Burch credits alternative therapy for her recovery. It's easy to see in the smile on her face how proud she is in recovering without the use of prescription medication.

Now it's just my -- it's therapy for me and it's an alternative method. It's not prescriptions, it's natural, it's fun and you can enjoy it with others, especially with other vets," said Burch.

The reasons you won't see a bar inside the VFW Post #1 is simply their effort to change revenue models for the post. Michael Mitchel is the post commander and says most VFW's are going bankrupt. The model of Post #1 is to invite in art shows and profit from renting out the space they have for special events.

It's a space with a prime location that the post owns outright.

Those who belong to the post are trying to bridge the gap between veterans and the community. Community groups are invited to attend events, rent out the space or even come to a yoga class or two.

The veterans here clearly re-shaping the VFW post of tomorrow, for the veterans of today.

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6.4 - The Republic (AP): [War of 1812 veteran with storied history finally gets gravestone in Massachusetts](#) (18 October, 159k online visitors/mo; Columbus, IN)

BOSTON — A Boston man who carried a storied history as a veteran of the War of 1812 has finally gotten a gravestone — 159 years after a promise was made to put a monument there.

The Boston Herald reports (<http://bit.ly/1kgnfo7>) a local historian and a veteran's agent unveiled the gravestone for Lt. Josiah Bacon on Saturday in front of nearly 100 people at Everett's Woodlawn Cemetery.

Historian and retired school teacher Ernie Sullivan says he researched Bacon's career, but couldn't find his gravestone. He and Joseph Hickey, Everett's director of Veteran Services, petitioned the Veterans Administration, which researched Bacon's story and cut the stone marker.

Sullivan says that throughout Bacon's life, the man played the roles of soldier, leader of the Whig Party in Massachusetts, state representative and philanthropist.

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6.5 - WIBW-TV (CBS-13): [VA arrests man for slashing tires and breaking windows on VA's vehicle](#) (18 October, Ariana Cohen, 153k online visitors/mo; Topeka, KS)

VA police arrested a suspect after one of their vehicles had slashed tires and broken windows.

Federal Chief of Police Department of Veteran Affairs for Eastern Kansas Sparky Edwards says Saturday morning, police noticed a VA police vehicle had multiple slashes to its tires and cracked windows from bricks.

Edwards says it was more than \$4,000 worth in damages to the vehicle. The vehicle was parked in front of emergency department.

Edwards tells 13 NEWS 52-year-old Ronald Robinson of Leavenworth was arrested Saturday afternoon.

Robinson was charged with felony criminal damage to property, threatening to harm law enforcement, intoxication on federal property, criminal length of knife on federal property, and disorderly conduct.

Robinson is currently being held on \$50,000 bond at Leavenworth County jail.

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6.6 - The News-Times: [Danbury honors WWII vet in Walk of Honor](#) (18 October, Katrina Koerting, 146k online visitors/mo; Danbury, CT)

Anthony J. Yakacki's 19th birthday is one he will remember forever ,because it was also the day he and his Marine unit entered the Battle of Iwo Jima.

He recalls his fellow Marines singing “Happy Birthday” to him in their landing craft before hitting the beach. Because it was his birthday, he was put in the back of the boat. Several Marines sitting in the front were shot and killed before landing.

Within a couple of hours of coming ashore, Yakacki was ordered to pick up the fallen medic’s bag and inject the wounded with morphine, said Carol Noreika, his daughter.

“He never did that before,” she said. “He was from a small coal-mining town in Pennsylvania.”

Noreika and her two brothers said they are proud of Yakacki, describing him as their hero and a great father.

His service was honored Sunday afternoon as this year’s recipient of the Warrior Award. He was recognized during the eighth annual Walk of Honor, held at the Danbury War Memorial to honor veterans of present and past American wars. The winner is selected from submitted nominations.

“I’m happy that they picked me,” said Yakacki, 89, of Danbury. “All of the other veterans deserve it as much as I do.”

About 150 people came out in the flurries to honor Yakacki and other veterans.

“I’m surprised that there were so many people who came out and recognized us,” Yakacki said. “I’m glad people are concerned about the veterans.”

Yakacki was a corporal with F Company, 2nd Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment of the 4th Marine Division. He enlisted when he was 18 and was wounded on March 12, 1945, when a shell exploded nearby, less than a month after the landing on Iwo Jima. He still has shrapnel in his back.

His children have just started to learn of his war experience. He hardly spoke of it while they were growing up and they knew little more than that he fought at Iwo Jima. He began opening up after watching the graphic scene in the beginning of “Saving Private Ryan,” Noreika said.

“He got all emotional and said it was what it was like with all of the flying body parts,” she said.

She and her two brothers were able to hear more as he gave talks to local groups, including a presentation at Joel Barlow High School, where she learned he strangled a man in hand-to-hand combat.

He later spoke of the carnage he witnessed and his encounters with the Japanese.

“He said you didn’t know where they were until you saw a flash of light in the cave or where they were hiding.” Noreika said.

She learned more about his time from his conversations with other Marines at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Whenever he encounters other Marines, Noreika said, he embraces them and begins sharing stories.’

Yakacki said the phrase “Semper Fidelis” still means a lot to him and other Marines.

"Once a Marine, always a Marine," he said.

Lt. Col. Patrick Ford, a retired Marine and psychologist at the Danbury Vet Center, spoke of the courage exhibited by those who fought at Iwo Jima. He himself entered the Marines under three veterans of the battle, and said they taught him the importance of strength in unity.

"Those who fought, recognized that the cause was more important than themselves," Ford said.

"Mr. Yakacki and other veterans are heroes."

Sunday's ceremony also included a moment of silence for those who died, including last year's recipient, John "Buzz" Hogan, who died in December from cancer caused by his exposure to Agent Orange.

The Walkway of Honor's new pillars and bricks were also dedicated in honor of those who have served.

"We owe them the highest respect and honor," said Lee M. Teicholz, one of the event's organizers.

Mayor Mark Boughton also thanked everyone in the armed forces for their sacrifices and courage.

"We're free because of the men and women who have given so much — their lives, their youth," he said.

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6.7 - Herald & Review: [Legionnaires' outbreak requires water system fix at veterans home](#)
(18 October, Kurt Erickson, 113k online visitors/mo; Decatur, IL)

SPRINGFIELD – Illinois is spending at least \$2.3 million to fix a water system linked to a deadly outbreak of Legionnaires' disease at its largest veterans nursing home.

A review of contracts awarded in the wake of the incident at the Quincy veterans home shows the state has hired companies to monitor the water supply and design and construct a secondary water treatment facility at the facility.

Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs spokesman Ryan Yantis said installation of a temporary water treatment system is under way.

"This automatic water treatment site will add additional disinfectant chemicals to the campuswide water system to improve water quality," Yantis said. "A permanent water treatment plant will be constructed while the temporary site functions."

The work comes a month after the outbreak killed 12 residents. More than 50 individuals from the nursing home tested positive for the disease, which is transmitted by breathing vapor or mist from contaminated water systems.

No new cases of Legionnaires' have been reported since Sept. 11, and no additional deaths have been reported since Sept. 15, Yantis said.

Investigators zeroed in on the water system at the 129-year-old facility as the culprit in the outbreak.

The facility, home to 400 residents, sits on 210 acres with more than 40 buildings. Yantis said the age and size of the campus create "unique challenges" for the agency.

State Sen. John Sullivan, D-Rushville, said he is hopeful the response is adequate.

"They serve a pretty vulnerable population," Sullivan said. "It was a serious situation with the deaths. Obviously there is going to be a cost involved in fixing it."

In late September, U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., requested a formal investigation into the outbreak by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. An official response has not yet been issued.

"Because the facility receives federal funding, he still feels that the federal agencies should be involved, and, as he said in his letter, making sure that the facility is taking the proper steps to provide a high quality of care and prevent future outbreaks," Durbin spokeswoman Christina Mulka said.

Yantis said no work is currently planned at the state's other veterans homes in Anna, LaSalle and Manteno.

"We will address each home's needs based on the physical requirement for each facility if a problem is discovered or if capital funds are appropriated," he said.

But, he said the department is working with other state agencies to use the lessons learned from the Quincy incident at the other homes.

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6.8 - Daily News: [Weight loss surgery connection to suicide?](#) (17 October, Scott Marcus, 30k online visitors/mo; Red Bluff, CA)

At the bottom of the television screen, during virtually every newscast, there is now a crawling parade of headlines informing us of everything from the latest world disasters to which celebrity is hooking up with whom. Recently, one story caught my eye: "Weight loss surgery connected to increased risk of suicide."

One might assume this to be counterintuitive, reasoning that if someone's lifestyle was so unhealthy that he underwent successful major surgery to change it, he would be so relieved with the outcome, that the resulting emotions would be happiness; possibly even jubilation.

Yet dig deeper.

First, the details; according to a study, troubled individuals were about 50 percent more likely to try to take their own lives after they lost a lot of weight with surgery.

“While we are clear and confident about the medical benefits of weight loss, especially through weight-loss surgery, I think we’re not as attentive to the potential psychological benefits or harms of it,” said Dr. Amir Ghaferi, director of bariatric surgery at the Ann Arbor Veterans Administration Healthcare System in Michigan.

Some of the correlation might be obvious. After all, morbidly obese people have a higher likelihood to suffer from mental health problems and have a much-higher-than-normal suicide risk than the average population. (“Morbid obesity,” affecting about six percent of our population, is defined as having a body mass index [BMI] 40 or higher. As illustration, a 5’ 4” woman’s healthy weight is considered somewhere between 120 and 150 pounds. That same woman, morbidly obese, would weigh around 235.)

Theories abound as to what is causing this tragic bump, including changes in how the body metabolizes alcohol metabolism after surgery; other substance misuse instead of food; as well as the increased stress of adjusting to a new body, image, and lifestyle; and more.

Ghaferi pointed out that not only does one’s body change, but also rapid weight loss can shake up important relationships.

That’s what I thought when I first saw the news crawlers. Think about it, an obese couple spends a great deal of time together eating. I don’t say this is a judgmental fashion, merely a reflection of reality. If you’re very heavy, you’re taking in more calories than you’re spending; pure and simple. Therefore, you’re either consuming more or eating more caloric foods (or both). If a couple is obese, it’s one method in which they can spend time together. After all, we tend to hang out with like-minded people.

Now consider the scenario where one partner rapidly loses weight. He or she is no longer willing (or able) to eat as before and will seek out other, healthier activities to fill that void. Therefore, relationships change, leaving both partners trying to figure out new ways to spend time together — or apart — causing stress and loneliness, not to mention friction between them. If the person who lost the weight already suffered from mental health issues, his ability to cope is diminished from the get-go. Add to that, that he no longer “medicates” with food exposing raw the emotions, and the result indeed could be what is seen in this study.

To me, this reiterates that — with very few exceptions — get thin quick weight loss programs might change us on the outside, but if we don’t address the root causes of the weight problem — thoughts, feelings, and beliefs — the results can actually be worse than tipping the scales at too high of a number. The question we ask must shift from “How fast can I lose weight” to “How do I build a healthier lifestyle that I can live with?”

Answer the latter instead of the former and not only will you be thin, but also your relationships will improve and indeed you’ll find the happiness that you sought.

Scott “Q” Marcus is a nationally known weight loss expert for baby boomers and the CRP — Chief Recovering Perfectionist — of www.ThisTimeIMeanIt.com.

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6.9 - Full Measure (Video): [VA Art Spending](#) (18 October, 1k online visitors/day; Washington, DC)

This week, Full Measure 'Follows the Money' and the trail of wasteful spending leads straight to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Lawmakers are criticizing the agency, saying the VA took some artistic liberty on some very pricey purchases.

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