



Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

2 October 2015

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

1.1 - The Washington Post (Federal Eye): [Congress to VA: \\$1.6 billion Denver hospital will be funded ... this time](#) (1 October, Emily Wax-Thibodeaux, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Despite a last minute fight over funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs vastly over budget hospital in Denver, Congress agreed to fund the rising sticker price of the \$1.6 billion medical facility, thought to be one of the most expensive hospitals in the world.

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1.2 - NPR (Audio): [The Number 22: Is There A 'False Narrative' For Vet Suicide?](#) (1 October, Jay Price, 8.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A single number has shaped the way that Americans think about young military veterans. It's the number 22, as in, 22 vets take their lives each day. The number has become a rallying cry for advocates trying to call attention to suicide among vets, especially those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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1.3 - Military.com: [VA Launching New Customer-Oriented Website on Veterans Day](#) (1 October, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

The Veterans Affairs Department will be going live with a new website on November 11 -- Veterans Day -- one intended as a quick stop for veterans wanting information or to apply for benefits and services.

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1.4 - The Denver Post (Updated): [Congress agrees to deal to fund VA hospital in Aurora, Rep. Jeff Miller backs off plan to cut VA bonuses](#) (1 October, Mark K. Matthews, 4.7M online visitors/mo; Denver, CO)

A last-minute fight over funding for a Veterans Affairs hospital in Aurora was settled peacefully Wednesday, and now construction of the \$1.675 billion facility has the full support of Congress — ending months of frustration for Colorado lawmakers and veterans.

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1.5 - The Dallas Morning News: [Watchdog: VA lost two key pages of vet's medical records](#) (1 October, Dave Lieber, 3.8M online visitors/day; Dallas, TX)

A former veteran whom I described last month as “the lost soul of the VA” has been found. Good news to share. After The Watchdog asked the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs about the forgotten appeal hearing promised to former Air Force Sgt. Rickey Staves, the Fort Worth vet got his hearing last week.

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1.6 - The Washington Times (AP): [St. Louis VA mental health records questioned by watchdog](#) (1 October, Jim Suhr, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A federal watchdog says it has confirmed a whistleblower's claims that Veterans Affairs sites in St. Louis marked appointments for mental health patients as completed before they were seen, effectively boosting the appearance of the sites' productivity.

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1.7 - The Washington Times: [VA apologizes for 'ill-advised' ban on veterans' cellphones](#)

(1 October, Jessica Chasmar, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs apologized Wednesday for an "ill-advised" policy that banned veterans from bringing their cellphones to appointments. Photographs, first published on the blog Disabled Veterans, emerged earlier this week showing official VA leaflets alerting veterans that their appointments would be canceled if they brought a cellphone with them, the Washington Free Beacon reported.

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1.8 - Washington Free Beacon: [VA: Ban of Phones for Veterans Was 'Ill Advised'](#) (1

October, Adam Kredo, 2.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) apologized on Wednesday for temporarily implementing what it called an "ill-advised" policy at some medical centers that banned veterans from bringing cellphones to appointments, according to a statement provided by the VA to the Washington Free Beacon.

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1.9 - The Hill: [Black box to combat medical malpractice](#) (1 October, Wade Ayer, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Until the death of my sister Julie Ayer Rubenzer in 2003 I lead a rather normal life, going to work, spending time with my family and enjoying life. Julie's death was a clear result of medical malpractice. I have spent the last 10 years devoted to researching this issue across the country. As a result I created a Facebook page called the "National Organization for Medical Malpractice Victims"...

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1.10 - KOMO News (Video): [Dozens of vets mistakenly told their benefits were cut off](#) (1

October, Tracy Vedder, 1.6M online visitors/day; Seattle, WA)

At least two dozen local veterans were mistakenly told their benefits were being cut off, and it's all because the Seattle Veterans Administration ignored a big pile of mail. It's part of KOMO News on-going investigation into the local VA.

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1.11 - Las Vegas Sun (AP): [Veterans cemetery in Boulder City gets \\$3.5M to restore slipping headstones](#) (1 October, 902k online visitors/mo; Henderson, NV)

Nevada has received a \$3.5 million federal grant to help address sinking headstones at a veterans cemetery in Boulder City. Gov. Brian Sandoval announced Thursday that the state won the grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

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1.12 - Portland Press Herald: [VA pursues expansion of its outpatient care clinic in Portland](#) (1 October, Kevin Miller, 772k online visitors/mo; Portland, ME)

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is hoping to expand a clinic in Portland that allows southern Maine veterans to receive basic medical and mental health care locally rather than traveling to the Togus VA Medical Center near Augusta.

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1.13 - Military Times: [Higher drug co-pays, uniform DoD-VA formulary in defense bill](#) (1 October, Patricia Kime, 421k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Easier access to urgent care, higher pharmacy co-pays and a coordinated formulary between the Defense and Veterans Affairs departments are among the changes service members, families and retirees will see in health care as a result of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill.

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1.14 - Berkshire Eagle: [Williamstown man gets 2 years in jail for assaulting woman](#) (2 October, Bob Dunn, 312k online visitors/mo; Pittsfield, MA)

Mechta felt Colbert's chances for rehabilitation would be better if he were able to take advantage of the counseling and supervision available through the VA Medical Center and the Soldier On program, rather than a state prison incarceration.

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1.15 - The Spectrum: [Volunteer numbers more than VA expected](#) (1 October, Freddy Groves, 295k online visitors/mo; Saint George, UT)

The Department of Veterans Affairs expected 100,000 volunteers to step up during the 2015 Summer of Service, and what it got was 300,000 — triple the expected number.

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1.16 - The Memphis Flyer: [Organization Trains Rescue Animals for Veterans with PTSD](#) (2 October, Alexandra Pusateri, 231k online visitors/mo; Memphis, TN)

If Memphis veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or a traumatic brain injury (TBI) want to receive a service dog, the process can be stressful and costly. And until recently, the groups that paired veterans with service dogs were located far away. But a new local organization, The Paul Oliver Foundation, is changing that.

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1.17 - WOWT-TV (NBC-6, Video): [Starving Cancer Veteran Battles VA Bureaucracy](#) (1 October, Brandon Scott, 212k online visitors/mo; Omaha, NE)

Since July, WOWT 6 News has been following the story of Jonathan Robbins, a Marine Corps veteran from Omaha battling stage three throat cancer while also battling the bureaucracy at the VA Health System.

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1.18 - WBNG-TV (CBS-12, Video): [New VA Clinic looks to give local veterans the help they deserve](#) (1 October, Scott Sasina, 161k online visitors/mo; Johnson City, NY)

There are more than 17,000 veterans in the Southern Tier. Unfortunately, not all of them are getting medical help. But a new Veteran Affairs clinic coming to downtown Binghamton could change all that. On Wednesday, Richard Hanna, the Republican Representative for the 22nd District, announced a new VA clinic coming to downtown Binghamton.

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1.19 - Kitsap Sun: [VA Puget Sound announces Bremerton clinic location](#) (1 October, Ed Friedrich, 105k online visitors/mo; Bremerton, WA)

The VA Puget Sound Health Care System has signed a lease for a new community-based outpatient clinic in Bremerton. The new clinic will allow more veterans to be seen and new health care services to be offered.

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1.20 - The Daily Tribune: [Bill aims to recruit doctors at VA clinics](#) (1 October, Jonathan Anderson, 104k online visitors/mo; Wisconsin Rapids, WI)

Two Wisconsin lawmakers hope to solve a shortage of doctors at rural Veterans Affairs facilities by providing cash incentives to professionals willing to work in underserved areas such as central Wisconsin. U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, D-La Crosse, introduced a bill this week that he said would help attract physicians to rural VA medical centers, which have been forced to cut back on services because of staffing shortages.

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1.21 - KBIA-FM (NPR-91.3, AP): [Federal Watchdog Confirms St. Louis' Veterans Affairs Wrongdoing](#) (2 October, 83k online visitors/mo; Columbia, MO)

A federal watchdog said it confirmed a whistleblower's claims that St. Louis' Veterans Affairs sites wrongly marked appointments for mental health patients as completed even before the patients were seen, boosting the system's performance showing.

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1.22 - KEYC-TV (CBS/FOX-12, Video): [V.A. Offers Yoga Class for Veterans](#) (2 October, Kassandra Sepeda, 36k online visitors/mo; Mankato, MN)

It's not your typical yoga class...Milwaukee's v-a medical center has started hosting a free yoga class every Tuesday for veterans... As many as twenty-five local vets have been showing up every week!

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1.23 - FierceGovernment: [Two VA medical centers marked appointments as complete before doctors saw patients](#) (1 October, Ryan McDermott, 21k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Two Veterans Affairs Department hospitals marked appointments as complete even before patients were seen by a doctor, according to a Sept. 29 VA inspector general report. The report examined the John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks VA Medical Centers, both of which are in St. Louis, between October 2013 and June 2014.

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2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

2.1 - Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: [Chance encounter with homeless vet sparks volunteer effort](#) (1 October, Meg Jones, 1.9M online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

"I thought 'What's the price of freedom?'" So Frelka-Bruch proposed to her company, Sigma-Aldrich Corp., to fill 50 backpacks with items homeless veterans would need and donate them to volunteer services at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

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2.2 - Journal News: [Westchester homeless veteran population down to 'functional zero'](#)

(1 October, Mark Lungariello, 776k online visitors/day; White Plains, NY)

When Westchester County launched its Patriot Housing Initiative in August 2013, it set a goal of ending veteran homelessness in the county by the end of 2015. County officials said at a news conference Thursday that Westchester is at "functional zero," with no known homeless veterans on the street.

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2.3 - The Leaf-Chronicle: [Grant will help homeless veterans' transition](#) (1 October, Ray Howze, 264k online visitors/mo; Clarksville, TN)

Homeless veterans now will have a few more resources available to get back on their feet. On Thursday at Buffalo Valley's transition house on Fork Drive, the organization received a \$235,705 grant to go toward facility improvements and rehabilitation efforts at the organization's six homes in Lewis, Montgomery and Hamilton counties.

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3. Ending the Claims Backlog

3.1 - Washington Free Beacon: [VA Fails to Meet Self-Imposed Deadline For Reducing Claims Backlog: More than 75,000 veterans still awaiting benefits](#) (1 October, Morgan Chalfant, 2.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has failed to meet its self-imposed deadline for reducing the backlog of disability claims to zero. In January 2013, when the agency was led by Secretary Eric Shinseki, promised that the count of unresolved claims 125 days old or older would be whittled down to zero by Sept. 30, 2015, the end of the fiscal year.

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

5. Women Veterans

5.1 - Lafayette Journal & Courier: [Conference to honor women veterans](#) (1 October, Taya Flores, 390k online visitors/mo; Lafayette, IN)

Retired Maj. Gen. Erika Steuterman will keynote the Women Veterans conference Tuesday at the West Lafayette Public Library. Purdue University centers — the Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and the Military Family Research Institute — are sponsoring the event.

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6. Other

6.1 - The New York Times (AP): [Democrats Block Veterans Funding Bill as Budget Talks Loom](#) (1 October, 70.6M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

Democrats on Thursday blocked the Senate from turning to a \$78 billion spending measure for the Department of Veterans Affairs and military base construction. They and the White House argue that it's part of an overall GOP budget framework that shortchanges spending on other domestic programs.

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6.2 - The Huffington Post: [Collateral Damage: Effects of the Current Narrative on Veterans](#) (1 October, Tom Aiello, 33.6M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

During a recent Veteran's charity fundraising gala, much like the hundreds of galas that occur year round - something significant happened... At a point in the show the emcee asked all attendees from a certain group of Veterans in the audience to stand and be recognized.... Not a single person stood in spite of their presence.

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6.3 - FOX News: [America needs a leader, not a loser](#) (1 October, Mike Huckabee, 31.8M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

As president I will transform Washington and transfer power back to the people. My plan is simple: -Term Limits for Congress and judges. Do your service and return home... Require Congress to get their healthcare from the V.A.. No American veteran will ever rot and die again if they're waiting in line alongside a U.S. Senator.

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6.4 - The Washington Post (The Fed Page, Partnership for Public Service): [Helping military members transition to a new life](#) (1 October, Susan Kelly, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

For the more than 200,000 men and women leaving the military every year, finding employment and transitioning to a new life can be difficult and sometimes quite traumatic. "You don't know what's out there and how you'll fit into civilian life," said Marine Sgt. Maj. Jim Booker, 53, who left the military this past summer after 32 years of service.

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6.5 - The Washington Post (Act Four): ['Heroes Reborn' and 'You're the Worst' take on Latino veterans' experiences](#) (1 October, Alyssa Rosenberg, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

As African American characters claw back territory they've long been denied on national television, drawing huge audiences to shows like "Empire" and "Scandal," it's become increasingly obvious that TV lags in other areas: Asian characters who are neither tech-support workers nor sex objects, characters of Middle Eastern descent on shows that don't deal with national security and Latino characters in general, among others.

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6.6 - USA Today: [Time to stop arguing; time to find answers](#) (2 October, 16.7M online visitors/mo; McLean, VA)

New gun laws will not and cannot stop the type of horrific violence that descended on Umpqua Community College on Thursday morning. We must undertake a fundamental change in how we, as a society, respond to the mass killings... It has taken decades to overcome the inertia that perpetuated health-care delays and inadequacies for military veterans through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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6.7 - NJ.com: [N.J. veterans' groups to honor soldiers buried at Finn's Point National Cemetery](#) (1 October, Bill Gallo Jr., 7.3M online visitors/mo; Newark, NJ)

Tucked away hot far [from] the Delaware River is one of New Jersey's only two national cemeteries. Officials from New Jersey veterans groups plan to gather there Sunday at 11 a.m. to pay tribute to those buried there, many of them Confederate prisoners of war.

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6.8 - Military.com: [Congress to Investigate Claims VA Officials Abused Positions for Gain](#) (1 October, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

Congress will hold a hearing this month into allegations that two Veterans Affairs Department officials used their positions to push a pair of regional directors out of their jobs, take over the vacancies and collect hundreds of thousands of dollars in relocation expenses from the VA.

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6.9 - VICE News: [Gunman Among At Least 13 Dead in Oregon Shooting](#) (1 October, 6.3M online visitors/mo; Brooklyn, NY)

A shooting at the campus of Umpqua Community College in the southwest Oregon city of Roseburg has left 13 people dead and 20 others injured, according to Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum... Victims are also expected to be routed to a nearby Veterans Administration medical center and to hospitals in the Eugene/Springfield area, located roughly an hour away.

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6.10 - The Washington Examiner (Video): [Watch: What the VA really does to whistleblowers](#) (1 October, Pete Kasperowicz, 3.9M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Two whistleblowers from the Department of Veterans Affairs told the Washington Examiner that while the VA claims to want to hear complaints from its employees, it does everything it can to fight back and defend itself.

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6.11 - Philly.com (Philadelphia Inquirer): [Congress to probe VA relocation payments](#) (1 October, Tricia L. Nadolny, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Philadelphia, PA)

A congressional committee said Thursday it will hold a hearing on allegations that senior officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs - including the director of the Philadelphia benefits office - misused the agency's relocation program for their own gain.

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6.12 - The Hill: [Senate Democrats block VA funding bill](#) (1 October, Jordain Carney, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Senate Democrats on Thursday blocked a bill that would fund veterans' benefits and military construction, in an effort to push Republicans to negotiate a larger budget deal. Senators voted 50-44 on ending debate over whether to proceed to the funding bill. Sixty votes were needed.

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6.13 - Stars and Stripes: [VA art budget comes under fire in Congress](#) (1 October, Travis J. Tritten, 1.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, went to the House floor on Wednesday with poster displays of a rock sculpture and other installations that account for \$6.34 million in recent art and consulting expenses at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

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6.14 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: [Self-promotion: A VA official created a new job and then she took it](#) (2 October, 1.1M online visitors/mo; Pittsburgh, PA)

This week's winner in the "nice work if you can get it" category is Diana Rubens, a high-ranking official in the Washington, D.C., office of Veterans Affairs who created a new position in Philadelphia, where she wanted to move, and promptly filled it — herself.

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6.15 - Military Times: [Senate Democrats block VA budget bill](#) (1 October, Leo Shane III, 421k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Senate Democrats on Thursday blocked plans for a nearly \$164 billion Veterans Affairs Department budget for fiscal 2016 over objections to Republicans' overarching spending plans and a lack of progress on a compromise budget deal.

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6.16 - Leavenworth Times: [Preliminary hearing set for former VA physician assistant](#) (1 October, John Richmeier, 53k online visitors/mo; Leavenworth, KS)

A preliminary hearing has been scheduled for a former physician assistant who is accused of sexually abusing patients at the Leavenworth VA hospital. The preliminary hearing for Mark E. Wisner is scheduled for Oct. 28.

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6.17 - FierceHealthIT: [VA OIG: Palo Alto Healthcare System vendor partnership put patient data at risk](#) (1 October, Susan D. Hall, 40k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Palo Alto VA Healthcare System put patient health information at risk during a pilot program with an outside vendor meant to improve its IT capabilities, according to a report from the Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Inspector General.

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1. Access to Benefits/Care

1.1 - The Washington Post (Federal Eye): [Congress to VA: \\$1.6 billion Denver hospital will be funded ... this time](#) (1 October, Emily Wax-Thibodeaux, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Despite a last minute fight over funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs vastly over budget hospital in Denver, Congress agreed to fund the rising sticker price of the \$1.6 billion medical facility, thought to be one of the most expensive hospitals in the world.

Throughout the week, tensions increased over whether Congress would fund the last \$625 million needed to finish the complex, whose price tag has ballooned to nearly three times the \$604 million the VA originally budgeted for. The project is widely known as “the biggest construction failure in VA history.”

The project was riddled with errors, mismanagement and problems ranging from hospital doors that were supposed to cost \$100 each but ended up -running \$1,400 to entire rooms that had to be refashioned because requests for medical equipment changed at the last minute.

Last week, the Senate agreed to a bill that would allow the VA to spend the additional \$625 million. The Senate measure includes a provision that would put the Army Corps of Engineers in charge of any VA project expected to cost \$100 million or more.

But the measure was opposed by Rep. Jeff Miller (R-Fla.) chairman of the House veterans committee and an outspoken critic of the agency.

Miller wanted the VA to cover part of the \$625 million with \$200 million used to pay VA employee bonuses.

VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson, recently tapped to get the Denver project back on track, called that suggestion “a lousy idea,” saying it would take money out of the pockets of hard-working employees.

On Wednesday, Miller said he would “reluctantly” support the Senate bill.

The 184-bed hospital is expected to replace an outdated World War II-era facility in Denver. But the project is already \$1 billion over budget and includes what even the VA’s leadership has called “extravagant features,” including a \$100 million atrium and concourse that veterans groups say is a waste of resources.

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1.2 - NPR (Audio): [The Number 22: Is There A 'False Narrative' For Vet Suicide?](#) (1 October, Jay Price, 8.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A single number has shaped the way that Americans think about young military veterans.

It's the number 22, as in, 22 vets take their lives each day.

The number has become a rallying cry for advocates trying to call attention to suicide among vets, especially those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Twenty-two, not some vague, rounded-off number. Not 30, not 20. Twenty-two.

A number so specific it inspires action. Speeches, fundraisers, marches and even walks clear across the country.

But 22 doesn't quite add up.

There were lots of news stories this summer about Toby Flaget, a retired police officer and Marine veteran, who walked from Oregon to New Jersey wearing a t-shirt that said "22 is 22 too many."

"People don't want to talk about it. But it's a real problem," Flaget says.

There's actually a different problem.

That number, 22, doesn't really apply to the veterans everyone thinks it does: those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"That number, if we talk about it out of context, it's questionable," Keith Jennings, Iraq combat veteran and clinical psychologist, says. He acts as chief science adviser for a North Carolina-based group called StopSoldierSuicide.org.

"So when we talk 22 deaths a day, we as Americans think that number? 22? I can hang my hat on it. 'Cause it's a hard number. But it's not, there's a big plus or minus, uncertainty and variability behind that," he says.

Jennings says the 22 research was a Herculean effort by good VA scientists, but it's not what advocates and politicians often suggest.

The study looked at vets of all ages, and found that most who killed themselves were likely too old to have served in Iraq or Afghanistan. The authors were clear about that, and other caveats, but their cautions are often ignored when people talk about the number 22.

Plus, suicide is notoriously tricky to study. One reason is that it's relatively rare.

"It takes so long to put together good data on suicide research because we need enough time to lapse to allow enough cases to accrue for us to start making meaningful sense of the data," says Derek Smolenski, a Defense Department epidemiologist and statistician.

He says suicide studies are usually full of caveats like that.

So Smolenski and a team, in a study released this year, dug deeper. They found that vets who had served during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars commit suicide at a rate of about one a day — not 22.

Of course, even one a day is a lot. And younger military vets are committing suicide much more often than civilians.

Doctors treating veterans want researchers to identify which groups of vets are most at risk, like troops who saw heavy combat or soldiers who were pushed out of the service early.

"That helps us focus what should our efforts be as far as outreach, education, prevention and treatment," says Dr. Bruce Capehart, who heads the mental health program for Afghanistan and Iraq veterans at the VA Medical Center in Durham, N.C.

"But we have to know who the people are that need those treatments before we can offer it to them and help them become engaged in care," Capehart says.

Helping vets: that's what the number 22 motivated a lot of people to try to do.

Jennings, the clinical psychologist, agrees it has raised awareness. But he worries that the big, inaccurate, number contributes to a corrosive stereotype about Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

"That narrative goes something like, American enlists, American goes to war, American comes back and is diagnosed with a mental health condition or is broken — somehow there's this connotation — and because they have PTSD, they ultimately kill themselves. That's a false narrative," he says.

Jennings is the son of a Vietnam vet and grew up surrounded by successful, well-adjusted veterans of that war. But he admits that when he thinks about Vietnam vets, his mind conjures up the Hollywood stereotype of a vet, begging from a wheelchair with a POW-MIA flag.

This kind of narrative is powerful stuff, but Jennings says it shouldn't define young veterans.

"What gets lost in the conversation is the majority — actually you can say the vast majority — do OK," Jennings says. "The vast majority of our veterans do OK."

Something, he says, that people should remember when they meet a young combat vet — or when they hear the number 22.

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1.3 - Military.com: [VA Launching New Customer-Oriented Website on Veterans Day](#) (1 October, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

The Veterans Affairs Department will be going live with a new website on November 11 -- Veterans Day -- one intended as a quick stop for veterans wanting information or to apply for benefits and services.

"Vets.gov" will not replace "va.gov," the VA's main site, but will consolidate information pages and online applications for a range of programs, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits Danny Pummill said Tuesday during a veterans' summit sponsored by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and DefenseOne.

"[It's] our first attempt at bringing everything together at one location, so veterans on Veterans Day will have one place to go and be able to find all the information there," he said.

Joe Davis, national spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, said the veterans group has yet to be briefed on the new site but considers it a positive step by the VA.

"Combining umpteen websites into one is an initiative that's long overdue. We look forward to its successful implementation," he said on Thursday.

The VA's vision is to establish Vets.gov as a destination portal for veterans to be able to file for a benefit, check on a claim, add or remove a dependent, change addresses and more, but without first wading through other parts of the VA's bureaucracy. Over time the VA plans to migrate from 300 to 400 va.gov sites over to Vets.gov, according to the specifications spelled out in the contract proposal published on the FedBizOpps site in early September.

The VA anticipates about 20,000 visits to the site on the first day. Just how many eventually will visit the site is unknown but the VA noted in its contract solicitation that the contractor "should plan for maximum general public usage."

When it goes live on Veterans Day Vets.gov will offer up instructions and steps for some of the agency's most popular services and transactions, the VA said in a statement on Wednesday. Additional functions and tools will be added over the coming year, with "the ultimate goal [of making it] the single, one-stop shop for information and self-service for veterans and those that care for them," the statement said.

Pummill said VA Secretary Bob McDonald, who came to the department after a career with consumer products giant Procter and Gamble, has been driving VA officials and staff to be more "veteran-centric." McDonald has often said veterans are customers and it's the VA's responsibility to meet their needs.

"Is it going to work perfectly on the first day? Probably not. It's a step in the right direction, something we should have done a long time ago," Pummill said.

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1.4 - The Denver Post (Updated): [Congress agrees to deal to fund VA hospital in Aurora, Rep. Jeff Miller backs off plan to cut VA bonuses](#) (1 October, Mark K. Matthews, 4.7M online visitors/mo; Denver, CO)

WASHINGTON — A last-minute fight over funding for a Veterans Affairs hospital in Aurora was settled peacefully Wednesday, and now construction of the \$1.675 billion facility has the full support of Congress — ending months of frustration for Colorado lawmakers and veterans.

"Today marks a pivotal day for veterans in Colorado and the Rocky Mountain region," said U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, R-Colo. "Years from now, when veterans go to this hospital to receive the care that they have (been) promised, they will enter into what will be the crown jewel of the VA infrastructure, the crown jewel of the VA system."

Prior to the celebration, however, Colorado lawmakers had to solve one final issue: helping the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs get the final \$625 million it says it needs to finish the troubled project, which has blown its budget so badly that its current price tag is nearly three times the \$604 million the VA expected to pay in 2011.

Last week, at the urging of Gardner and Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., the Senate agreed to a bill that would allow the VA to spend that additional \$625 million.

But the measure — which cleared the Senate unanimously Friday — initially was opposed by U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller, the powerful chairman of the House veterans committee.

Miller, a Florida Republican, wanted the VA to cover part of the \$625 million by siphoning \$200 million from a fund used to pay employee bonuses. He was so adamant about this approach that on Tuesday he successfully blocked the Senate bill from going forward in the House.

Under pressure from Colorado lawmakers and Republican leadership, however, Miller relented. And in a floor speech Wednesday, he said he would support the Senate bill reluctantly.

But that didn't mean he went quietly.

In his speech, Miller railed against a lack of accountability at the VA and an agency culture that has allowed officials to spend millions of dollars on artwork and conferences with little repercussion for the gross mismanagement of the Aurora facility.

"The (House veterans) committee recently found that the Palo Alto (Calif.) VA health care system has spent at least \$6.3 million on art — on art and consulting services," he said. "These projects include an art installation on the side of a parking garage that displays quotes by Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt in — wait for it — in Morse code that cost \$285,000. It actually lights up."

Although Miller's frustration is shared by members of Colorado's congressional delegation, lawmakers from the state said local veterans need the hospital built as soon as possible to deal with growing demand.

"There is no doubt the VA mismanaged this project from the start. And as disappointing and unacceptable as this situation has been, we are where we are," said U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter, D-Arizona. "Under the leadership of (VA) Secretary (Robert) McDonald and Deputy Secretary (Sloan) Gibson, the VA has admitted their mistakes on this project, and they are both personally involved in completion of this facility."

A couple hours after Miller spoke, the House passed the Senate bill by a unanimous vote. Congress also moved ahead Wednesday with a separate stopgap spending bill for the federal budget that is considered essential to continue work on the Aurora project.

The twin moves all but end a Colorado campaign that began last spring to keep the over-budget project afloat and funded.

"We have the components in place to complete this facility to serve the needs of veterans in Colorado and throughout the Rocky Mountain region," Bennet said in a statement. "Now let's finish the damn thing."

Added VA spokeswoman Victoria Dillon in a statement: "We know we made mistakes in the development of this medical center, but we remain steadfast in our commitment to complete the state-of-the-art facility for Colorado veterans and doing so while being good stewards of taxpayer dollars."

Accompanying these cheers, however, is no small amount of relief, as the Colorado effort to fund the facility nearly fell apart in the final week. Until Wednesday, it appeared as if the Senate bill and Miller's proposal were on a collision course with little time to solve the impasse.

The VA has spent about \$1 billion on the project. And without getting approval from Congress to spend the extra \$625 million, it was expected that work on the construction site would shut down in early October.

But congressional aides said Miller gave up the fight after he realized his proposal was dead on arrival in the upper chamber and after he was told that the VA would take a look at his ideas to route money to the Aurora project from less-essential parts of the agency.

Included in the Senate measure are several reforms, including a provision that would put the Army Corps of Engineers in charge of any VA project expected to cost \$100 million or more. The policy change is in direct response to budget problems at the Aurora construction site and a handful of other new VA facilities.

That this funding fight came down to the final few days is not a huge surprise; twice this year, Congress hesitated before eventually steering money to the Aurora hospital, which was badly managed and over-designed according to a months-long investigation by The Denver Post.

With the last \$625 million ready to go, federal lawmakers now can turn their attention toward instituting broader changes at the VA, as well as prepare for the public release of two federal inquiries that sought to understand how the Aurora project became the biggest construction failure in the agency's history.

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1.5 - The Dallas Morning News: [Watchdog: VA lost two key pages of vet's medical records](#) (1 October, Dave Lieber, 3.8M online visitors/day; Dallas, TX)

A former veteran whom I described last month as “the lost soul of the VA” has been found. Good news to share.

After The Watchdog asked the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs about the forgotten appeal hearing promised to former Air Force Sgt. Rickey Staves, the Fort Worth vet got his hearing last week.

News from the hearing is both wonderful and horrendous. Wonderful because moments before it began, Staves learned of two missing pages from his medical file. Horrendous because those two missing pages, a doctor's report, support his case that his injuries are probably military-related.

“Patient had to pull and push heavy equipment up to 300 lbs. at a time while in the Air Force loading planes,” the doctor writes in the newly discovered pages.

That bolsters Staves' case. He expects a decision within a year. He's optimistic.

Staves says, "I wrote The Watchdog, CNN and the secretary of Veterans Affairs. You were the only one that came to my aid."

Let's review: The VA lost Staves' appeal; the VA lost his address; the VA lost the two most important pages of his medical file.

How many millions more like him?

False pharmacy

Did you see the story about a drug company that raised the price of a drug from \$13.60 to \$750 per pill? After an outcry, the pharma-boss said the price would be lowered, but he didn't say by how much.

That leads to a question: Are you allowed to shop for a better price for prescription drugs in Texas?

Reader Robert M. tells The Watchdog he went to a pharmacy for a prescription refill and learned the price jumped 20 percent. He went to a competing pharmacy to price-check before buying.

"The pharmacist said she couldn't tell me," he says. "She said it was against the law for her to divulge the price. The only way I could be told the price, she said, would be for me to first transfer my prescription over. Surely, that can't be true, can it?"

What's your guess? Can you shop for a better price on brand-name drugs?

I asked the Texas State Board of Pharmacy. Answer: "There is no Texas law or rule that prohibits a pharmacist from providing the price for a prescription to a patient."

If a pharmacy refuses to give you a price, file a complaint with the state board.

Find a doctor

While we're talking health, how do you find a doctor who takes Medicare?

Reader Carole H. says she's trying to find a doctor for her 91-year-old mom, her father and herself, but all doctors she calls don't take Medicare patients.

I checked with Medicare. They tell me:

1. Visit the medicare.gov website or call 1-800-MEDICARE.
2. Search for doctors at www.medicare.gov/physiciancompare/search.html.

High medical bills

Complaints about high medical and hospital bills are common. Now I hear about an occupation called medical billing advocates. They fight for lower bills. Their group is Medical Billing Advocates of America — billadvocates.com.

Advocates don't charge an upfront fee, but collect a percentage of savings. If they don't save on a bill, they don't get paid. (A tip of the hat to Star-Ledger watchdog columnist Karin Price Mueller in New Jersey for finding this.)

Closing time

Note to U.S. Postal Service: You put your counter clerk at the downtown Dallas Post Office at 400 N. Ervay St. in a bad position every day when the counter closes at 5 p.m. Anyone can still line up and approach the window. He's forced to turn them away. Where's a "CLOSED" sign?

The other night, I arrived at 5:04 p.m. and stood yards away from a clerk who refused to serve me.

"I'm inside and in line," I said.

"I'm not going to argue with you," he said, in a line I bet he repeats most days to late arrivals.

Don't worry, pal. In Watchdog Nation, we don't argue. We share.

I snapped his photo with my iPhone and departed. Outside, I tweeted the pic and posted my frustration on Facebook.

Reaction from others was instant: "They've done it to me, too," Penny B. writes. "I never had a FedEx box be rude," James W. posts. "They should do what good businesses do," A.P. writes. "Lock the entry but take care of those inside — with a smile and great service."

I agree. See, Mr. Postal Clerk. We don't argue. We take it to the streets and gain immediate support. Brave new world.

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1.6 - The Washington Times (AP): [St. Louis VA mental health records questioned by watchdog](#) (1 October, Jim Suhr, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

ST. LOUIS (AP) - A federal watchdog says it has confirmed a whistleblower's claims that Veterans Affairs sites in St. Louis marked appointments for mental health patients as completed before they were seen, effectively boosting the appearance of the sites' productivity.

St. Louis VA Health Care System's records from October 2013 and June of last year showed an employee inappropriately marked 60 percent of the 20 consults reviewed as "complete" before those treatments were finished, a VA inspector general's report released Wednesday said. Such misrepresentation "increases the risk that veterans may become lost in the system" if a patient misses a consult appointment or the clinic cancels it, according to the report.

The questioned employee, who was not named in the report, told investigators that he never received formal training or was made aware of the policy on consult management.

Investigators also substantiated allegations that the St. Louis VA's full-time outpatient psychiatrists benefited financially from productivity data, the report showed. During the 2013

fiscal year, the psychiatrists received an average of \$13,710 in performance pay, and seven of them got an additional \$2,920 on average for meeting or exceeding the productivity goal.

The report called remedies pursued by the St. Louis VA's acting chief "acceptable," and "we consider the recommendations closed."

St. Louis VA spokeswoman Marcena Gunter said Thursday the matter was "an isolated incident with one employee," who she said has been "re-educated" along with the providers about proper protocol.

"We're also doing monthly audits to ensure that we continue in that compliance," she said. "I think the most important thing we want the public to know is that the issue did not affect reported patient wait times. We certainly want our patients to get the best possible care, timely care and access to all they appointments they need."

The St. Louis VA system's former chief of psychiatry, Dr. Jose Mathews, publicly complained last year that too few psychiatric patients were being seen, creating a delay in patient care. Mathews also alleged in a 2013 federal complaint that he was demoted because of a staff "mutiny" that followed his efforts to make employees work harder and more efficiently.

Mathews, who took over as chief in November 2012, told The Associated Press last year that he "could account for only a four-hour workday."

U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Democrat, said in a statement that the report showed "bad training, not bad motives" at the St. Louis VA, adding that her priority is to see a permanent director hired there "to help keep things moving in the right direction."

McCaskill's counterpart, Republican Sen. Roy Blunt, called the questioned records-keeping "inexcusable."

"It's my view that these problems are directly tied to the fact that the St. Louis VA has had a revolving door of acting directors with no clear or consistent leadership," Blunt said in a statement. "The VA does not seem to be getting better and that is not something our veterans should have to endure. We owe our veterans more."

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1.7 - The Washington Times: [VA apologizes for 'ill-advised' ban on veterans' cellphones](#)
(1 October, Jessica Chasmar, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs apologized Wednesday for an "ill-advised" policy that banned veterans from bringing their cellphones to appointments.

Photographs, first published on the blog Disabled Veterans, emerged earlier this week showing official VA leaflets alerting veterans that their appointments would be canceled if they brought a cellphone with them, the Washington Free Beacon reported.

The signs gave a list of "prohibited items," which included images of a gun, a knife, a backpack and an iPhone.

“If brought to your appointment will [sic] result in the cancellation of your exam(s),” reads the leaflet, which bears the VA’s official logo.

The notices were included in appointment packages to veterans, a VA official told the Free Beacon.

“The flyer included in Veterans’ Compensation and Pension (C&P) appointment letters at the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System’s (ECHCS) Golden community based outpatient clinic were ill-advised,” the VA official said in a statement.

The official made clear that exams will not be canceled if a phone is brought to appointments.

“All C&P program managers across the system have been informed that the distribution of these, or similar, flyers should be immediately discontinued,” the official said. “The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) goal is to provide veterans with the care and the opportunities for health that they have earned through their service and sacrifices.”

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1.8 - Washington Free Beacon: [VA: Ban of Phones for Veterans Was ‘Ill Advised’](#) (1 October, Adam Kredo, 2.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) apologized on Wednesday for temporarily implementing what it called an “ill-advised” policy at some medical centers that banned veterans from bringing cellphones to appointments, according to a statement provided by the VA to the Washington Free Beacon.

Photographs emerged earlier this week showing official signs at VA medical facilities stating that a veteran would have his or her appointment cancelled if they bring with them a cellphone.

The photos, first published on the blog Disabled Veterans, depict of a list of “prohibited items.” Included within that list, along with guns, knives, and backpacks, is a photo of an iPhone.

“If brought to your appointment [these items] will result in the cancelation of your exam(s),” reads the flyer, which bears the VA’s official logo and slogan, “Defining Excellence in the 21st Century.”

These flyers were included in appointment packages to veterans, according to a VA official who spoke to the Free Beacon and disclosed that the flyers would be “immediately discontinued.”

“The flyer included in Veterans’ Compensation and Pension (C&P) appointment letters at the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System’s (ECHCS) Golden community based outpatient clinic were ill-advised,” The VA official said in a statement.

Exams will not be cancelled if a phone is brought to a C&P appointment, the official made clear.

“All C&P program managers across the system have been informed that the distribution of these, or similar, flyers should be immediately discontinued,” the official said. “The Department

of Veterans Affairs (VA) goal is to provide veterans with the care and the opportunities for health that they have earned through their service and sacrifices.”

The flyers had originally caught some vets off guard and prompted Disabled Veterans’ Benjamin Krause to criticize the VA.

“The decision is a violation of due process and numerous laws protecting the rights of disabled Americans,” Krause wrote.

“The key here seems to be that VA forgets that veterans are also Americans who are protected by the Constitution and who also possess unalienable rights,” he adds. “Did we sign our rights away forever by fighting our country’s battles?”

Moreover, Krause wrote, “the leaflet does not explain what to do if the veteran is prescribed use of an iPhone or backpack as an accommodative device that helps the disabled veteran with a disability.”

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1.9 - The Hill: [Black box to combat medical malpractice](#) (1 October, Wade Ayer, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Until the death of my sister Julie Ayer Rubenzer in 2003 I lead a rather normal life, going to work, spending time with my family and enjoying life.

Julie’s death was a clear result of medical malpractice. I have spent the last 10 years devoted to researching this issue across the country. As a result I created a Facebook page called the “National Organization for Medical Malpractice Victims” with the goal of providing a forum for victims and family members to come together and share their experiences.

What I learned is alarming and I firmly believe these issues need to be addressed, before there is one more death at the hands of a malpractice physician.

As a veteran of Operation Desert Storm I have a natural interest in veteran’s issues. In 2012 I began to receive messages from veterans across the country complaining about the quality of care at our VA hospitals.

I have tried to bring this information to the attention of Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.), Rep. Glen Grothman (R-Wis.) and former Rep. Tom Petrie (R-Wis.). They have refused to look at the data or address the issue.

Eventually I was able to share my information with Wisconsin State Rep. Christine Sinicki (D-Milwaukee). She took the time to meet with the families of the victims, and research the issue. Based on the data I supplied she authored Assembly Bill 255, Known as the “Julie Ayer Rubenzer Law” or the “Surgical Black Box Bill.”

This measure gives the patient consumer the right to choose to have their surgery recorded by audio and video. All data can be used in a court of law. It is designed for disciplinary boards to review and weed out bad doctors. It is also to protect whistleblowers and good doctors. It is the

first bill of its kind in the United States. Many are dubbing this as the strongest patient safety bill in generations.

This A.B. 255 was given to Rep. Jeff Miller (R-Fla.), the chairman of Veterans' Affairs Committee. Congress has the authorization to implement this into law for all VA hospitals. As expected I have never heard back from anyone in Congress on my issues or implementing the bill. The reason they are ignoring me is that they will have to make extremely uncomfortable changes against the interests of the medical community, putting their campaign funds at risk.

I have many concerns that these conversations need to take place at a federal level and not at a state level.

1) National practitioner database: By law this is off-limits to the public and patient consumer. No one is allowed to truly research the history of their doctor or hospital. This must become transparent to the public.

2) No national tracking system for medical malpractice doctors: There literally is not one portal for patients to find real time information about their doctor. Example: Maybe their doctor had settlements against him. This data could be a clear indicator whether or not you would want this individual operating on you.

3) Malpractice doctors lose their license in one state and resurface in another: Many people have expressed that they feel these type of doctors are being hired by the VA.

If the VA hospitals would like to clean up quality issues, the 'Surgical Black Box' is a good start. It is time to put the patient consumer ahead of the profits. The 'Surgical Black Box' is there to protect the patient, the doctor and staff. It ensures quality.

Ayer is a sales engineer residing in Random Lake, Wisconsin.

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1.10 - KOMO News (Video): [Dozens of vets mistakenly told their benefits were cut off](#) (1 October, Tracy Vedder, 1.6M online visitors/day; Seattle, WA)

At least two dozen local veterans were mistakenly told their benefits were being cut off, and it's all because the Seattle Veterans Administration ignored a big pile of mail.

It's part of KOMO News on-going investigation into the local VA.

It initially began with a tip to the VA's Inspector General alleging that more than 1,000 mailed-in forms necessary for veterans to get benefits were left sitting in a bucket for months.

What that meant for disabled veterans who relied on the local VA is that some of them were told their unemployability benefits were going to be cut off. As the KOMO Investigators showed in an earlier report, a denial or delay of either monetary or medical benefits can put some veterans and their families into a tailspin.

"You don't know what to do, you scream," said Chris Seidler, the mother of a disabled vet. "Where do you turn?"

In looking at the mishandled Seattle VA mail, the Inspector General report only reviewed a fraction of the mail that had allegedly been left sitting for months. The IG found that staff mismanaged unprocessed mail and unnecessarily proposed to veterans that they would "discontinue their individual unemployability benefits." That was in spite of having "received the questionnaires on average 66 days earlier."

With only a fraction of the mail to investigate, it's impossible to know how many veterans beyond the initial 27 were affected. But the IG determined 20 percent of the mishandled mail fell into that category.

Senator Patty Murray says she is shocked by the situation, and in a letter to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs said, "This is exactly the type of mismanagement and negligence that further complicates the benefits process for veterans, leading to unnecessary stress and unacceptably delaying benefits."

The local VA says it has cleared up the backlog of mail and initiated an audit process to ensure this won't happen again.

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1.11 - Las Vegas Sun (AP): [Veterans cemetery in Boulder City gets \\$3.5M to restore slipping headstones](#) (1 October, 902k online visitors/mo; Henderson, NV)

Nevada has received a \$3.5 million federal grant to help address sinking headstones at a veterans cemetery in Boulder City.

Gov. Brian Sandoval announced Thursday that the state won the grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The money will go toward raising and realigning about 23,000 headstones, some of which have shifted as the soil gives way over time.

Nevada veterans services chief Kat Miller said existing turf and top soil around grave markers will be chemically treated and replaced with new soil. The headstones will be raised and realigned using a base material that's expected to prevent slippage in the future.

Sandoval said the maintenance is another step the state is taking to honor veterans.

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1.12 - Portland Press Herald: [VA pursues expansion of its outpatient care clinic in Portland](#) (1 October, Kevin Miller, 772k online visitors/mo; Portland, ME)

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is hoping to expand a clinic in Portland that allows southern Maine veterans to receive basic medical and mental health care locally rather than traveling to the Togus VA Medical Center near Augusta.

The VA has operated a Community-Based Outpatient Care facility on Fore Street in Portland since 2011, as well as a second outpatient clinic in Saco. Under a proposal in President Obama's fiscal year 2016 budget, the VA is requesting congressional authorization to spend \$6.8 million to lease about 56,600 square feet at an unspecified location in Portland. The Saco clinic would close and be consolidated into the larger Portland facility, which would offer more services than it does now.

"The proposed lease would enhance veteran health care options by creating a more efficient, patient-centered approach to care and by adding multiple specialty care services closer to the veteran population," the VA proposal states. "With this new lease, sufficient space will be available to provide the necessary specialty care capacity to help ensure veterans have timely access to high-quality care."

The expansion has not yet been funded and would require authorization by Congress, a potentially lengthy process. The proposal was applauded by veterans groups and at least one member of the state's congressional delegation.

"I'm very enthusiastic about the prospect of a significant expansion of VA services in Portland," Rep. Chellie Pingree, Maine's 1st District congresswoman, said in a written statement. "There are a lot of procedures and services that are in high demand that could be provided in Portland, and it would be great if we could save veterans in southern Maine the drive to Togus. We've got a long way to go before we can break ground on an expansion, but it's a proposal I strongly support."

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, and U.S. Sen. Angus King, a Maine independent, said they are soliciting feedback on the proposal.

"Ensuring that Maine's veterans have access to the highest-quality care is one of our top priorities, and we're pursuing the input of local veterans and interested stakeholders to understand their perspective about the proposal," King and Collins said in a joint statement. "We look forward to continuing those discussions and remain committed to working to improve care for veterans across our state."

Jim Doherty, spokesman for the VA Maine Healthcare System, declined to comment on the proposal because it involves pending legislation. The proposal is expected to be discussed during a meeting Tuesday with VA officials at the Post 17 American Legion in Portland.

The state commander of the American Legion in Maine, Ronald Rainfrette, welcomed the prospect of an expanded facility in the Portland area. Maine has a large population of aging veterans, and making the trip to either the VA Togus hospital in Chelsea or other VA facilities can be a logistical and financial challenge for some veterans, he said.

"I think it's a great idea because traveling for all of our veterans in such a large state is difficult," Rainfrette said. "So every time we can put a clinic in different towns, I'm all for it."

The VA operates community-based outpatient clinics in eight communities – including Portland, Bangor and Caribou – plus smaller outpatient operations in four communities. The Portland

clinic has 45 full- and part-time employees who provide care to an estimated 3,850 veterans annually, according to data provided by Doherty.

Those services include primary care and mental health care, lab work, telemedicine and home-based care for veterans unable to travel to the clinic. Specialists in such fields as cardiology, endocrinology and rheumatology also visit the clinic one or two days a week for appointments, and the clinic serves as a teaching facility for medical students in their residency stage at Tufts University near Boston and Maine Medical Center in Portland.

The potential expansion in Portland comes at a time when the VA is seeking to help veterans in rural states, such as Maine, by creating more satellite or outpatient facilities. At the same time, the department is under intense pressure from veterans organizations and members of Congress to reduce the waiting time for veterans to receive care and address a backlog of disability claims.

Congress also is scrutinizing cost overruns at new VA facilities, particularly at a hospital under construction near Denver that has cost roughly \$1 billion more than anticipated.

In its proposal, the VA presented a list of potential options to address the increased demand for services in southern Maine, including construction of a new, even larger facility. But the VA said leasing space would be more cost-effective and provide more flexibility to respond to changing demands in the future.

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1.13 - Military Times: [Higher drug co-pays, uniform DoD-VA formulary in defense bill](#) (1 October, Patricia Kime, 421k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Easier access to urgent care, higher pharmacy co-pays and a coordinated formulary between the Defense and Veterans Affairs departments are among the changes service members, families and retirees will see in health care as a result of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill.

If the legislation gets past a threatened veto from President Obama over unrelated issues, Tricare beneficiaries will see an uptick in co-payments for prescription medications at retail pharmacies and by mail once the bill, HR 1735, becomes law.

Under the bill, co-payments for a 30-day generic prescription filled at a Tricare network pharmacy would rise to \$10, from the current \$8, while prescriptions for brand-name drugs will rise to \$24, up from \$20.

Generics still would be available at no cost by mail, but a 90-day prescription for a brand-name medication by mail would rise to \$20, up from \$16, and medications not on Tricare's formulary would increase to \$49, from \$46.

Prescriptions would continue to be available at no cost to customers using military pharmacies.

The Defense Department had proposed, and the Senate had supported, even higher co-pays for most medications and a more aggressive schedule for increasing co-pays through 2025.

But under an agreement forged between the House and Senate, pharmacy co-pays will continue to rise at a slower rate, one that is relative to any cost-of-living adjustments.

If the COLA increases the amount of a co-pay by 50 cents or more, the co-pay would be rounded up to the nearest dollar. If the increase is less than 50 cents, co-pays would remain the same but the increase would carry over to the following year, which means that whenever the aggregate increase topped 50 cents, co-pays would rise to the next-highest dollar.

Lawmakers who negotiated the final bill said they “rejected more than 60 percent of the proposed increases to Tricare pharmacy co-payments requested by the DoD and approved by the Senate,” preferring instead to include “modest adjustments ... at the minimum amount necessary” to help offset costs of a new military retirement overhaul that is also part of the defense bill.

The bill also requires DoD and VA to create a joint formulary that includes the same medications for conditions including pain, sleep disorders, psychiatric illnesses and any other diseases the departments want to include.

The joint formulary should be in place by June 1, under the bill.

A uniform drug formulary between the departments was among the health care recommendations made by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission earlier this year. Lawmakers also had pressed for a joint formulary out of concern for veterans who were leaving active duty and having difficulties filling needed medications at VA pharmacies.

A Government Accountability Office investigation found that just 43 percent of medications in the DoD formulary also are offered through the VA system.

The defense policy bill contains a number of other provisions designed to improve care and services for Tricare beneficiaries, including one that could prevent overuse of emergency rooms. That provision calls for a three-year pilot program to allow Tricare beneficiaries to go to urgent care without pre-approval.

Under the pilot, the Tricare nurse advice line would advise beneficiaries on how to get care at the “most appropriate level,” according to the bill, including assisting them in deciding whether to go to an ER, wait for regular doctor’s hours or go to an urgent care facility.

Currently, Tricare Prime beneficiaries must obtain pre-approval for urgent care visits. Lawmakers said the pilot program has the “potential to lower health care costs for DoD” while providing beneficiaries easier access to care.

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1.14 - Berkshire Eagle: [Williamstown man gets 2 years in jail for assaulting woman](#) (2 October, Bob Dunn, 312k online visitors/mo; Pittsfield, MA)

A Williamstown man has been sentenced to two years in jail for an alcohol-fueled assault that left the victim with injuries the judge called "frightening."

James Colbert, 54, admitted that he beat a 31-year-old woman and smashed a 40-ounce beer bottle over her head after a night of drinking in March.

The victim appeared in Berkshire Superior Court on Thursday and tearfully recounted how she was still traumatized from the attack.

The assault left the victim with a concussion, cuts requiring 14 stitches, a black eye and other cuts and bruises, said Assistant Berkshire District Attorney Robert Kinzer.

Judge John Agostini called photos of the victim's injuries, "startling" and "frightening."

Colbert's attorney, Michelle Mehta, argued against the 2-to-3-year state prison sentence the state recommended, feeling her client's problems stemmed from post-traumatic stress, developed during his military service, and struggles with alcohol.

Mehta felt Colbert's chances for rehabilitation would be better if he were able to take advantage of the counseling and supervision available through the VA Medical Center and the Soldier On program, rather than a state prison incarceration.

"What you get in state prison is a bunch of angry people," Mehta said, illustrating the negative impact that environment could have on Colbert's rehabilitation, while acknowledging he "did something horrendous."

Agostini agreed state prison wasn't appropriate for Colbert, but based on his prior record, including prior convictions for assault and battery and larceny, some term of incarceration was necessary.

Kinzer said when Williamstown police responded to the March 20 attack, the woman had locked herself in an upstairs bathroom, where she had called for help via a cellphone.

Police kicked in the front door and took Colbert into custody.

Kinzer said the woman was struck about 20 times, but Colbert disputed that number.

Colbert pleaded guilty to one count each of assault and battery with a dangerous weapon and assault and battery.

Following his eventual release from jail, Colbert will serve two years of probation, during which time he must avoid drugs and alcohol, undergo counseling and reside at either the Soldier On program or the VA Medical Center in Leeds.

He was given credit for 196 days of time already served in custody.

The investigation was conducted by members of the Williamstown Police Department.

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1.15 - The Spectrum: [Volunteer numbers more than VA expected](#) (1 October, Freddy Groves, 295k online visitors/mo; Saint George, UT)

The Department of Veterans Affairs expected 100,000 volunteers to step up during the 2015 Summer of Service, and what it got was 300,000 — triple the expected number.

The goal of the Summer of Service was to bring community volunteers, veterans service organizations and local communities into partnership with VA centers to help 15,000 veterans and their families. The actual number reached topped 40,600.

Here are some ways volunteers helped:

- Transport veterans in for care
- Information desk
- Appointment reminder calls
- Lifeguard
- Work at National Cemeteries
- Parking lot shuttle driver
- Assist at Wheelchair Games and sports clinics
- Inventory scanner
- Staff welcome-home events
- Pharmacy technician
- Staff clothing rooms and gift shops
- Work at Stand Downs
- Assist at recreation programs
- Prepare dinner for patients and their families
- Outreach for homeless veterans.

Quite a variety of volunteer possibilities, and all of them very much needed.

If you're interested in volunteering, it doesn't have to be in the summer. Help is needed year-round. Here are a few things to know:

Depending on your role and proximity to veterans, you might need a health screening. Drivers require a full physical. You also might need a background check, but perhaps only a minimal one.

If you want to volunteer with hospital patients, go online to www.volunteer.va.gov or call the Voluntary Services Office at the closest VA medical center. (See www.volunteer.va.gov/directory) Check the FAQ at www.volunteer.va.gov/faqs.asp

If you'd like to help but would rather make a monetary donation, you can do that too. Your dollars will help to provide extras for the veterans.

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1.16 - The Memphis Flyer: [Organization Trains Rescue Animals for Veterans with PTSD](#) (2 October, Alexandra Pusateri, 231k online visitors/mo; Memphis, TN)

If Memphis veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or a traumatic brain injury (TBI) want to receive a service dog, the process can be stressful and costly. And until recently, the groups that paired veterans with service dogs were located far away.

But a new local organization, The Paul Oliver Foundation, is changing that.

Oliver, a Marine who suffered from PTSD and TBI, loved animals. But in December 2013, he accidentally overdosed on medicines he took to treat his conditions.

The Paul Oliver Foundation co-founder Amanda Butler said she and co-founder Kimm Harris heard about Oliver after his death and wanted to honor his memory.

"He was really trying to get better," Butler said. "He wanted to help veterans that were suffering the way that he was."

At first, they considered holding a fundraiser and donating the proceeds to a local charity, but then they found a gap in assistance for veterans — service dogs.

"I truly believe he was alive longer because of his dog, Scout. He wasn't an actual service dog, but he did so much good for Paul," Butler said.

Butler and Harris researched service dogs and what it would take to start an organization. Now, the Paul Oliver Foundation is trying to find trainers willing to donate their time for the all-volunteer organization dedicated to providing service dogs to veterans suffering with PTSD and/or TBI. The foundation will deal entirely in rescue animals, pulling them from shelters and placing them into training for their new human companion.

"We felt a real calling to provide those service dogs to people in this area," Butler said. "I think the closest [other organization that provides service dogs] is in Mississippi, which is still pretty far away."

Without any assistance, a service dog can cost up to \$22,000, and insurance often doesn't cover the cost of service dogs, despite their proven effectiveness in lowering anxiety, blood pressure, feelings of paranoia, and the indirect benefit that comes with owning a dog. The Veterans Administration (VA) is looking further into service dogs as a viable treatment. Currently, the VA is collecting subjects for a study to research the effects of a service dog in the treatment of PTSD.

In Memphis and Shelby County, there are currently around 59,000 veterans, and more are coming back from deployments. According to the VA, between 11 and 20 percent of veterans from the post-September 11th war era are diagnosed with PTSD. For the Gulf War in the 1990s, 12 percent suffer from PTSD. Vietnam War veterans have the highest percentage, estimated at around 30 percent, though only 15 percent are actually diagnosed.

The Paul Oliver Foundation plans to bring the veterans in during the dog-training process and start the bond early between recipient and dog. This also helps train the dog to specifically address certain issues, like security sweeps of the house before the owner enters, fetching medicine, or reacting to a panic attack.

"Paul was very involved in helping his fellow Marines," Butler said. "He had a real heart for helping the people who were in the same position he was. We really felt like this was the best way to honor him, [taking] what he really had a heart for and help the people who are in this area."

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1.17 - WOWT-TV (NBC-6, Video): [Starving Cancer Veteran Battles VA Bureaucracy](#) (1 October, Brandon Scott, 212k online visitors/mo; Omaha, NE)

Since July, WOWT 6 News has been following the story of Jonathan Robbins, a Marine Corps veteran from Omaha battling stage three throat cancer while also battling the bureaucracy at the VA Health System.

Robbins waited several months for his throat surgery and is now four weeks into his radiation treatment. The radiation has caused burns in his throat, making it nearly impossible for him to eat. He's lost nearly thirty pounds. Robbins told WOWT 6 News: "I haven't been able to keep any solid food or even liquid foods in my stomach since last Thursday. I'm lucky if I can keep down 400 to 600 calories a day."

Since WOWT 6 News first aired stories about Robbins this past summer, Omaha's VA Health System approved his cancer treatment at a non-VA facility. On Monday, with Robbins literally starving, his private oncologist ordered a feeding tube. However, the tube wasn't part of the VA's pre-approved treatment plan and required additional approval. The VA told Robbins to wait for a VA scheduler to call him and set up a consultation.

For four days Robbins has tried and failed to get an appointment, each day losing more weight as he received more radiation. Initially he suffered in silence before his friends and family suggested he call WOWT 6 News, fearing the VA's broken bureaucracy could literally kill him.

Robbins said: "They just really don't care. A feeding tube should be a number one priority. You're talking about somebody starving."

WOWT 6 News tried to get answers from Omaha's VA Health System, asking if anyone could explain why Robbins has had to wait so long to get a feeding tube. A VA Representative said privacy laws prohibit them from speaking about specific patients, but assured that they would look into the situation. A few hours later, Robbins contacted WOWT 6 News saying the VA called him and scheduled a consultation for Friday. If all goes well, Robbins was told he might get his feeding tube before the weekend. Robbins told WOWT 6 News: "I'm apprehensive but hopeful."

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1.18 - WBNG-TV (CBS-12, Video): [New VA Clinic looks to give local veterans the help they deserve](#) (1 October, Scott Sasina, 161k online visitors/mo; Johnson City, NY)

Binghamton, NY - There are more than 17,000 veterans in the Southern Tier. Unfortunately, not all of them are getting medical help. But a new Veteran Affairs clinic coming to downtown Binghamton could change all that.

On Wednesday, Richard Hanna, the Republican Representative for the 22nd District, announced a new VA clinic coming to downtown Binghamton.

This is to make sure those who risked their lives are getting the care they need.

The new clinic will be located at 203 Court street in Binghamton.

The building is close to 25,000 square feet, is easily accessible, and will have a huge parking lot in the back.

But according to Hanna, people who can use VA facilities don't show up for help.

And that is something he wants to change.

"Not nearly as many who are qualified to use these clinics are signed up for them," Hanna said "So if people would like to, they should certainly, if they're a veteran, go down there and find out if they qualify and take advantage of...of this service."

Mark Yonaty, the project developer for the new VA clinic, said there is a lot of work to be done if they want to make the construction deadline.

"I would like to think we could probably commence construction sometime after the new year," Yonaty said "January, February and if things go as planned I think that we could probably anticipate between a 6 to 9 month deadline and get this facility open."

Yonaty said he is proud to be working on this project.

"I think it's going to be pretty much a state-of-the-art Outpatient Clinic Servicing. It's a great project, it's a well deserved project for our Veterans."

A project that hopes to keep veterans healthy and role models for the next generation.

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1.19 - Kitsap Sun: [VA Puget Sound announces Bremerton clinic location](#) (1 October, Ed Friedrich, 105k online visitors/mo; Bremerton, WA)

The VA Puget Sound Health Care System has signed a lease for a new community-based outpatient clinic in Bremerton. The new clinic will allow more veterans to be seen and new health care services to be offered.

The new location, at 4205 Kitsap Way in Bremerton, is less than a half-mile from the existing clinic, which opened in 2001. Details of the when it will open will be announced in the coming weeks, according to a VA news release.

The new clinic is in a shopping mall previously anchored by the closed QFC grocery store. The building is owned by Golden Oyster Bay LLC under Robin Waite.

The new clinic will feature an additional patient-aligned care team that will allow an extra 1,000-plus patients to be seen, according to the VA. Current enrollment is 4,400. The new site will have an eventual capacity of more than 6,000 patients.

"We are very excited to get started on this new phase of health care for our veterans in the Bremerton area," said Dr. Connie Morantes, service line leader for General Medicine Services. "This new location will allow us not only to expand existing services but also offer additional services to veterans needing care."

Tenant improvements will begin on the 14,103-square-foot site once a timeline is agreed upon, which could take place in the next few weeks. The new clinic will nearly triple the size of the existing clinic and will allow the staff to grow from 22 to more than 30. The additional staff will allow for expanding primary care and home-based primary care services as well as the addition of physical therapy.

In 2014, there were more than 14,600 visits to the Bremerton clinic. This year, it has already experienced more than 15,500 visits. It is anticipated that growth will continue.

"Our patient growth has exceeded 5 percent per year for the last several years," said Michael Tadych, acting director of VA Puget Sound Health Care System. "This new clinic will help us accommodate the growth that we expect to continue and help veterans get the care they need in the community in which they live."

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1.20 - The Daily Tribune: [Bill aims to recruit doctors at VA clinics](#) (1 October, Jonathan Anderson, 104k online visitors/mo; Wisconsin Rapids, WI)

WASHINGTON — Two Wisconsin lawmakers hope to solve a shortage of doctors at rural Veterans Affairs facilities by providing cash incentives to professionals willing to work in underserved areas such as central Wisconsin.

U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, D-La Crosse, introduced a bill this week that he said would help attract physicians to rural VA medical centers, which have been forced to cut back on services because of staffing shortages.

The legislation comes after Gannett Central Wisconsin Media reported last month that the Wisconsin Rapids VA clinic had been referring some patients to facilities up to an hour away for more than two years because it lacks enough doctors, nurse practitioners and physician assistants.

Shortages of medical staff also have affected a VA clinic in Wausau and the Tomah VA Medical Center, which in August had to close its 11-bed psychiatric unit because of limited staffing.

“This is a matter of fairness to our veterans — they served our country, and they deserve proper health care,” Kind said in a statement. “Through more recruiting tools to bring good doctors to Wisconsin, we can better fulfill our promise to our veterans of quality health care.”

The bill, called the Veterans Access to Care Act, would designate VA facilities as health professional shortage areas — a classification that would allow the VA to provide financial incentives to doctors, nurses and other professionals who agree to work in a shortage area for at least two years. Those incentives could include repayment of student loans and scholarships.

“It’s tough for the VA system because of budget limitations to be as competitive as it needs to be with private health care providers,” Kind said in an interview.

Wisconsin Rep. Reid Ribble, R-Sherwood, is co-sponsoring the bill. It will likely be assigned to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, according to Kind.

"Hopefully we can move this along expeditiously," he said.

Companion legislation was introduced in the Senate in March.

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1.21 - KBIA-FM (NPR-91.3, AP): [Federal Watchdog Confirms St. Louis' Veterans Affairs Wrongdoing](#) (2 October, 83k online visitors/mo; Columbia, MO)

A federal watchdog said it confirmed a whistleblower's claims that St. Louis' Veterans Affairs sites wrongly marked appointments for mental health patients as completed even before the patients were seen, boosting the system's performance showing.

A VA Inspector General's report Wednesday involved records of the St. Louis VA Health Care System's records from October 2013 and June of last year. Investigators found that of 20 consults reviewed, an employee inappropriately marked them "complete" 60 percent of the time.

The report said such inaccurate notations when a patient misses a consult appointment or the clinic cancels it "increases the risk that veterans may become lost in the system."

The report questions the St. Louis system's oversight of the matter.

A message was left Thursday with St. Louis VA spokespeople.

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1.22 - KEYC-TV (CBS/FOX-12, Video): [V.A. Offers Yoga Class for Veterans](#) (2 October, Kassandra Sepeda, 36k online visitors/mo; Mankato, MN)

It's not your typical yoga class...Milwaukee's v-a medical center has started hosting a free yoga class every Tuesday for veterans...

As many as twenty-five local vets have been showing up every week!

And the class is now being held in a new location with a lot more open space and natural light.

Yoga helps improve flexibility and strengthen muscles but perhaps most importantly, instructors say there are also mental health benefits.

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1.23 - FierceGovernment: [Two VA medical centers marked appointments as complete before doctors saw patients](#) (1 October, Ryan McDermott, 21k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Two Veterans Affairs Department hospitals marked appointments as complete even before patients were seen by a doctor, according to a Sept. 29 VA inspector general report.

The report examined the John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks VA Medical Centers, both of which are in St. Louis, between October 2013 and June 2014. The audit took place after the IG received allegations that the hospitals marked mental health appointments as complete even before the patients were seen.

The allegations were founded, the report (pdf) says, since the IG's investigation revealed that 12 of the 20 mental health consults it reviewed were marked complete before the doctor saw the patient.

That means a veteran can slip through the cracks if an appointment is marked complete, but the patient hasn't actually shown up.

The clinic nurse told the IG that there is no automatic tracking in the system to ensure it reschedules the veteran for his appointment if the patient does not show up for the appointment or if the appointment is canceled by the clinic.

"This practice increases the risk that veterans may become lost in the system if they missed their consult appointment," the report says.

The problems don't end there. Doctors also racked up an average of \$2,920 for meeting or exceeding productivity goals based on the faulty appointment information, the report says.

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2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

2.1 - Milwaukee Journal Sentinel: [Chance encounter with homeless vet sparks volunteer effort](#) (1 October, Meg Jones, 1.9M online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

Amanda Frelka-Bruch noticed the man had a new blanket, one adorned with an American flag print.

She had seen him sleeping under a bridge in the Marquette Interchange on her way to work and stopped occasionally to drop off a sack lunch and a smile. Frelka-Bruch never asked his name or why he was homeless.

But one day she saw that the man, whose possessions amounted to a shower curtain, pillow and a few items of clothing folded neatly in a plastic bag, had a new blanket. She told him she liked it and as she turned to walk back to her car he said he got it from the VA.

She asked if he was a veteran and the man told her he had done two tours in Afghanistan. Stunned, Frelka-Bruch fought back tears as she told the man to have a nice day. He thanked her for the meal.

"I don't think I was surprised. I think I was sad," Frelka-Bruch said this week. "I thought 'What's the price of freedom?'"

So Frelka-Bruch proposed to her company, Sigma-Aldrich Corp., to fill 50 backpacks with items homeless veterans would need and donate them to volunteer services at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

Her company agreed and Thursday morning Frelka-Bruch and her co-workers lined up in the employee lunch room to grab new backpacks which they filled with warm socks, winter gloves and hats, water bottles, toe warmers, toothbrushes, toothpaste, first aid kits, hand cream, deodorant, combs, baby wipes and packs of tissue.

Among her co-workers was Brent Navis, facility services supervisor, who served in Iraq with the Navy Reserves in 2006-'08 and was surprised at the number of homeless veterans.

"It was shocking to me. I was very fortunate. I was a reservist and I was lucky," said Navis, whose company paid his salary while he was deployed to Iraq and made sure his job was waiting for him when he returned home. "I never really gave (veteran homelessness) a serious thought until Amanda told me."

Nationally, an estimated 50,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. And they're from all wars dating back to World War II as well as peacetime. Statistics also show that one in five homeless men is a veteran and among the fastest growing segments of homelessness are post-9/11 veterans.

In January, Milwaukee VA homeless outreach coordinators found 114 homeless veterans living in temporary shelters and 13 living on the street. The survey was done by visiting shelters, streets, bridges and other locations where homeless people are located as well as doing ride-alongs with police near the Milwaukee VA Medical Center.

Though there are plenty of programs and resources to help homeless veterans, from housing vouchers and food pantries to drug and alcohol counseling, job training and mental health services, some veterans fall through the cracks. It might be mental health problems such as PTSD or traumatic brain injuries, or substance abuse or lack of family and social support networks or difficulties in finding and keeping a job. Or it can be a combination of all those.

Sigma-Aldrich, a chemical products company based in St. Louis with factories in Wisconsin, donated the funds to buy backpacks and comfort items as part of its United Way campaign in Milwaukee. The company on Thursday also packed 1,000 bag lunches for homeless people.

"What I'm hoping, when they get these is to know that someone thought of (them), that they'll say 'I fought for their freedom and someone cares,'" said Frelka-Bruch, whose grandfathers fought in Korea and World War II.

The backpacks were dropped off at volunteer services at the Milwaukee VA Hospital where they will be given to veterans, many of whom were homeless, who are getting back into the work force after treatment for mental health and addiction issues.

"This is a wonderful thank you," said Stephanie Pulsfus, who oversees volunteer services at the VA. "It's so fun to see the community support the veterans."

As manager of the community engagement division at the Milwaukee VA, Pulsfus handles volunteers and all donations that come to the hospital. With the holidays approaching, Pulsfus is putting together a wish list for items needed by veterans and at the top are warm socks, underwear and winter coats.

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2.2 - Journal News: [Westchester homeless veteran population down to 'functional zero'](#)
(1 October, Mark Lungariello, 776k online visitors/day; White Plains, NY)

When Westchester County launched its Patriot Housing Initiative in August 2013, it set a goal of ending veteran homelessness in the county by the end of 2015.

County officials said at a news conference Thursday that Westchester is at "functional zero," with no known homeless veterans on the street. Permanent homes have been found for 329 veterans, the county said, and permanent housing is being sought for the eight veterans in temporary shelters.

Doug Ferguson, a U.S. Air Force Veteran, found a home through the county's Patriot Housing Initiative after falling on hard times and spending about a year on the streets. He said veterans in similar situations should seek help.

"If you were that 1 percent who served the country, you really deserve it," he said. "Everybody that went in sacrificed their lives for people they don't even know."

After finding a home, he enrolled at Westchester Community College and now works for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Montrose preparing food.

The Patriot Housing Initiative started as part of the national 100,000 Homes Campaign which issued a goal to find homes for homeless veterans and their families by 2014. Westchester held two "100-day challenges" in 2013 and 2014 to aid veterans in finding homes and jobs.

Karl Bertrand, a leader of the local campaign, said advocates have identified homeless veterans in various ways, including through partnerships with local soup kitchens and police departments.

"We are determined that if you find another one, we'll be on that today," he said.

State Sen. Terrence Murphy, R-Yorktown, said he hoped to present Westchester's initiative as a model to other communities in the state. Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino, a Republican, said some local landlords agreed to give veterans rental priority.

"I can't think of any achievement that I am more proud of than this one," he said.

Know of a homeless veteran living on the street? Call the 24-hour VA hotline at 1-877-4AIDVET 1-877-424-3838.

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2.3 - The Leaf-Chronicle: [Grant will help homeless veterans' transition](#) (1 October, Ray Howze, 264k online visitors/mo; Clarksville, TN)

Homeless veterans now will have a few more resources available to get back on their feet.

On Thursday at Buffalo Valley's transition house on Fork Drive, the organization received a \$235,705 grant to go toward facility improvements and rehabilitation efforts at the organization's six homes in Lewis, Montgomery and Hamilton counties.

Buffalo Valley has two facilities in Clarksville — one on Donna Drive and another on Earnest Shelton Drive.

Part of the grant money will be used for a tankless water heater at the Fork Drive home, said Debbie Hillin, senior vice president of Buffalo Valley. The water heater is expected to cut utility costs almost in half. As a result, Hillin said, they can use money saved from the reduced costs to reinvest in the home.

"You can get the bricks and sticks (for the home)," Hillin said, "but no one gives money to run it."

Grants such as the one presented by the Tennessee Housing Development Agency on Thursday help groups such as Buffalo Valley continue to run the veteran facilities.

The house on Fork Road opened in 2011 after the Department of Veterans Affairs acquired the land in 2010. It now has eight bedrooms, four baths and two half-baths for homeless veterans who are working their way back to permanent housing.

Veterans can stay in the house for up to two years. Brian Grant, one of the social workers with the VA, works with the veterans at the home on Fork Drive. They set transition goals that can include saving money, a stable job and sobriety. Once those goals are met, they work on finding permanent housing for the veterans.

"We have a lot of success with our guys," Grant said. "They can stabilize, get money and get into permanent housing."

Clarksville Mayor Kim McMillan, state Rep. Jay Reedy and representatives with the office of U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn, THDA, VA and the Clarksville Office of Housing and Community Development attended Thursday's presentation.

McMillan attended the ribbon-cutting when the house opened in 2011. She said she was impressed to see the house still in good condition four years later.

In addition to Buffalo Valley, McMillan praised the VA for its work with the program. The VA Tennessee Valley Healthcare System selects the candidates for the temporary housing.

"Coming back now all this time later, it looks as beautiful now as it did then," McMillan said.

Veterans who haven't received a dishonorable discharge from the military are eligible for the program.

According to Hillin, the program isn't a "handout" but a "hand-up."

"If you think you're going to come here and do nothing, you're wrong," Hillin said.

Veterans in the program have to actively take steps, such as employment and saving money, to stay in the program.

Even with programs such as Buffalo Valley's, "calls for housing are greater than our capacity," Hillin said.

But that doesn't discourage their efforts.

"Not one of our veterans should ever be without a home," she said.

For more information on the program, veterans can call the Nashville office at 615-873-6400.

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3. Ending the Claims Backlog

3.1 - Washington Free Beacon: [VA Fails to Meet Self-Imposed Deadline For Reducing Claims Backlog: More than 75,000 veterans still awaiting benefits](#) (1 October, Morgan Chalfant, 2.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has failed to meet its self-imposed deadline for reducing the backlog of disability claims to zero.

In January 2013, when the agency was led by Secretary Eric Shinseki, promised that the count of unresolved claims 125 days old or older would be whittled down to zero by Sept. 30, 2015, the end of the fiscal year.

As of Sept. 28, over 75,000 disability claims were still backlogged.

When the count of backlogged claims stood at about 125,000 in July of this year, the agency walked back that initial promise, suggesting that Shinseki had meant to fix the deadline at the end of the calendar year, Dec. 31. Officials also say that the date was never intended as a firm deadline.

Allison Hickey, a VA official, has suggested that the agency will never eliminate the backlog of its oldest claims.

“Zero for us is not an absolute zero,” Hickey said in August when the backlog was reduced to just under 100,000 unresolved claims from a peak of well over 600,000 in March 2013.

While the VA has touted its claims reduction, reports have surfaced of regional VA offices across the country manipulating and shredding records. For instance, employees at a Philadelphia VA center in 2014 were found to have manipulated claims data. More recently, an employee at a Houston VA center was discovered to have altered nearly 100 claims to meet management goals.

The VA inspector general in August discovered staffers at a Los Angeles center shredding mail from veterans regarding disability claims. As a result, the VA has launched at least 10 investigations into benefit data manipulation at facilities nationwide.

Dan Caldwell, a former Marine and the legislative and political director at Concerned Veterans for America, told reporters Thursday to take the VA’s alleged claims reduction “with a grain of salt.”

“You really have to call into question their real success,” Caldwell said.

A VA inspector general report released this week indicated that executives exploited a relocation program in order to obtain salary hikes and other monetary perks.

The inspector general has also recently revealed that the VA spent \$1.3 billion to make its electronic claims system “partially effective” and that over 300,000 individuals listed as pending in the VA health care enrollment system have already died.

Darin Selnick, who spent eight years at the VA and now serves as a senior veteran affairs adviser at Concerned Veterans for America, said the VA is plagued by a “culture of corruption” that exists in both its Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Veterans Health Administration (VHA) branches.

A newly released independent assessment of the VHA found that the culture of the agency’s network of health systems is “characterized by risk aversion and lack of trust.”

Selnick, who also serves on the Congressional Commission on Care, called for similar independent reviews to be conducted of the VBA in order to further expose the agency’s “longtime problems.”

Selnick also demanded the passage of the VA Accountability Act of 2015, a bill that passed the House in July that would grant VA Secretary Robert McDonald the power to remove or demote a VA employee because of performance or misconduct. McDonald has refused to support the legislation and President Obama has vowed to veto it.

Obama labeled the bill “counterproductive” in July, arguing it would “have a significant impact on VA’s ability to retain and recruit qualified professionals and may result in a loss of qualified and capable staff to other government agencies or the private sector.”

“It shows that he is not serious about fixing problems at the VA,” Caldwell replied Thursday when the Washington Free Beacon inquired about the president’s promise to veto the bill. “President Obama and his administration have sought to contain this as a political scandal.”

Caldwell also said that Obama administration officials have “flat out lied” by implying that the bill would hurt whistleblowers.

According to Selnik, Obama’s refusal to support the legislation is disappointing to the nation’s veterans and soldiers on the front lines.

“It’s very demoralizing to see the president do this sort of thing,” Selnik said.

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

5. Women Veterans

5.1 - Lafayette Journal & Courier: [Conference to honor women veterans](#) (1 October, Taya Flores, 390k online visitors/mo; Lafayette, IN)

Retired Maj. Gen. Erika Steuterman will keynote the Women Veterans conference Tuesday at the West Lafayette Public Library.

Purdue University centers — the Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and the Military Family Research Institute — are sponsoring the event.

“We will be focusing on the strengths and the issues that women veterans have faced while serving, and continue to face as veterans,” said Martina Sternberg, assistant director of the Military Family Research Institute.

Such issues include post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, and being a single mother while in the military, she said.

Steuterman will address her struggles and triumphs as she rose to the top as a woman in the military.

She has led a storied military career. She retired after 34 years of service in the U.S. Air Force. Her last two assignments were on the Air Staff at the Pentagon in Washington D.C.

She is also a Purdue alumna having graduated with a bachelor's in 1976 and a master's degree in business administration in 1977.

Steuterman has devoted her retirement to helping people with disabilities. She served on boards for nonprofits that help the disabled such as Wabash Center and The Arc of Indiana.

A panel of other women veterans will also share their experiences and answer questions after the keynote.

If you go

Who: Open to the public

When: 4 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Walnut Room, West Lafayette Public Library

More information: Call the Military Family Research Institute at 765-496-3403.

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6. Other

6.1 - The New York Times (AP): [Democrats Block Veterans Funding Bill as Budget Talks Loom](#) (1 October, 70.6M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

WASHINGTON — Democrats on Thursday blocked the Senate from turning to a \$78 billion spending measure for the Department of Veterans Affairs and military base construction. They and the White House argue that it's part of an overall GOP budget framework that shortchanges spending on other domestic programs.

The 50-44 vote on the measure fell shy of the 60 required to overcome a filibuster and came a day after Congress voted to forestall a partial government shutdown and keep Cabinet agency doors open through Dec. 11, buying time to try to reach a budget and spending pact.

The White House has issued blanket veto threats against every spending bill, saying they shortchange domestic programs while exempting the Pentagon from the return of automatic spending curbs that would otherwise freeze its budget. Republicans note that many Democrats supported the bills when they were considered by the Appropriations Committee.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said Thursday that negotiation on a potential budget pact that would increase tight budget limits for the Pentagon and domestic agencies are still in the very early stages.

Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said the nascent talks have "moved a little bit in the last few days."

Reid said McConnell had sought to largely cut congressional Democrats out of the talks. But Reid and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said they were confident that wouldn't happen since Democratic support will be needed to pass any agreement.

"Republicans need our votes," Reid said.

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6.2 - The Huffington Post: [Collateral Damage: Effects of the Current Narrative on Veterans](#) (1 October, Tom Aiello, 33.6M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

During a recent Veteran's charity fundraising gala, much like the hundreds of galas that occur year round - something significant happened...

At a point in the show the emcee asked all attendees from a certain group of Veterans in the audience to stand and be recognized.... Not a single person stood in spite of their presence.

Now you may think of this as an isolated occurrence but I see it as a culmination of events that have been building for some time now.

It represents a manifesto on behalf of Veterans' that they may no longer want to be used as "props." Very few Veterans consider themselves a charity case and increasingly Veterans have come to realize that the narrative around "helping" Veterans may actually be hurting Veterans by pervading a negative perception.

You Can't Blame Veteran Charities

Veteran charities have learned that telling an emotional story gets the most donations. The more donations they get, the more Veteran families they are able to help. The challenge is balancing the message with the military and Veteran culture.

I recently looked at the messaging of 20 major Veteran nonprofits and found that only three out of 20 talked about empowering veterans to achieve their potential while 17 talked about helping Veterans in need.

This is not an act of commission but an act of ignorance on behalf of the nonprofits. They need to communicate how bad the need is and how much help is needed as part of their fundraising and advocacy. But what they are ignoring is the negative effect of this message on America's perception of Veterans.

"A Generation of PTSD and Suicide"

We all know how the World War II generation of Veterans was defined as "The Greatest Generation." However in a recent conversation with a younger post-9/11 Veteran he shared in a very poignant way what he and so many others feel.

He said, "We are defined as a generation of PTSD and suicide. We have only a small window left before that is how America will remember us."

The greatest damage to veterans occurs as these messages are pervaded through national media, social media, and the direct messaging of these organizations at their events. These messages are amplified by a very caring American public with little to no military experience.

There is another level of collateral damage and that is to the veterans themselves. This is the idea that if a Veteran hears they need help often enough, they will start to believe it.

How Do We Fix This?

It begins with an understanding of the military culture. An ethos that is drilled into every service member beginning the day they volunteer. An ethos that I will always place the mission first; I will never accept defeat; I will never quit; and, I will never leave a fallen comrade.

This is the real narrative and their stories emanate from the way they act, the way they interact and the way they think. Not the way, others portray them in messages counter to their culture. We need to help change the message. Our Veterans are not china dolls; they just have different life experiences.

We must demand that Veterans' nonprofits better nuance their communications around what Veterans' are bringing to the community - Veterans as an asset and not a liability.

We should require that the nonprofits have the Veterans tell their stories more and tell their own story of their nonprofit less.

The requirement that nonprofits must always check themselves in everything they do that they are "treating people like people" and not like props or caricatures. Remove the generalizations so the audience sees not only what our Veterans are but who they are.

What Can Veterans' Do?

The single greatest thing that can be done is to provide direct feedback to these charities when you see this happening. It can be at an event or in a feedback channel through their website. Eventually they will understand and start to change how they communicate.

There is also a need to simply lead by example. Under every measure our Veterans are succeeding but the tails on these wars are long and we need to understand there will be ebbs and flows for these individuals touched by military service.

Still, the number of Veterans volunteering in the community continues to rise. The number of Veterans starting businesses continues to rise. Through the success of those efforts we can start to overpower the negative perceptions and positively change how people perceive this generation of Veterans.

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6.3 - FOX News: [America needs a leader, not a loser](#) (1 October, Mike Huckabee, 31.8M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

A wise man once said: "What do you call a leader with no followers? Just a man out for a walk."

That's the problem with Washington.

Washington politicians think making a speech on the Senate floor is leadership.

Making a speech is not leadership. Proposing a bill is not leadership. Fighting and losing, again and again, is not leadership. It's nothing but talk.

I've heard enough speeches in Washington. We need real leadership to change Washington because Washington is a strip club. The political class dances for the donor class and the working class gets stuck with the tab!

As president I will transform Washington and transfer power back to the people. My plan is simple:

- Term Limits for Congress and judges. Do your service and return home.

- Lifetime ban on lobbying for members of Congress. Going to Washington should not be a career.

- No budget, no pay for the President or Congress. If the President or Congress won't do their job, they don't get paid.

- No pay for political campaigning. Resign if you decide to run for an office other than the one you currently hold.

- Require Congress to get their healthcare from the V.A.. No American veteran will ever rot and die again if they're waiting in line alongside a U.S. Senator.

- Abolish the IRS and pass the FairTax. Enough tinkering with the tax code to benefit Washington elites, we need a tax revolution that creates prosperity for all.

- Stop raiding Social Security. Washington has done enough lying and stealing. It's your money, not the government's.

- End the Department of Education. Education is a family function, not a federal one. Kill Common Core and restore common sense.

- Pass a balanced budget amendment. I did it for 10 years as governor despite facing the Clinton machine and most Democrat legislature in America. Why can't Washington?

America needs a leader who fights and wins, not a loser.

That's exactly what I did as governor.

I repeatedly defeated the Clinton machine and put corrupt career politicians in jail. I cut taxes, balanced the budget ten years straight, and raised average family income 50%. I defended life, marriage and religious liberty. I got the job done, despite facing the most Democrat legislature in the country.

That's leadership, and that's what's missing in Washington.

I refuse to walk my grandkids through the charred remains of a once great country.

Instead of burning this country to the ground, let's burn down the corrupt Washington political machine and rebuild America before it's too late.

Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee is a 2016 Republican candidate for president of the United States.

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6.4 - The Washington Post (The Fed Page, Partnership for Public Service): [Helping military members transition to a new life](#) (1 October, Susan Kelly, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

For the more than 200,000 men and women leaving the military every year, finding employment and transitioning to a new life can be difficult and sometimes quite traumatic.

"You don't know what's out there and how you'll fit into civilian life," said Marine Sgt. Maj. Jim Booker, 53, who left the military this past summer after 32 years of service. Booker said his confidence has been boosted and his job-search skills sharpened by the Department of Defense's newly designed Transition Assistance Program, an initiative managed by Susan Kelly.

As head of the DOD's Transition to Veterans Program Office, Kelly has led the sweeping overhaul of the 20-year-old program, helping service members begin considering their transition out of the military long before discharge, and collaborating with a number of federal agencies to provide far more extensive and focused assistance than was provided in the past.

"Susan has changed how DOD thinks about the transition process," said Teresa Gerton, acting assistant secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training Services at the Department of Labor. "It's gone from, 'You're transitioning in six weeks – good luck!' to, from the minute that someone puts a uniform on, we have to be talking to them about, 'Someday, sooner or later, you're going to be a civilian again, so let's make sure you are prepared for that transition.'"

Stephanie Barna, principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for manpower and reserve affairs, said Kelly "built this program from an empty room, with simply the law and a White House mandate to guide her."

"She started from nothing and now has a full-fledged program operating at 206 sites worldwide, covering every service, incorporating other federal agencies and doing it in less than two years," said Barna.

Under the new federal program authorized by the 2011 VOW to Hire Heroes Act, transition planning begins at the service member's first permanent duty station, usually after one year of service. Service members are offered counseling and assistance to align their training and military career with what they eventually want to do as civilians.

As service members near the end date of their military service, the counseling intensifies and touches on everyday issues that may not have been a concern, such as how to find a job, dress for an interview, write a resume, choose a health-care plan and manage personal finances. With

50-60 people in a room, usually, these sessions are small enough to be hands-on and personal, compared with previous iterations that included large lecture halls of 300 members.

The presenters and counselors come from DOD and a variety of federal departments. Representatives from the Department of Labor, for instance, discuss workforce issues, and officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs offer counseling about benefits.

The transition program also offers assistance from the Small Business Administration regarding loans for starting a business; information from the Department of Education about educational opportunities; and advice from the Office of Personnel Management regarding federal employment.

Some of this information and help was available in the past, but service members often would have to go from agency to agency to find it, navigating multiple websites and 1-800 numbers.

“Susan has ensured that those agencies are all on-site. She and her team have brought it together,” said Barna.

“Susan is really good at encouraging, supporting, collaborating and getting to see how the different parts fit together, which is why the program has been so successful,” added Mark Breckenridge, deputy director at the Defense Manpower Data Center. “Susan does a wonderful job allowing others to see how their contributions will fit in.”

Among the challenges in putting the program together has been working with four different military departments, traditions and populations. “Susan has really had to work to bring each of them into this program in accordance with their culture,” Barna said.

In surveys, more than three-quarters of the attendees reported the program has prepared them to be “career-ready” and provided access to resources that would help in civilian life.

Kelly said the revamped transition program is more comprehensive and more focused than in the past on getting service members to start aligning their military training with what they may want to do in the long term as a civilian.

“That’s the crux of the entire change, having the system acknowledge that everyone, whether you are a four-star general or serving only four years in active duty, will separate from the military service and go into civilian life,” said Kelly. “No matter how old you are, you will not go fishing and hunting the rest of your life.”

This article was jointly prepared by the Partnership for Public Service, a group seeking to enhance the performance of the federal government, and washingtonpost.com. Go to the Fed Page of The Washington Post to read about other federal workers who are making a difference.

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6.5 - The Washington Post (Act Four): [‘Heroes Reborn’ and ‘You’re the Worst’ take on Latino veterans’ experiences](#) (1 October, Alyssa Rosenberg, 19.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

As African American characters claw back territory they've long been denied on national television, drawing huge audiences to shows like "Empire" and "Scandal," it's become increasingly obvious that TV lags in other areas: Asian characters who are neither tech-support workers nor sex objects, characters of Middle Eastern descent on shows that don't deal with national security and Latino characters in general, among others. But while it's not quite a trend yet, I noticed that two series this fall, NBC's science fiction extravaganza "Heroes Reborn" and FXX's romantic comedy "You're the Worst," have made a little headway by creating characters with a specific confluence of race and experience: Both shows have characters who are Mexican American veterans.

If these Mexican American characters are the result of individual creative visions, rather than a concerted effort to represent an underrepresented segment of the population, they have stumbled onto a real trend. Though traditionally underrepresented in the armed forces, the number of Latinos in the military has been growing in recent years, and the number of Latino veterans may double by 2024. A 2013 demographic report on the U.S. military found that 11.6 percent of active-duty military personnel identified as Hispanic.

NBC didn't have a full episode of "Heroes Reborn" to screen for critics before the Television Critics Association press tour in Los Angeles in August. But Ryan Guzman, who plays Carlos Gutierrez, led with his character's military experience.

"He's a Mexican American Army veteran who is coming back from a tour in Afghanistan and is being thrust into a heroic spotlight where he doesn't feel comfortable and he's having an identity crisis with himself as well as dealing with the world around him and dealing with a loss of someone very dear to him," Guzman said. "And he's at kind of a crossroads as well where an immense opportunity is kind of presented to him and he doesn't know if he's worth it at all. So I connected with my character quite a bit, because there's been quite a few times where, especially in this industry alone, where you kind of question if you're worth being this role or if you're worth being on this show or anything, and it's a beautiful character."

If "Heroes Reborn" wants to avoid stereotypes of tragic veterans and to figure out how to make Gutierrez's ethnic background a source of actual details that define the character and drive his behavior, rather than simply another shade on the show's color palette, series creator Tim Kring might do well to look to a very different series, FXX's scabrous sitcom "You're the Worst."

One of the four main characters is Edgar (Desmin Borges), a veteran and recovering heroin addict who lives with his friend Jimmy (Chris Geere). He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, which manifests in sleeplessness and terrifying nightmares. But Edgar is many things other than his military experience. He's a hopeless romantic who encourages Jimmy to pursue a relationship with Gretchen (Aya Cash) and comforts Gretchen's best friend, Lindsay (Kether Donohue), after her husband dumps her in horrifyingly public circumstances. And he's a fantastic cook, an arena that both draws on his heritage and lets him care for Jimmy and Gretchen in a way that the pair, united by their hugely arrested development, are unable to do for each other.

Borges and Falk have delivered a deadpan style for Edgar to use when telling his most horrifying war stories. And the show has a sly tendency to make fun of the way people react to veterans. In one first-season episode, Edgar is invited to speak at a memorial dedication, only for his speech to be cut short by a councilman eager to hear a band perform, and to be taken in by a group of method actors who want to steal his life story for a forthcoming movie. When Edgar visits a military chaplain for help in negotiating his increasingly complicated friendships,

the priest mistakes him for a potential leaker, calling military intelligence to warn that “I think we’ve got another Snowden.” And when a heartless VA administrator tries to guilt Edgar out of asking the government to pay for medication that would help him sleep, Jimmy finally steps up to help the friend who does so much for him.

“We had this guy come in and talk to the writers’ room,” Falk said of his efforts to treat Edgar respectfully. “And he basically said, ‘Treat us like anyone else when you’re writing us. We’re ballbusters.’ He personally has a lot of issues that Edgar does. But he said, ‘Me and my buddies get together, and talk s—, and make fun of each other,’ so I sort of took that as license to try to render him as three-dimensionally as possible.” (It’s worth noting that Latino veterans appear to find jobs and health insurance at higher rates than some of their counterparts.)

But while Falk enjoyed the challenge of trying to take “the insane-making red tape that veterans have to go through to get health care, [and] to render that entertaining,” in the second season of “You’re the Worst,” it was important to him to expand Edgar’s identity beyond his military service. The result is a hobby, Edgar’s attempt at improv comedy, and the new friends he finds through it. “He doesn’t know if he’s good or bad at it, he just knows that this is another avenue that he’s ready to explore,” Borges told me. “I come from a very improvised sort of background, but I never would have thought to put that in for this character.”

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6.6 - USA Today: [Time to stop arguing; time to find answers](#) (2 October, 16.7M online visitors/mo; McLean, VA)

New gun laws will not and cannot stop the type of horrific violence that descended on Umpqua Community College on Thursday morning.

We must undertake a fundamental change in how we, as a society, respond to the mass killings that now have occurred in Roseburg, Springfield, Troutdale — and across our nation. Because what we’ve been doing is not working.

Instead of focusing on the tools of mass violence — whether they be guns, knives, bombs, nunchucks, vehicles or hands — we must confront the causes. Committing mass murder is not a rational action.

Yet we waste millions or billions of dollars arguing about gun control measures that are going nowhere because our politicians lack guts. Years, or probably decades, would pass before such restrictions achieved any practical effect. Meanwhile, firearms and ammunition sales skyrocket whenever the national dialogue focuses on gun restrictions versus gun owner rights. Those firearms are fine when kept and handled safely by responsible owners, but not when they fall into the hands of the mentally deranged or the truly extreme.

Socially isolated young men — people who feel that they don’t fit in, ones who see killings as an achievement — perpetrate many of these mass killings. What drives them to such irrational actions? We must invest, not only financially but socially, in finding the answers and acting on them.

It is long past time to overcome — indeed, rip away — the stigma that some people still have about mental health. Neither individuals or society is served when parents don't know how to get treatment for their children, or are embarrassed to do so ... When people fear to seek treatment because that might jeopardize their careers or relationships ... And when people do not know where to turn to get needed treatment.

Our society has valued lip-service and bureaucracy over intervention. It has taken decades to overcome the inertia that perpetuated health-care delays and inadequacies for military veterans through the Department of Veterans Affairs. In the same vein, we have tolerated lengthy waits for the mentally ill to access counseling, inpatient and outpatient services, and crisis care.

We, as President Barack Obama said Thursday in grieving for the Roseburg victims, have allowed ourselves to become numb.

Numbness is a defense, but only in the short term. Numbness is not an answer.

Each of us must find some way, big or small, to stand up to the violence in our society. To reach out to those who exist on the margins of our society. And to bring mental illness and treatment out of the darkness.

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6.7 - NJ.com: [N.J. veterans' groups to honor soldiers buried at Finn's Point National Cemetery](#) (1 October, Bill Gallo Jr., 7.3M online visitors/mo; Newark, NJ)

UPDATE: Due to the threat of bad weather, the ceremony has been rescheduled for Sunday, Oct. 11. The story now reflects that change.

PENNSVILLE TWP. — Tucked away not far from the Delaware River is one of New Jersey's only two national cemeteries.

Officials from New Jersey veterans groups plan to gather there Sunday at 11 a.m. to pay tribute to those buried there, many of them Confederate prisoners of war.

New Jersey State VFW Commander Daniel Viveiros is among those expected to attend.

Sgt. W.T. Whitaker VFW Post 1952 Commander Frank Hofacker of Pennsville is pleased that those buried at Finn's Point are getting recognition.

The ceremony will include brief remarks, a wreath laying, a rifle salute and the playing of "Taps."

Hofacker notes that there are only two national cemeteries in the entire State of New Jersey, the other being Beverly National Cemetery in Beverly.

"I think it's a great thing," Hofacker said of the ceremony which has been held for just a few years.

Ceremonies had been held in Beverly, but never at Finn's Point until veterans here pointed out Finn's Point's importance.

"These soldiers should be recognized, too," said Hofacker. "His is a national cemetery."

Despite the forecast for threatening weather on the weekend, the event was still on as of Thursday morning.

The public is encouraged to attend the event, Hofacker says.

Finn's Point is tucked away down a long road behind Fort Mott State Park along the Delaware River in Pennsville Township.

Finn's Point's first burials were the Confederate prisoners of war who had died while being held at Fort Delaware on nearby Pea Patch Island in the Delaware River.

The bodies were ferried across the Delaware River from Fort Delaware to the cemetery.

Finn's Point was designated as a national cemetery on Oct. 3, 1875, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Union Monument at Finn's Point was put in place at the cemetery in 1879 in memory of 135 Union guards who died while on duty at Fort Delaware and who were buried at the cemetery, according to the VA.

The Confederate Monument was built by the U.S. government in 1910 to memorialize Confederate soldiers buried at the cemetery, according to the VA. The 85-foot tall concrete and granite obelisk features bronze tablets listing the names of 2,436 Confederate prisoners of war who died at Fort Delaware during the Civil War.

Finn's Point was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

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6.8 - Military.com: [Congress to Investigate Claims VA Officials Abused Positions for Gain](#)
(1 October, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

Congress will hold a hearing this month into allegations that two Veterans Affairs Department officials used their positions to push a pair of regional directors out of their jobs, take over the vacancies and collect hundreds of thousands of dollars in relocation expenses from the VA.

The allegations, which have been passed on to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington, D.C., for possible criminal prosecution, were from the VA's Office of the Inspector General.

"In light of the serious misuse of taxpayer dollars and abuse of power substantiated by the OIG, it is our responsibility to examine how such practices were allowed and put an end to VA's culture of complacency," Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Florida, said on Thursday.

Miller chairs the House Veterans Affairs Committee, which will conduct the oversight hearing on Oct. 21.

The congressman said the IG report makes clear that that senior VA leaders "doled out outrageously generous relocation expense benefits as if they were an entitlement or perk of employment, as opposed to a tool to fill job vacancies that no qualified manager would accept."

Diana Rubens, now director of VA regional office in Philadelphia, was paid \$274,000 in moving assistance, the IG said. The VA authorized Rubens to take advantage of the Appraised Value Offer program, which pays an employee for the value of their home as an incentive for a job move. Kimberly Graves, now director of VA regional office in St. Paul, Minnesota, received \$129,000 for her move.

The congressman said the moves were not made in the interest of the VA but in the interests of the individuals.

The IG concluded that both women coerced their predecessors in Philadelphia and St. Paul into transferring so they could take over the jobs. Rubens had been a deputy undersecretary for field operations and Graves was the former director of the Veterans Benefits Administration's Eastern Area Office, now called the North Atlantic District.

Rubens took over the Philadelphia post in June 2014. Her predecessor, Robert McKenrick, told investigators that he took a transfer to Los Angeles because he understood he would lose his job if he didn't.

Antoine Waller said he took a transfer from St. Paul to Baltimore after falling for a bait-and-switch. Graves allegedly encouraged him to apply for the Philadelphia position -- which he wanted -- but then told him it was no longer available. He was told that his name was forwarded to VA Secretary Bob McDonald for the Baltimore directorship and that it was expected he would take it.

He did, and Graves began heading the St. Paul regional office in October 2014.

The IG also concluded that Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey, who heads up the VBA, should also be disciplined for selecting Rubens for the job. The IG findings prompted The American Legion, one of the largest veterans' service organizations in the country, to renew its call for her resignation or firing.

The VA has not commented on the Legion's call for Hickey's removal from the department.

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6.9 - VICE News: [Gunman Among At Least 13 Dead in Oregon Shooting](#) (1 October, 6.3M online visitors/mo; Brooklyn, NY)

A shooting at the campus of Umpqua Community College in the southwest Oregon city of Roseburg has left 13 people dead and 20 others injured, according to Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum.

Police responded to calls of an active shooter at the college at 10:38am, Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin told reporters Thursday afternoon. Officers located the suspect, who was shot and killed after a brief exchange of gunfire.

Oregon Governor Kate Brown told reporters that the shooter was a 20-year-old male who acted alone. Authorities could not provide any further information about the suspect, including a possible motive.

Early media reports had put the death toll as high as 15, but Hanlin said he could not confirm the number of people injured or killed.

Roseburg is a city of roughly 22,000 people located about 135 miles south of the Oregon capital of Salem and 180 miles south of Portland. Umpqua Community College has approximately 3,300 full-time students and 16,000 part-time students. The school's campus was put on lockdown and cleared by police officers.

A school official was reported as saying that shots rang out from the college's Snyder Hall.

Douglas County Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Kathy Cross later confirmed that "there is no longer a threat" at the college.

Agents from the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) are currently at the scene in Roseburg. More agents, including a K-9 team, are en route from the agency's Eugene and Portland offices, an ATF spokesperson told VICE News. The ATF is working closely with local law enforcement.

Police have bused students and faculty from the scene to the Douglas County fairgrounds.

Mercy Medical Center in Roseburg received a total of 10 patients, according to the hospital's updates. Victims are also expected to be routed to a nearby Veterans Administration medical center and to hospitals in the Eugene/Springfield area, located roughly an hour away. Helicopters from the medical transport service Life Flight are reportedly ready to move critically injured patients from the school.

"We're trying to prepare for a half-dozen or more victims," said Jim Godbold, a spokesperson at PeaceHealth Riverbend Hospital in Springfield. He later confirmed that the hospital had received three victims with gunshot wounds: an 18-year-old female, a 34-year-old female, and a third female patient whose age is unknown.

PeaceHealth later tweeted that "an army" of doctors, nurses had since volunteered to help treat the patients.

Hanlin said that a multi-agency taskforce was current cooperating with the investigation, including the Sheriff's office, Roseburg Police, the FBI, and US Marshals Service.

The shooting Thursday is the latest in a series of gun-related tragedies across America. There have been at least 264 mass shootings in the US in 2015 alone, according to the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit that collects data on shootings.

"Today's shooting in Roseburg is a heartbreaking tragedy, and my thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families," US Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Springfield, said in a statement. "Once we know more about what happened today, I plan to work with my colleagues in Congress to find ways to prevent tragedies such as these."

At a press conference late Thursday, President Barack Obama said that mass shootings and "carnage" have become "routine" and that Americans are becoming "numb to this" phenomenon.

"It cannot be this easy for somebody who wants to inflict harm on other people to get his or her hands on a gun," he said.

"It's fair to say that anyone who does this has a sickness in their minds, regardless of what they think their motivations may be," Obama added. "But we are not the only country on earth who has people with mental illnesses or who want to do harm to other people. We are the only country on Earth who sees these mass shootings every few months."

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6.10 - The Washington Examiner (Video): [Watch: What the VA really does to whistleblowers](#) (1 October, Pete Kasperowicz, 3.9M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Two whistleblowers from the Department of Veterans Affairs told the Washington Examiner that while the VA claims to want to hear complaints from its employees, it does everything it can to fight back and defend itself.

"They circle the wagons," said Shea Wilkes, a VA employee in Louisiana. "I mean, they circle the wagons hard."

Brandon Coleman, an employee in Arizona who was placed on leave for bringing attention to the VA's failure to properly treat suicidal veterans, said he has been escorted into the VA by police. He said that move is meant to intimidate other potential whistleblowers.

"You take him out of his position, and you place him on paid administrative leave, and then you walk him through the hospital with a police attendant escorting him on his way to a fact-finding, it scares people to death," he said. "They're not going to talk."

VA Secretary Robert McDonald, former head of Procter & Gamble, has tried to rebrand the VA as an organization that cares deeply about veterans. To that end, he's repeated his new slogan, "I CARE," and is often seen wearing a pin that says "I CARE."

But Coleman said that sentiment only goes so deep.

"It's a pin that goes on his lapel," Coleman said. "He cares, but, you know, a lot of this, he's allowed to happen on his watch."

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6.11 - Philly.com (Philadelphia Inquirer): [Congress to probe VA relocation payments](#) (1 October, Tricia L. Nadolny, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Philadelphia, PA)

A congressional committee said Thursday it will hold a hearing on allegations that senior officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs - including the director of the Philadelphia benefits office - misused the agency's relocation program for their own gain.

The news came three days after the VA's top watchdog asked federal prosecutors to investigate whether Diana Rubens, the Philadelphia director, broke the law by orchestrating her reassignment to the job and then had the agency pay almost \$300,000 to relocate her from Virginia to Havertown, Delaware County.

Rubens will be among those called to answer questions at the Oct. 21 hearing, said Rep. Jeff Miller (R., Fla.), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs. Also on the prospective witness list are her predecessor, Robert McKenrick; Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey; and Deputy Inspector General Linda Halliday, whose investigation and report sparked the congressional hearing.

In a statement, Miller said the inspector general's report showed "serious misuse" of taxpayer dollars.

"It is clear from the report that senior leaders doled out outrageously generous relocation expense benefits as if they were an entitlement or perk of employment," he said. The hearing will be the fourth the committee has called to investigate problems at the Philadelphia benefits office since the facility came under fire last summer.

The office has been described as the most troubled benefits office in the country. VA officials have said Rubens was moved from a job at the agency's Washington headquarters to the Germantown office in June 2014 to right the ship.

In Monday's report, Halliday accused Rubens of helping facilitate the transfer of the former director, McKenrick, to the VA's Los Angeles office so she could take his Philadelphia job, which allowed her to be closer to family.

The position has substantially less responsibilities than her old post, but her \$181,000 salary did not change.

Halliday also faulted the VA's relocation program as a whole, saying the agency had used relocating senior executives as a "method to justify annual salary increases."

Rubens has not spoken publicly since the report, and VA officials have declined to comment on her status - other than to say the agency will determine whether any disciplinary action is warranted.

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6.12 - The Hill: [Senate Democrats block VA funding bill](#) (1 October, Jordain Carney, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Senate Democrats on Thursday blocked a bill that would fund veterans' benefits and military construction, in an effort to push Republicans to negotiate a larger budget deal.

Senators voted 50-44 on ending debate over whether to proceed to the funding bill. Sixty votes were needed.

Democrats were expected to block the legislation as part of their push for an agreement that would roll back congressionally-mandated spending caps on both defense and non-defense spending.

"It has no chance of getting 60 votes. None. I know that. The Republican leader knows that. So why are we wasting time on votes destined to fail?" Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said ahead of the vote.

Meanwhile, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) said the bill "straight jackets" the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and "short changes" veterans.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) slammed Democrats, suggesting they had flip-flopped on the legislation since it was passed out of the Appropriations Committee.

"They issued press releases praising the bill, but they seem prepared to block the Senate from even debating this bill, too," he said. "It's all part of some half-baked Democratic scheme to get more money for the IRS and the Washington bureaucracies."

Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-La.) added Democrats' blocking the bill will have "consequences" for veterans as well as active-duty troops.

"If we fail to act, it will not just be our veterans who are hurt. It will also affect our active-duty military and our national security," he added.

Sen. Joe Donnelly (Ind.) was the only Democrat who voted to move forward with the VA proposal.

"Our commitment to supporting veterans should be something we can all agree on. However, we must also remember that supporting veterans and their families goes beyond the VA's budget," Donnelly said in a statement.

"I remain hopeful that in the coming weeks members of both sides of the aisle can come together and begin the hard work of negotiating a bipartisan budget that reflects all of our country's needs."

While Thursday is the first time McConnell has tried to move the VA funding bill, Democrats have previously twice blocked a separate defense spending bill, even as Republicans hammered them as obstructionist.

With government funding now set to expire on Dec. 11, McConnell and Speaker John Boehner have opened the door to negotiations with Democrats on a budget deal.

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6.13 - Stars and Stripes: [VA art budget comes under fire in Congress](#) (1 October, Travis J. Tritten, 1.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs ran its troubled Denver hospital project \$625 million into the red, but it also might have made questionable art purchases, according to one congressman.

Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., the chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, went to the House floor on Wednesday with poster displays of a rock sculpture and other installations that account for \$6.34 million in recent art and consulting expenses at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System.

The massive rock at the mental health center in Palo Alto cost \$483,000 and is part of a renovated \$1.3 million courtyard. Cut into cubes with a laser and pieced together, the sculpture evokes “a sense of transformation, rebuilding, and self-investigation,” according to the designers.

Miller offered a different perspective Wednesday, citing the rock as part of a pattern of “wanton and abusive spending practices” by the agency. He also said the agency’s spending habits continue to be a problem even as Congress was faced with cleaning up the fallout from the mismanaged hospital project in Colorado this week allowing the \$625 million in new spending.

“These projects include an art installation on the side of a parking garage that displays quotes by Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt in, wait for it ... in Morse code that cost \$285,000. It actually lights up,” Miller said.

The bill to raise the VA spending limit on the massively over-budget Denver hospital — despite grumbling among lawmakers — passed easily. A House vote Wednesday was nearly unanimous following a similar Senate vote last week because the legislation also authorizes continued spending on a raft of critical VA programs that few lawmakers want to see expire.

It also puts the Army Corps of Engineers in charge of any VA construction projects estimated at more than \$100 million as a way to avoid the years of mismanagement and shifting plans that plagued the Denver hospital. The project was originally conceived in the late 1990s and later estimated to cost \$328 million but has since ballooned to almost \$1.7 billion.

Miller, who voted for the bill, said the agency continues to be irresponsible with its use of money, including \$33.4 million through the third quarter of this fiscal year on conferences for staff.

“For example, as I address this House this afternoon, VA officials from across the country have gathered 40 miles away in Leesburg for a leadership conference that is costing the department \$1 million,” he said.

The VA did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday on the criticism on the House floor over spending on art and conferences. In a statement released after the vote, it said the legislation prevents a shutdown of the construction site and gives needed budget flexibility to complete the project.

“We know we made mistakes in the development of this medical center, but we remain steadfast in our commitment to complete the state-of-the-art facility for Colorado Veterans and doing so while being good stewards of taxpayer dollars,” spokeswoman Victoria Dillon wrote in a statement.

The VA also received a stinging rebuke earlier this week for spending on staff relocation. On Monday, the VA inspector general found two senior executives misused their positions to

improperly reap hundreds of thousands of dollars when they moved to new positions and that the agency used transfers to circumvent a freeze on raises.

The agency has proposed shifting about \$200 million from its medical services budget and other construction to finish the hospital, now widely considered the biggest construction failure in the agency's history.

"It is simply beyond me why VA would choose to pay to complete the Denver project by cutting medical services and medical facility dollars but not the exorbitant conference spending, or bloated relocation expenses or art," Miller said.

Dina Titus, D-Nev., said she reluctantly supported the bill but was concerned about where the VA will get the additional money for the project, despite assurances the agency would minimize any impact on veteran health care.

"Now, we all believe that veterans everywhere including in Denver should have access to the best health care possible, but the funds for the Denver project should not come at the expense of veterans in Nevada and in other parts of the country," she said.

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6.14 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: [Self-promotion: A VA official created a new job and then she took it](#) (2 October, 1.1M online visitors/mo; Pittsburgh, PA)

This week's winner in the "nice work if you can get it" category is Diana Rubens, a high-ranking official in the Washington, D.C., office of Veterans Affairs who created a new position in Philadelphia, where she wanted to move, and promptly filled it — herself.

To add insult to the injury — to the VA's already tarnished administrative reputation and to the taxpayers who fund it — Ms. Rubens kept the \$181,497 salary she'd been making in her old job, even though the new post is two steps lower on the agency's pay scales.

Ms. Rubens' action was egregious, and she wasn't alone. Another administrator, Kimberly Graves, moved from the Veterans Benefits Administration's Eastern Area Office to a lower post in St. Paul, Minn., where she kept her \$173,949 salary.

How do employees manage to give themselves cushy new jobs yet keep their paychecks coming from a position with greater responsibility? Is nobody keeping track of officials' actions at the VA? This is, after all, the same agency that gave out bonuses to employees based on falsified records about the waiting lists for services for veterans. This is the same agency that has become notorious for construction delays and cost overruns and, in Pittsburgh, for rewarding an administrator who presided while an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease took six lives and sickened more veterans.

When former Procter & Gamble executive Robert A. McDonald became VA secretary last year, the nation was hopeful that real change at the top would trickle down through the vast bureaucracy. A statement issued Wednesday by the VA Office of Public Affairs in Washington didn't inspire confidence. It says the agency will conduct a 30-day review of its incentive and relocation procedures, collect other evidence and "take appropriate accountability actions."

We hope so, but we're not optimistic.

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6.15 - Military Times: [Senate Democrats block VA budget bill](#) (1 October, Leo Shane III, 421k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Senate Democrats on Thursday blocked plans for a nearly \$164 billion Veterans Affairs Department budget for fiscal 2016 over objections to Republicans' overarching spending plans and a lack of progress on a compromise budget deal.

The procedural move follows similar decisions to stall the fiscal 2016 defense appropriations bill earlier this year and echoes President Obama's pledge to veto any budget measure that does not repeal mandatory spending caps looming over all federal operations.

Republicans decried the move as playing politics at the expense of veterans. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., called it "one more example of Democrats preventing us from doing our business."

The VA appropriations bill, which also includes military construction funds, would have provided a 3 percent budget increase for the new fiscal year. It's another spending boost for the department, which has seen its total budget nearly triple since the late 1990s.

But the ongoing budget fight has less to do with the specifics of that bill than with the larger Republican budget plans, which leave in place spending caps on a host of nondefense agencies but get around limits on defense spending by adding \$38 billion to temporary war funding that falls outside the scope of the regular defense budget.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., called that "a gimmick for short-term funding" and blamed Republicans for refusing to advance responsible budget plans.

The VA budget is not subject to the spending caps. But just before Thursday's vote, the White House reiterated plans for a veto of the VA spending measure as currently written.

Obama "has been clear that he is not willing to lock in sequestration going forward, nor will he accept fixes to defense without also fixing non-defense," officials said in a statement.

The latest round in the ongoing fight came just a few hours after Congress managed to avoid a partial government shutdown by passing a last-minute budget extension through mid-December, giving both sides two more months to negotiate a budget plan for the full fiscal year.

McConnell has said he hopes to reach such a compromise before December, but lawmakers have been unsuccessful at finding ways to repeal the sequestration spending caps approved by Congress in 2011, despite repeated attempts and widespread distaste for them.

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6.16 - Leavenworth Times: [Preliminary hearing set for former VA physician assistant](#) (1 October, John Richmeier, 53k online visitors/mo; Leavenworth, KS)

A preliminary hearing has been scheduled for a former physician assistant who is accused of sexually abusing patients at the Leavenworth VA hospital.

The preliminary hearing for Mark E. Wisner is scheduled for Oct. 28.

Wisner is charged with one felony count of aggravated criminal sodomy and three misdemeanor charges of sexual battery. The crimes are alleged to have occurred in 2014 while Wisner was working at the Eisenhower VA Medical Center.

Wisner initially had been charged in two cases. But Assistant County Attorney Michael Jones has filed an amended complaint to consolidate the same charges into one case.

Jones presented the amended complaint Wednesday when Wisner appeared in Leavenworth County District Court.

Wisner was appearing with his new court-appointed attorney, Debra Snider.

"I believe we are ready to set a preliminary hearing on this matter," Snider said.

Evidence will be presented during the Oct. 28 preliminary hearing, and a judge will determine if prosecution for the felony charge should proceed.

In February, Wisner surrendered his medical license to the state Board of Healing Arts. This action was taken amid allegations Wisner had used his position at the VA hospital to commit sexual battery against patients.

Wisner left his job at the VA hospital in February, according to hospital spokesman Shawn Hoffman.

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6.17 - FierceHealthIT: [VA OIG: Palo Alto Healthcare System vendor partnership put patient data at risk](#) (1 October, Susan D. Hall, 40k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Palo Alto VA Healthcare System put patient health information at risk during a pilot program with an outside vendor meant to improve its IT capabilities, according to a report from the Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Inspector General.

The OIG was investigating a complaint alleging that the facility's chief of informatics formed an illegal agreement with the vendor, Kyron, and that sensitive patient information was transmitted outside of VA's firewall.

The agreement allowed the vendor, as part of a pilot program, to test its extraction software on a VA server to transform de-identified VA patient information into structured patient profiles--part

of an effort to improve search and query of patient interventions and outcomes. This effort was meant to make data mining easier and more cost effective.

While those allegations were not substantiated, the investigation uncovered that Kyron personnel were given access to VA patient information within VA's IT enterprise without appropriate background checks and without undergoing the VA's security and privacy awareness training.

In addition, the VA's information security officers (ISOs) did not complete system security documentation and system risk analysis before allowing the Kyron software to be placed on the VA server. In effect, the pilot program did not have formal approval, according to the OIG.

The report recommends that local and regional ISOs implement controls to ensure that unauthorized software is not installed on VA networks without a formal risk assessment and formal approval to operate. In addition, Kyron employees' access to the data was cut off until they completed the background checks and security and privacy training.

There's been no shortage of criticism recently for the VA's IT efforts. Though nearly \$1 billion has been spent since 2009 on rolling out its electronic benefits management system, that project still suffers from defects and a lack of response-time goals, according to a Government Accountability Office report.

In addition, the OIG recently chastised the VA's use of the collaboration tool Yammer as an insecure time-waster.

Meanwhile, more than a year after the scandal involving veteran wait times, an independent report found problems within the department may only be getting worse.

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