



# Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

## 24 August 2015

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

#### **1.1 - The Washington Times (AP): [New Hampshire delegation members to host forum for veterans](#)** (23 August, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

New Hampshire's two U.S. senators and a congresswoman are hosting a forum for veterans about the Veterans Choice program and two new veterans' health clinics in the North Country. Sens. Jeanne Shaheen and Kelly Ayotte will be joined by Rep. Ann McLane Kuster and Veterans Administration officials at the forum Aug. 28 at White Mountain Community College in Berlin.

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#### **1.2 - The Des Moines Register: [In Iraq, former Iowa soldier helping Kurds fight Iran](#)** (23 August, Tony Keys, 3.6M online visitors/mo; Des Moines, IA)

A former Iowa National Guardsman who returned to Iraq in May to help fight the Islamic State says he's now facing a different foe: the Iranian army... [A] spokesman with the Louisiana National Guard told the Register that O'Leary had been declared "separated" from the Guard, and that the Army had granted him an honorable discharge. O'Leary expressed relief at the news, because it could mean he'll retain his veterans benefits.

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#### **1.3 - TribLive (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review): [Computer glitch, mail vendor switch blamed in delay of VA appointment notices](#)** (23 August, Walter F. Roche Jr., 1.5M online visitors/mo; Warrendale, PA)

A computer glitch and a change in mail vendors delayed notices about medical appointments to 14,000 veterans at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, officials said. The delays, which occurred in June, sparked an ongoing internal investigation of mailroom practices, according to VA spokeswoman Bethany Miga.

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#### **1.4 - The Spokesman-Review: [All veterans are worthy](#)** (24 August, Lorraine Scott, 779k online visitors/mo; Spokane, WA)

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#### **1.5 - The Buffalo News: [Letter: Staff at VA hospital did outstanding job](#)** (24 August, Sarah Violanti, 676k online visitors/mo; Buffalo, NY)

My husband, Lewis, died in Buffalo's Veteran Affairs hospital. What a place. He was treated like royalty. On July 28, I mentioned to a nurse that the following day was our 65th wedding anniversary.

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**1.6 - Brainerd Dispatch: [Congressmen hear veterans' take on VA reform at Brainerd roundtable](#)** (23 August, Zach Kayser, 198k online visitors/mo; Brainerd, MN)

Issues plaguing the Veterans Administration's new "Choice Program" took center stage Saturday during a Brainerd forum on VA reform hosted by U.S. Reps. Rick Nolan, D-Minn., and Tim Walz, D-Minn. More than 30 veterans, family members, clergy and state-level elected officials attended the roundtable-style forum.

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**1.7 - Independent Mail (Video): [Lending a Hand](#)** (23 August, Charmaine Smith-Miles, 137k online visitors/mo; Anderson, SC)

Ken Lewallen always travels with a plastic filing cabinet in his car. He never knows when he might run into a veteran who needs help filling out paperwork for benefits... This has been Lewallen's mission — his life work — for 40 years. And he does it all for free. Why?

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**1.8 - Observer-Reporter (Audio): ['Soldiering On' podcast deals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Local veteran shares his compelling story](#)** (23 August, Katie Roupe and Brad Hundt, 135k online visitors/mo; Washington, PA)

Editor's note – This podcast is the first in a series on veterans issues in Washington and Greene counties. Check out the entire Soldiering On series at <http://www.observer-reporter.com/vets>. Washington native Cpl. Christopher Morris joined the Marines in 2007. While he serving in Afghanistan, his truck was blown up by an Improvised Explosive Device.

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**1.9 - The Journal-News: [From the VAC: New Legislation Signed At State Fair](#)** (24 August, Dave Strowmatt, 126k online visitors/mo; Hillsboro, IL)

It has been almost a year since a VAC column has appeared. There is definitely something new to report this month. On Aug. 16, Veterans Day at the Illinois State Fair, Governor Rauner signed several bills into law that affect veterans and their families.

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**1.10 - St. George News: [Veterans Choice Program delays care](#)** (23 August, Nataly Burdick, 85k online visitors/mo; Saint George, UT)

Almost a year after the Department of Veterans Affairs unveiled a program that was supposed to make life easier for U.S. veterans needing medical care, many veterans say the program has instead done the opposite for them.

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**1.11 - AllGov: [Colorado Board of Health Refuses to Allow Marijuana for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; Tells Veterans to Stick to Opioids](#)** (23 August, Steve Straehley, 5k online visitors/day; CA)

The Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment and its Board of Health voted last month to deny those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) access to medical marijuana, despite the recommendation from the state's chief medical officer that it add marijuana to the list of approved treatments.

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## **2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness**

**2.1 - Mail Tribune: [ACCESS struggles to find available rentals for homeless veterans](#)** (23 August, Kaylee Tornay, 435k online visitors/mo; Medford, OR)  
Biondo is one of the estimated 462 homeless veterans in Jackson County. ACCESS Inc. hopes to find each one a home with the help of a \$6 million, three-year grant awarded in April by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The grant is part of \$93 million given to nonprofits across the nation to combat the problem of homelessness among veterans.

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**2.2 - The Times: [Housing redevelopment leaves disabled vet in the lurch. Willie Glenn seeking affordable place to live](#)** (23 August, Joshua Silavent, 129k online visitors/mo; Gainesville, GA)  
Willie Glenn rolls up to the curb in his electric wheelchair, glad to escape the “war zone” of construction that has enveloped his home in recent weeks. “Getting in and out ... it’s not easy,” he said. The renovations to this apartment complex at the corner of Forrest Avenue and Bradford Street in Gainesville are designed to attract higher-income tenants.

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**2.3 - Walla Walla Union-Bulletin: [Is there an acceptable level of homelessness?](#)** (22 August, Sheila Hagar, 64k online visitors/mo; Walla Walla, WA)  
Currently Walla Walla city and county governments and social service nonprofits are wrestling with what to do to alleviate area homelessness. But what is an acceptable level at which they can claim success?

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**2.4 - Westside Today: [Brentwood Reports: West L.A. VA ‘housing is not in itself a solution’](#)** (23 August, Larry Watts, 26k online visitors/mo; Santa Monica, CA)  
Congressman Ted Lieu attended the monthly meeting of the Westside Regional Alliance of Councils (WRAC) this week. He was peppered with many questions relating to veterans and the ongoing development of a Master Plan for the WLA VA Campus in Brentwood.

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**2.5 - Yakima Herald-Republic: [Next Step Housing, other groups helping local veterans who need a place to call home](#)** (23 August, Phil Ferolito, 300 online visitors/day; Yakima, WA)  
Marsh might still be at the mission if it weren’t for a five-year national push by the Obama administration to end homelessness among veterans by the end of 2015. Though that goal isn’t likely to be reached by December, significant strides have been made, with a 33 percent decrease in veterans homelessness since the push began in 2010.

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**2.6 - Hill Country Community Journal: [Local presentation fields questions on new VA apartments](#)** (24 August, Bonnie Arnold, 300 online visitors/day; Kerrville, TX)

A presentation about the “Freedom’s Path” veterans housing at the local VA Medical Center campus was offered recently in Kerrville, and small groups of area veterans with questions about the apartments attended either of two sessions.

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### **3. Ending the Claims Backlog**

#### **3.1 - The Tampa Tribune: Editorial: Local VA office makes progress on claims backlog**

(24 August, 947k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

It’s been a steady stream of troubling reports from Department of Veterans Affairs facilities across the country over the past few years as stories about patient backlogs and administrative failures make the headlines. So the recent news that the VA’s regional office at Bay Pines in Pinellas County has made substantial progress in reducing the backlog of disability claims while increasing the accuracy of the claims is deserving of recognition.

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### **4. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill**

#### **4.1 - The Washington Times (AP): University repays VA nearly \$150K for benefits’ overpayment**

(23 August, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Elizabeth City State University has repaid the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs nearly \$150,000 for overpayment of veterans’ benefits after a VA audit found the school miscalculated or incorrectly reported those benefits in more than 100 instances.

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#### **4.2 - The Free Lance-Star: Editorial: Colleges reaching out to veterans helps all**

(24 August, 2.7M online visitors/mo; Fredericksburg, VA)

Someone who worked on computer systems for four years in the military shouldn’t have to enter college without any credit for the training received in the military. Some colleges in Virginia agree with that and are working to make sure veterans who enroll get credit for classes taken in the military.

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#### **4.3 - Stars and Stripes: Academic accommodations can aid troubled veterans**

(23 August, Heath Druzin, 1.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Relocated to an empty clinic in the Phoenix Veterans Affairs Health Care System after going public about dangerous patient care problems, Dr. Katherine Mitchell needed a project to stay busy. With the rate of suicides increasing within the Phoenix system, she started studying victims’ case files and found a pattern that seemed tragically easy to address.

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### **5. Women Veterans**

**5.1 - Boston Herald: [Women vets meet to talk business](#)** (23 August, Marie Szaniszlo, 2.5M online visitors/mo; Boston, MA)

Two hundred women veterans and military spouses from across the country have gathered in Boston this weekend for a three-day crash course in starting and growing their own businesses. The Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship, or V-WISE, conference at The Westin Copley Place kicked off Friday with a keynote address from Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James.

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## **6. Other**

**6.1 - The Wall Street Journal (CIO Journal): [VA Officials Dinged for Using Free Yammer](#)** (23 August, Angus Loten, 37.5M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

Department of Veterans Affairs officials are being called out for encouraging agency staffers' use of a version of Yammer without proper administrative oversight. Since at least 2013, senior agency officials appeared to endorse the workplace use of the social-networking tool, owned by Microsoft Corp., without seeking approval by the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, as required under agency rules, according to the findings of an internal probe released this week.

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**6.2 - Raw Story (The Guardian): [Chat network used by Veterans Administration staff was a major security risk, investigation says](#)** (23 August, Sam Thielman, 4.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A chat network used by staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was a major security risk and open to anyone who had ever been a contractor or an employee at the VA, an internal investigation found.

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**6.3 - Inquisitr (Video): [Veterans Affairs Ruled Responsible For Marine's Death As VA Shown As Largest Non-Military User Of Ashley Madison](#)** (23 August, 918k online visitors/mo)

A Veterans Affairs investigation into the death of Marine Jason Simcakoski ruled that Veterans Affairs is responsible for the death of the Marine while the VA is embroiled in yet another scandal. With the revelation that Veterans Affairs is the largest non-military federal user of the cheating dating site Ashley Madison, employees who used the site may have had their records compromised in this sensitive breach of information.

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**6.4 - The Spokesman-Review: [Do more to honor vets](#)** (24 August, Herb Postlewait, 779k online visitors/mo; Spokane, WA)

Aug. 16 marked the 70th anniversary of the official end of World War II. The Washington State Veterans Cemetery in Medical Lake celebrated the day by honoring the area's veterans. The 16 million who served have been called "The Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw. There were no local elected officials present; not from Spokane, Spokane County, Airway Heights or even Medical Lake.

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**6.5 - The Grand Island Independent:** [Patriot Tour stop includes a poker run for first time; goal is 48 states in 100 days](#) (23 August, Jeff Bahr, 518k online visitors/mo; Grand Island, NE)  
A group of motorcycle riders didn't just bring an American flag to the Veterans Affairs Medical Center on Saturday morning. They also greeted some of those who live there. About 25 veterans and family members were sitting in front of the center when the Nation of Patriots Tour arrived.

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**6.6 - Fayetteville Observer:** [Student who wants to be doctor receives DAV scholarship](#) (23 August, Drew Brooks, 426k online visitors/mo; Fayetteville, NC)  
A Fayetteville student is \$20,000 closer to achieving her goal of becoming a doctor. Hannah N. Farmer received the top scholarship from Disabled American Veterans at the organization's national convention in Denver this month. Hannah, who has volunteered to work with veterans for 786 hours over four years, was recognized with the organization's Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship. She donated her time to the Fayetteville Veterans Affairs Medical Center, officials said.

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**6.7 - Bradenton Herald:** [USF instructor Eric Hodges helped win \\$150,000 grant for program to study veterans and the humanities](#) (24 August, James A. Jones Jr., 262k online visitors/mo; Bradenton, FL)  
The National Endowment for the Humanities recently awarded a \$150,000 grant to Eric Hodges, an instructor at the University of South Florida, Sarasota-Manatee, and two colleagues at Virginia Tech to develop a summer teaching institute focusing on veterans issues.

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**6.8 - Arkansas Democrat-Gazette:** [North Little Rock firm opens after raid](#) (23 August, Scott Carroll, 189k online visitors/mo; Little Rock, AR)  
An energy company opened Thursday after being raided by federal agents... Powers of Arkansas spokesman Steve Davison, contacted Thursday by phone, said the agents were from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Inspector General. He said they had a search warrant and DAV Construction, which shares office space with Powers of Arkansas, was the target of the raid.

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**6.9 - Muskogee Phoenix:** [Local veterans' creativity recognized nationally: All three take part in VAMC's Open Studio](#) (24 August, Mark Hughes, 96k online visitors/mo; Muskogee, OK)  
Three local veterans from Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center have won first, second or third place awards in the nationwide Veterans Creative Arts Competition. Each year, veterans treated at VA facilities compete in a local creative arts competition, Nathan Schaeffer, public affairs specialist, said. The competition included 51 categories in the visual arts division this year, ranging from oil painting to leatherwork to paint-by-number kits, Schaeffer said.

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**6.10 - Sci-Tech Today:** [Smartphones, Apps Are Liberating the Blind and Visually Impaired](#) (23 August, Pete Carey, 45k online visitors/mo; Calabasas, CA)

Ruben Morales, a blind 59-year-old retired engineer who lives in Morgan Hill, has used a specialized screen reading program for years to write and run spreadsheets on his desktop computer. But just this month, he figuratively cut the cord to his desktop and joined the mobile revolution. Morales was visiting the Veterans Affairs Department's Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in Menlo Park learning how to use an iPhone's features for vision-impaired people.

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**6.11 - MSNBC (Video):** [Weekends With Alex Witt](#) (23 August, 39k broadcast viewers; New York, NY)

In this 30-second video, former Donald Trump advisor Roger Stone promotes the newly updated book, Time to Get Tough: Make America Great Again!, in which Mr. Trump presents his vision of VA reform.

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## 1. Access to Benefits/Care

### 1.1 - The Washington Times (AP): [New Hampshire delegation members to host forum for veterans](#) (23 August, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

BERLIN, N.H. (AP) - New Hampshire's two U.S. senators and a congresswoman are hosting a forum for veterans about the Veterans Choice program and two new veterans' health clinics in the North Country.

Sens. Jeanne Shaheen and Kelly Ayotte will be joined by Rep. Ann McLane Kuster and Veterans Administration officials at the forum Aug. 28 at White Mountain Community College in Berlin.

Shaheen and Ayotte hosted a similar forum in May at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics in Manchester.

New Hampshire is the only state in the continental U.S. without a full service VA hospital. New Hampshire's delegation has worked to expand options for New Hampshire veterans seeking health care closer to home.

The VA announced last year that it would be opening two VA health clinics in Berlin and Colebrook as part of an expansion project under way at Vermont's White River Junction VA Medical Center.

"North Country veterans know all too well how difficult it can be to just make it to an appointment," said Ayotte, Shaheen and Kuster. "That is why we will continue our efforts to ensure this program is implemented properly and that New Hampshire veterans are fully informed of their options when it comes to receiving health care through the Veterans Choice Card program."

Under the Veterans Choice program, card holders are able to get care from non-VA doctors if they have been waiting more than 30 days for an appointment at a VA center or live more than 40 miles away from a VA medical care facility.

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### 1.2 - The Des Moines Register: [In Iraq, former Iowa soldier helping Kurds fight Iran](#) (23 August, Tony Keys, 3.6M online visitors/mo; Des Moines, IA)

A former Iowa National Guardsman who returned to Iraq in May to help fight the Islamic State says he's now facing a different foe: the Iranian army.

Ryan O'Leary originally went to north-central Iraq, where he volunteered to help train Kurdish soldiers fighting the extremist group also known as ISIS. But he told The Des Moines Register by phone this week that he shifted farther north in July, to work with a Kurdish soldiers trying to hold off Iranian troops along the border between Iraq and Iran.



ISIS has captured world attention recently because of its brutality in the region. But O'Leary said he came to believe Iran poses a bigger danger to the Kurds, a minority population he admires and supports.

"At the end of the day, ISIS isn't going to be a long-term threat. They're going to get pushed back, just like Al Qaeda has been," he said. "They'll be some of those people in the shadows if there's a car bomb now and again. They'll still be a threat. But they're not going to be holding a lot of land in the future."

The Kurds have carved out a semi-autonomous area of northern Iraq, but many of their people also live in neighboring Iran and Turkey. Their dream is to have an independent homeland, and O'Leary believes they deserve it. Former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons and helicopter gunships to try to snuff out Kurdish ambitions. Saddam is gone, but Iran and Turkey have continued to try to keep a lid on the Kurds.

O'Leary, 28, is a former Iowa National Guard corporal who served in Iraq in 2007-08 and in Afghanistan in 2010-11. He decided to return to Iraq on his own this spring after hearing from a former interpreter who is Kurdish and serving with the Peshmerga, which is the Kurds' army. O'Leary contends the Kurds deserve more U.S. support, because they've been stalwart allies of America.

U.S. officials have warned him it's dangerous and unwise for him to be in Iraq, but they have told the Register what he's doing is legal.

O'Leary said he's now serving in a mountainous area where Iraq meets Iran and Turkey. It's about 260 miles north of Baghdad, the Iraqi capital. He estimated on Thursday that Iranian soldiers were set up less than a mile from his location. "I could shoot at the Iranians now and probably hit some," he said with a chuckle.

He added, however, that Kurdish leaders don't want to start a fight with the Iranian army. Iranian soldiers occasionally fire bullets or mortar rounds in the Kurds' direction, he said, and they killed a shepherd about a week ago.

"Right now, it's pretty much a standoff. We've got guns pointed at each other," he said.

Like so much in the region, the situation around O'Leary is complicated and confusing. During the phone interview Thursday, the sound of jets could be heard nearby. He said they appeared to be Turkish fighter planes, possibly harassing other Kurdish units in the area.

Although O'Leary has seen other former American and British soldiers in northern Iraq, he said he's the only one he knows of in his rugged sector. He said he's been helping train new recruits, including Kurdish men from Iran who have been slipping over the border into Iraq. They work on infantry tactics and go on patrols through the mountains.

"We pretty much sleep on the ground, wherever we're at for the night," he said. "We have some fortified positions, but we usually sleep outside on the dirt or in the rocks. It's pretty primitive."

They drink water from streams and eat local food. He brought along his National Guard camouflage uniforms, which he'd stripped of U.S. insignia. But he's now switched to the plain khaki uniforms of the Peshmerga, so he doesn't stand out as much.

He said he has no plans to return to Iowa soon. He left behind a girlfriend in the Des Moines area who disapproved of his quest. They since have broken up, he said. His parents also told him they thought it was a bad idea to return on his own to Iraq, but they told the Register they support his decision. The Register is not identifying his parents' names or their hometown confidential at the request of the FBI, which is concerned they could potentially be targets for reprisals.

His mother said O'Leary has kept in touch with their family via email and Facebook. He sounds well, she wrote in an email to the Register this weekend. "The political instability of that area naturally causes us to be concerned for his safety, but for now it sounds like he is where he wants to be."

After serving with the Iowa National Guard in Afghanistan, O'Leary transferred to the Louisiana National Guard to be near his then-wife in New Orleans. But they divorced, and he applied to transfer back to the Iowa National Guard.

In deciding to return to Iraq on his own, he walked away from his commitment to the Louisiana Guard and, by extension, the U.S. Army. His actions could have led to allegations that he was "absent without leave," which could have brought formal charges and a court martial. He said Thursday he was unsure of his status.

But a spokesman with the Louisiana National Guard told the Register that O'Leary had been declared "separated" from the Guard, and that the Army had granted him an honorable discharge.

O'Leary expressed relief at the news, because it could mean he'll retain his veterans benefits. That would be helpful, especially since he has received treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs for post-traumatic stress disorder, and he might need more help once he returns to the U.S.

The PTSD stems from his combat experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan with the Iowa Guard. When asked Thursday how he's coping with the condition, he replied, "If anything, being here has helped."

O'Leary ended the conversation abruptly, saying he had to go. Fighter jets were back overhead, and his unit needed to move.

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**1.3 - TribLive (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review): [Computer glitch, mail vendor switch blamed in delay of VA appointment notices](#) (23 August, Walter F. Roche Jr., 1.5M online visitors/mo; Warrendale, PA)**

A computer glitch and a change in mail vendors delayed notices about medical appointments to 14,000 veterans at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, officials said.

The delays, which occurred in June, sparked an ongoing internal investigation of mailroom practices, according to VA spokeswoman Bethany Miga. Appointment notices were sent to

veterans a week in advance, instead of two weeks or more, but no veterans' appointments had to be canceled or rescheduled, she said.

A computer crash caused delays of as long as three weeks. Shorter delays stemmed from switching contractors for mailing services, Miga said. Because of the contract switch, about 10,000 notices had to be mailed from VA facilities in Butler, she said.

"This issue was not due to a lack of funding, but was an alternate way to send mail and continue to communicate with veterans about their VA care while we brought our new system online," Miga wrote in an email.

Michael Stelacio, department commander of the Pennsylvania American Legion, called the glitch inexcusable.

"It's a terrible shame," he said. "No other organization or business could flourish with the ineptness that the VA displays time and time again. It's beyond words."

Michael Aaron Glass, executive director of Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh, said Friday that he had not heard about the delays but considers them "highly unacceptable."

"In many cases, we have veterans who have some serious mental or physical issues, and any delay in care could be highly detrimental to them," Glass said. "There really is little room for error for them to receive their due medical services."

Miga said the mailings that had to be sent from Butler were "roughly one to two days" behind the usual schedule and "did not negatively impact the care we provide to veterans."

She said a contractor, Pitney Bowes, was selected through a competitive bidding process to replace Neopost USA.

As for the computer crash, Miga said that although notices usually arrive several weeks before scheduled appointments, the delayed notices arrived a week ahead.

"The delay was due to an unexpected crash in the computer hardware that we use to generate these letters," she said.

The scheduling of medical appointments and delays in treatment have been major issues in a review of VA care across the country.

Secret wait lists and delays in treatment at VA facilities nationwide, including the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, outraged Congress and the public in 2014. The wait lists are believed to have prompted the resignation of former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, a retired Army general.

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**1.4 - The Spokesman-Review: [All veterans are worthy](#)** (24 August, Lorraine Scott, 779k online visitors/mo; Spokane, WA)

For 24 years, I have carried mental and physical baggage because I felt unworthy. Even though I wrote a confidence-building, self-worth-generating book called "Loving Myself First," I realized my belief of worth didn't include being a veteran.

When I safely returned home from Desert Storm (1991), I felt the Veterans Administration was for veterans more worthy: ones with extensive injuries, or ones who'd experienced direct combat. Those were the veterans who deserved to be helped, not me. I believed I just needed to move on. I never let myself process what I'd experienced.

Those unresolved thoughts and feelings don't go away. They hang around. I know because I'm having leakages of emotions.

I couldn't take it any longer, and contacted the Spokane VA hospital. They gave me hope and helped me feel worthy of care. Then, I wondered how many more veterans are limping through life because they feel unworthy.

I tell you: You are worthy and deserving. Contact the eligibility specialist at the VA. Let them help you. Don't be like me and wait 25 years.

Lorraine Scott, SFC (Retired)

Loon Lake

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**1.5 - The Buffalo News: [Letter: Staff at VA hospital did outstanding job](#)** (24 August, Sarah Violanti, 676k online visitors/mo; Buffalo, NY)

My husband, Lewis, died in Buffalo's Veteran Affairs hospital. What a place. He was treated like royalty.

On July 28, I mentioned to a nurse that the following day was our 65th wedding anniversary. Boy was I surprised; the next day the staff gave us a beautiful party with a cake and a gift of a dozen roses for me.

They brought us to a large space in the hall and gave everyone there, and whoever passed by, a slice of cake. We were so surprised, and so thankful.

On Aug. 4, Lewis passed away, but I will always remember what wonderful care they took of him. I congratulate all of the people who cared for him. They were the best! God bless every one of them.

Sarah Violanti

Hamburg

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**1.6 - Brainerd Dispatch: [Congressmen hear veterans' take on VA reform at Brainerd roundtable](#) (23 August, Zach Kayser, 198k online visitors/mo; Brainerd, MN)**

Issues plaguing the Veterans Administration's new "Choice Program" took center stage Saturday during a Brainerd forum on VA reform hosted by U.S. Reps. Rick Nolan, D-Minn., and Tim Walz, D-Minn.

More than 30 veterans, family members, clergy and state-level elected officials attended the roundtable-style forum, held at the Brainerd VFW Mahlum-Hanson Post 1647. The roundtable was part of a three-day series of meetings Walz and Nolan held on veterans affairs in northeast Minnesota.

Veterans at the forum had praise for the medical care the local VA facilities gave them. The problem, they said, was getting access to it, and getting the VA to cover their expense claims.

"I've never had a veteran really complain about the quality of the care at the VA," Post 1647 Commander Dave Meyer said. "It has always been the wait time."

The "Choice Program" that Congress set up in 2014 was supposed to let veterans who didn't get a medical appointment within 30 days of their preferred date choose instead to go to a non-VA-eligible facility for treatment. The program was instituted following the 2014 VA scandal where VA employees at the Phoenix, Ariz., Veterans Health facility allegedly falsified records as dozens of veterans died waiting for care.

Crow Wing County Veterans Service Officer Bob Nelson said that rather than helping, the Choice Program has made veterans confused and frustrated. The move toward centralization under the Choice Program made it devoid of the personality and empathy from older, more localized VA programs, and caused long wait times, he said.

"It's probably the most misunderstood program in the VA," Nelson said. "People don't know anybody and anything, they don't know where things are."

Walz, who serves on the U.S. House Veterans' Affairs and Armed Services Committees, did most of the talking during the roundtable. He said the the problems with the Choice Program stemmed from a wide gulf between the way the VA implemented it and the way lawmakers actually intended the program to go.

"I am hard-pressed to find anyone finding it's working that way," he said.

Walz asked the audience for a show of hands. How many of them had a good experience with the conventional VA system?

Almost everyone raised their hand.

Then he asked, how many had a successful experience with Choice?

Just one person appeared to raise their hand.

"Capture that guy, he's the one guy in America," Walz joked. "He's like Sasquatch, take a picture."

Nolan demands more help for suicidal vets

The roundtable also covered the VA-related issues facing young post-9/11 veterans, particularly the high rate of veteran suicides. When veterans in crisis call the VA, they're met first with a recorded menu of buttons to dial rather than a human, Nolan said.

"By seventh or eighth (phone option), here's a young guy with a gun to his head," he said. "There should be a 'If this is an emergency, press one.' And somebody picks up the phone and helps him."

Nolan vowed to push the VA leadership for changes.

"We're going to get out there and sit on (VA Secretary Bob) McDonald if we have to," he said.

Nolan said he and Walz planned on meeting with McDonald to discuss potential changes to the Choice Program. In addition, Nolan said he would advocate for reauthorization of the Agent Orange Act, which allows the VA to add coverage for various Agent Orange-related diseases. The Agent Orange Act is set to expire Sept. 31.

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**1.7 - Independent Mail (Video): [Lending a Hand](#)** (23 August, Charmaine Smith-Miles, 137k online visitors/mo; Anderson, SC)

Ken Lewallen always travels with a plastic filing cabinet in his car. He never knows when he might run into a veteran who needs help filling out paperwork for benefits.

In that filing cabinet, he keeps his forms, a dictionary of medical terms, a book detailing the rules for federal benefits for veterans, their dependents and for survivors and plenty of business cards so that veterans always know how to reach him if they have questions.

This has been Lewallen's mission — his life work — for 40 years.

And he does it all for free.

Why?

Because he is a veteran. Because he learned how to apply for his benefits after he suffered an injury while loading an aircraft with supplies that were bound for soldiers fighting in Vietnam.

"I know how to get from point A to point B in the Veterans Affairs system," Lewallen said. "So if I go somewhere, I have all my paperwork with me. I want to help as many veterans as I can."

And he is not alone.

Every week, on Tuesdays, Lewallen is at the American Legion Post No. 14, on East Greenville Street in Anderson with about a half-dozen other veterans.

They are all volunteers with the Disabled American Veterans. Like Lewallen, they all come in with their portable filing cabinets and fill out paperwork so that veterans and their spouses can receive their benefits from the military.

Most weeks, they will see 20 to 30 veterans on that one day. But some weeks, they have as many as 40 come in.

“We stay as long as we need to,” one of the volunteers, Eddie Herndon said. “We will see two to three and Ken will see about 30.”

They are all trained to do what they do. Each year, they must be recertified to continue to volunteer with the Disabled American Veterans.

Recently, Lewallen was honored by the Anderson County Council for his four decades of dedication to veterans. He was also honored this month by inducted into the Chosin Few as an honorary member. The Chosin Few is a group of veterans who served in the Chosin Reservoir, one of the famous battles of the Korean War.

For Lewallen, his work with veterans started after he himself was injured.

A native of Commerce, Ga., Lewallen served in the Marine Corps and he served as a supply officer during the Vietnam War. One day, when he and another group of soldiers were loading an aircraft with supplies bound for Vietnam, a pallet of those supplies were dropped by the forklift operator. The soldiers guiding the pallet into place were all injured.

In the accident, Lewallen lost the use of his left arm and went through 39 surgeries.

While still living in the Washington, D.C., area, Lewallen started volunteering for the American Red Cross. By then, it was 1975. There, he met veterans — like him — who needed help with their paperwork so they could receive their benefits. One man, Lewallen remembers clearly.

“He was living in a horse stall when I found him,” Lewallen said. “He had been drinking and was separated from his family. I remember about six or eight months later, I ran into him. He looked totally different. He told me that he had started getting his benefits, and he wasn’t drinking any more.

“Man, that was worth a million dollars to me,” Lewallen said. “I didn’t get paid. But that was worth all the pay in the world.”

So Lewallen has not stopped since.

In 1999, Lewallen moved to Simpsonville, S.C., to be closer to his sisters. When he arrived in South Carolina, it was not long before people were coming to his home to get help with their paperwork for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. People would drive from Georgia and North Carolina for the help.

For a while, Lewallen drove to Anderson so he could work from an office inside the local Veterans Affairs clinic.

Then, about six years ago, he moved to Anderson so he would not have to drive so far to help the veterans here.

“If we were attorneys, we could make thousands of dollars doing this work,” Lewallen said.

But Lewallen said he has had his days of working. He has worked three jobs at one time when his children were younger. Now, he simply likes helping veterans because he can.

“I started out, filling out paperwork for World War I veterans,” Lewallen said. “We do better because we all come in here and work together to help these veterans.”

Wayne Picklesimer is one of those volunteers who works alongside Lewallen and the others at the American Legion post. He said he has filled out paperwork for veterans sitting in a restaurant parking lot before. He said some veterans come in from Walhalla, Seneca, Salem and neighboring states for help.

“I will fill out a form on the trunk of my car, if it will help a veteran,” Picklesimer said. “I feel like the veterans need to get their benefits. I want them to get the same thing I got, if I can. So we go to job fairs and to the unemployment offices and to nursing homes.”

And the only reward they are looking for Lewallen and Picklesimer said is a “thank you.”

“We had a veteran today who realized he could start getting the medicine he needs,” Picklesimer said. “When you have a veteran who walks in here and says, ‘I’ve got 100 percent of my benefits, you feel warm all over. That’s all it takes. You want to keep on working.”

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**1.8 - Observer-Reporter (Audio): ['Soldiering On' podcast deals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Local veteran shares his compelling story](#)** (23 August, Katie Roupe and Brad Hundt, 135k online visitors/mo; Washington, PA)

Editor's note – This podcast is the first in a series on veterans issues in Washington and Greene counties. Check out the entire Soldiering On series at <http://www.observer-reporter.com/vets>.

Washington native Cpl. Christopher Morris joined the Marines in 2007. While he serving in Afghanistan, his truck was blown up by an Improvised Explosive Device. As a result of the explosion, Morris suffered traumatic brain injury and struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In this compelling podcast, Morris talks about his so-far unsuccessful struggle to receive mental health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs. We also learn about how he was injured, as well as how he copes with PTSD.

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**1.9 - The Journal-News: [From the VAC: New Legislation Signed At State Fair](#)** (24 August, Dave Strowmatt, 126k online visitors/mo; Hillsboro, IL)



It has been almost a year since a VAC column has appeared. There is definitely something new to report this month.

On Aug. 16, Veterans Day at the Illinois State Fair, Governor Rauner signed several bills into law that affect veterans and their families. First was Senate Bill 107, now Public Act 99-0375. This act affects the property tax paid by service connected disabled veterans. For tax year 2015 and beyond the law is changed to provide the following changes: Service connected disabled veterans with a 30 percent or 40 percent rating receive a \$2500 reduction in the assessed value of their home for property tax purposes; 50 percent and 60 percent ratings net a \$5000 reduction; and those veterans who have a 70 percent or higher rating are exempt from property tax. These reductions and exemptions are only valid on the veteran's primary residence.

Montgomery County Supervisor of Assessments Ray Durston has told me that veterans already receiving a reduction do not need to bring in new documentation if their reduction will change based on this new law. Veterans with a 30 percent or 40 percent rating must bring verification with a date of not more than twelve months ago to his office for processing. The VAC can most likely help any who need that verification.

This change in the law affects tax year 2015 and beyond, so veterans won't see the reduction in this year's payments. That does not mean any should wait. Get it done and in to the assessor's office as soon as possible.

Senate Bill 1818, Public Act 99-0377, affects our children. The University of Illinois Children of Veterans Scholarship program has been changed to include the Siege of Beirut and the Grenada Conflict. Service from June 14, 1982, through Dec. 15, 1983, is now a qualifying period for children to apply for this program.

House Bill 3686, Public Act 99-0374, creates the Veterans and Military Discount Card. It designates the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs as the Agency responsible for the production and issuance of these cards. So now in addition to the ability to have a veteran designation on a driver's license or state ID card, veterans can have a separate discount card. This is run completely and totally by the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Montgomery County Veterans Assistance Commission cannot help with this in any way.

Speaking of the driver's license issue, the VAC does not handle this issue either. Veterans must take a copy of their DD Form 214 to an IDVA Service Office for certification. Then, once the 214 is certified and stamped by an IDVA service officer, the veteran takes it to a secretary of state drivers' facility for issuance of a driver's license or ID card with the veteran designation. You can also mail the 214 and another state issued form of identification to the IDVA central office in Springfield with a request form for certification. The service officers will certify, stamp and return your 214 to you. Then you go to secretary of state drivers' facilities and get your new license or ID card.

More legislative things are happening and have happened on the federal level as well. The rules changed in May this year for the Veterans Choice in Care Act. When the program went into effect, the distance was measured by straight line—as the crow flies. With the help of Congressman Rodney Davis and many others in congress, the law was changed to measure the distance by road miles. The folks writing the laws finally realized that veterans don't jump on crows' backs to get to their doctors. With that change, nearly every veteran who uses VA health care is now eligible to use the choice card.

With the change in eligibility came a complication in the enrollment and use of the program. Now, the veteran must call the patient advocate at their VA medical center in order to have his or her enrollment information loaded to the Choice program. Since this is a "contracted service," the Choice folks do not have eligibility information until VA gives it to them. VA won't give it to them until the veterans tells them to do so. Make more eligible, make it more complicated. Seems to be the norm, but it will work.

On the federal level also is House Resolution 1607, the Ruth Moore Act of 2015. This federal legislation will order the VA to accept statements by the veteran and others who have knowledge of a sexual assault. The statements will be used as evidence for post traumatic stress claims for victims of such an assault even in the absence of documented police reports or other investigative materials. This will go a long way toward helping any veteran who has to live with the aftermath of an event that traumatic.

All in all, we continue to help the veterans of the county and their families. Even with all of the mess happening, veterans continue to receive the benefits they have earned. We have continued to plug along here at the Veterans Assistance Commission of Montgomery County, and our efforts have netted well over a quarter of a million dollars in retroactive benefit payments for the fiscal year that began on Dec. 1, 2014, with continuing benefits projected to be over \$2 million.

We continue to enroll eligible veterans in the Veterans Health Administration, and the Montgomery Veterans Task Force has provided well over 26,000 miles worth of transportation during that same nine month period. The task force also provided its inaugural education grants to a senior from each of the four high schools in the county at the end of last school year.

And finally, the Veterans Assistance Commission of Montgomery County has joined the world of Facebook. We now have our page where we'll be posting information and new items from time to time. We're listed as our name says. Hit the search, find us and like and follow the page to see the latest.

As always, we are available for help with any veterans' benefits issues, and our hours are the same—8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except holidays. Our telephone number is 217-532-9695 and we are located at 201 S. Main St. in Hillsboro.

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**1.10 - St. George News: [Veterans Choice Program delays care](#)** (23 August, Nataly Burdick, 85k online visitors/mo; Saint George, UT)

Almost a year after the Department of Veterans Affairs unveiled a program that was supposed to make life easier for U.S. veterans needing medical care, many veterans say the program has instead done the opposite for them.

The Veterans Choice Program stipulates that veterans who are enrolled in VA health care may get medical care through non-VA doctors, as long as they live 40 miles from a VA medical care facility or have to wait more than 30 days for care through the VA.

At first, this seemed like it would be a burden lifted from veterans who found themselves traveling or waiting for care, something that many veterans have experienced through the VA.

“I could have been dead”

Stevan Duke, an Army veteran who fought in the Vietnam war, shared his experience dealing with the George E. Wahlen Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Salt Lake City, the one which most veterans in Southern Utah have to travel to for certain medical care.

After experiencing intermittent numbness in his left leg, arm and side of his face while he was in Preston, Idaho, he called in to the VA, which, he said, suggested he visit a doctor in Logan, Utah.

The doctor recommended him for heart tests in the VA hospital as soon as possible, but the VA told him their “soon as possible” would be in three months, he said, and they would not schedule him until he met with his primary care provider and a cardiologist in Salt Lake City.

Duke checked in to the ER in the VA hospital, told them he was having symptoms of a stroke, and after deciding he wasn't having a stroke, the doctor had him wait for five and a half hours, he said, until they finally did some tests and found nothing.

Eventually, he went home and started feeling chest pains, Duke said, so he checked in to the emergency room at Dixie Regional Medical Center in St. George. There, doctors found his left aorta was 95 percent blocked, Duke said. They put a stent in his heart the very next morning.

The left aorta is often called the “widowmaker,” Duke said, because of how fatal it is when it becomes blocked.

“I could have been dead,” he said.

What concerns him, Duke said, is that he was so close to dying, but the VA tests had not been able to find anything wrong with him, except for carpal tunnel.

Physically, he is feeling much better, he said, but while the VA has promised to pay for his visit to the ER at Dixie Regional, he has yet to hear whether they will cover his visit to the ER in Salt Lake City.

The VA automatically approves covering the costs of visits to the ER for chest pains, Duke said, so he had no struggle with approval there, but that struggle is one that other veterans know all too well.

For many of these veterans, problems stem from waiting around for the Choice Program administrators to give permission for them to use a certain doctor, and that authorization has to be given for every procedure and visit.

The problem veterans experience is that the Choice Program takes so long to provide authorization so they sit around waiting, usually month after month, for someone to call back with the OK; and many times, veterans report, the program never calls back, and they are stuck dealing with the bureaucracy of the program.

“I give it a D”

Larry Harris, an Army veteran who also fought in Vietnam, has to have epidural shots in his back for pain twice a year.

He's had them for several years now, but never struggled to get his medication until he went through the Choice program.

Hoping to find someone nearby who could take care of him rather than traveling over 300 miles to Salt Lake City, Harris called the Choice program; they took about three months to provide him with care, he said.

When he finally got an appointment, Choice had only scheduled him for a consultation, Harris said, while he was waiting in pain the entire time.

Eventually, Harris got his epidural shot, but only after months of hounding the VA.

"So that's my experience with the Choice Program," he said. "I give it like a D. I eventually got what I wanted, but I had to stay on top of it the whole time."

#### Making a choice

Erwin Aguayo, a Navy veteran who served in Vietnam as well, shares a similar story. After suffering from rectal bleeding in September, his primary care provider referred him for a colonoscopy.

Aguayo has special authorization to use the VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System in Las Vegas, where it took him three months to get an appointment with an independent contractor working with the VA in Las Vegas. Once he finally got his appointment, he said, the doctor met with him for just a few minutes and scheduled him for an appointment a month later.

He then went to the VA hospital to give them notice of the appointment, but found that the people he needed to talk to had left by the time he got there. So, he had to stay in Vegas overnight.

The next day, Aguayo said, the VA hospital would not accept the card the independent contractor had given him, and he had to return to the contractor's office to ask them to send the information to the VA hospital for processing.

A month later, his appointment had not been processed and no one knew anything about it.

At home, and still bleeding, Aguayo finally decided to visit his wife's doctor, who got him a colonoscopy the next day and also scheduled him for a CAT scan a week later. They found a tumor in his large intestine, he said.

In another week, he had surgery to remove 25 inches of his large intestine and 18 inches of his small intestine.

Before the surgery, he called Choice, but they decided they wouldn't do anything about it, and referred him to a patient advocate.

“The patient advocate said, ‘well you did have a choice. You made a choice. You went to your own private doctor,’” Aguayo said. “I got really angry because it’s the same thing that I heard from Choice and the same thing I heard from the hospital. All I can conclude is somehow they teach each other how to turn us down.”

The advocate said they could not do anything for him because he had decided to go through his own provider, Aguayo said, rather than waiting around for the surgery he needed.

The care the vet gets

Ken Stewart, an Air Force veteran from the Vietnam War, also found himself having to pay for his own care after his primary care provider was out of town and the VA would not offer an alternative provider he could visit.

Suffering through a lot of pain, he called hoping for authorization to visit the ER. The Choice Program representative he spoke to suggested he go, Stewart said, but that the Choice Program might not pay for it.

After going to the ER, Stewart said, they prescribed him pain medication and physical therapy that the Choice Program would also not authorize without a recommendation from his primary care provider – who was still out of town. The program would still not allow an alternative recommendation for him, he said.

Stewart paid for a physical therapy visit out-of-pocket, but when his primary care provider returned, and they were able to get authorization for physical therapy visits through the VA, Stewart found that he would need to travel to Salt Lake City for physical therapy three times a week since the Choice Program wouldn’t pay for local visits.

He also needs triple bypass surgery, something that he will have to travel to the Salt Lake City VA hospital to get.

“It’s just very inconvenient and not much caring for the care the vet gets,” Stewart said.

Eleven years of waiting

Marlin Halford, a Navy veteran who served in Cuba following the Cuban Revolution, has been waiting 11 years for surgery.

Halford fell and tore the rotator cuff in his right shoulder in 2004. It took three months to get an MRI from the Salt Lake City VA hospital, and he was scheduled another three months later for a consultation to go over the results.

He was supposed to receive a call after that to schedule surgery, Halford said, but three years later, after multiple attempts to get a surgery scheduled, he was still living with an injured shoulder. At this point, Halford said, he found out they had no record of his MRI or of his consultation.

For years, neither he nor his primary care provider could get an answer from the VA, and he continued living with his worsening shoulder until the Choice Program began.

When he got his Choice Program card, Halford said, they immediately told him he was ineligible for the program because he lives within 40 miles of a VA clinic.

Distance, Duke said, is measured “as the crow flies,” disqualifying more veterans than the program would if the distance was based on the distance of road travel.

Halford finally got an MRI scheduled after getting Sen. Mike Lee’s office involved. When he then called to schedule a consultation, he found that the person he was speaking to had a copy of his MRI and his records from 11 years before – MRI and records that he had been told were lost.

He finally decided to get a consultation from a non-VA doctor, paying for it out-of-pocket, Halford said. Of course, after 11 years, the damage had only gotten worse, and now, he said, he not only needs to have his rotator cuff fixed, but part of his clavicle has to be removed; his entire shoulder needs extensive surgery.

“I can’t get surgery down here, I can’t get anything through the Choice card,” Halford said. “So I’m not happy with it. As far as I’m concerned, it’s a waste of paper.”

#### Southern Utah’s medical care

This is a wall veterans in Southern Utah have often hit, the distance issue, because the VA’s Community-Based Outpatient Clinic in St. George qualifies as a VA medical care center.

However, the CBOC is ill-equipped to handle most of these veterans’ health problems. The clinic does not even have an X-ray machine.

In fact, the CBOC cannot do much more than provide a physical, Halford said, forcing veterans who need any actual treatment to have to travel to see a VA doctor.

In a town hall meeting in January at the Southern Utah Veterans Home in Ivins, veterans found out that because the CBOC clinic is here, no one in St. George can qualify for Choice based on distance.

While St. George veterans don’t meet the distance qualifications for the Choice program, many are finding they can qualify because they have to wait longer than 30 days for care; but, going through the program almost always means yet another long wait.

“As far as I’m concerned, the choice is, you have no choice,” Duke said.

Harris and Aguayo disagreed. You have a choice: wait, drive or pay, they said.

“For me it was, ‘you’ve made a choice,’” Aguayo said. “Now pay for it.”

#### Laying in bed, waiting

That was the case of Chuck Waddell, a Vietnam veteran currently living in Cedar City. He had back and knee injuries that were aggravated in late March and early April, sending him on the road to immobility.

Waddell was bedridden within a month or two of his back and knee injuries becoming aggravated and made multiple visits to the ER at Valley View Medical Center in Cedar City.

When he finally made a trip to the VA hospital in Salt Lake City, making a makeshift ambulance out of a rented van he could lay in on the trip, Waddell was told it would be a five-month wait to get the back surgery that would return some mobility to his life.

However, the most dehumanizing part of his story, Waddell said, is that they did not change his bed sheets or shorts during his stay at the VA hospital in Salt Lake. Instead, he said, he was left to sit in his own urine and feces. He said:

In the nine days I was there they never changed my linens on my bed, not one time did they change my bed when I was up there. I stunk so bad it wasn't even funny.

Eventually, with the help of Sen. Mike Lee, Waddell was moved to the Southern Utah Veterans Home in Ivins where he qualified for the Choice program. From there, he tried to schedule the surgery that would get him back on the road to recovery and alleviate some pain. Working with the bureaucracy of the Choice Program, however, was a constant frustration for him.

He would make calls to Choice Program workers who would promise to schedule his surgery and return his calls, Waddell said, but he would never receive the calls.

Meanwhile, Waddell was in pain, bedridden, usually drugged from pain killers, he said, and that made it even harder for him to schedule his own surgeries.

A bureaucratic machine can't feel

This lack of response is something Harris, who gives a D grade to the Choice program, said he also experienced. Veterans have to wait for authorization from the Choice Program before they can do anything if they want their care paid for, he said, and veterans are having to constantly call in and wait for that authorization.

"If you wait for them to call you back, they won't," he said. "You call them and they say 'this will take about five or 10 days'; well, it never does, it always takes longer and if you don't call them back, you don't hear anything."

The problem also stems from disorganization, Harris said. Choice is administered by independent insurance conglomerates, so when veterans call, they never talk to the same person twice.

"My experience, throughout this whole thing is, the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing," Harris said.

Having worked with Waddell, Christopher Scott, congressional and legislative affairs liaison for the VA, said the VA hasn't abandoned Waddell or other veterans.

While he admits it takes some patience to work with the system, Scott said, they still work hard to give the patients attention, and Waddell is no exception.

"We have been in contact with this veteran," Scott said. "I can tell you, I was on vacation and the veteran called me on my personal cell phone and I assisted the veteran and that's very important. I'm not sure of how many veterans would get that nationally."

It's the patient's responsibility, Scott said, to get in contact with the Choice program and submit proper paperwork. He said he has helped Waddell do this.

Bruce Solomon, a readjustment counselor at the St. George Vet Center in St. George, has seen many similar cases of veterans waiting for care. To the VA, he said, they are just one of millions more who are also in pain.

The problem, he said, is that the government, instead of spending money on doctors, is spending money on more bullets and more conflict, increasing the number of veterans who need care and increasing the load on an already over-burdened system.

"I look up and I see the population of veterans, which is millions and millions," Solomon said; "you've got doctors in the VA system who've got 1,000 clients each. So the medical program is really taxed and really burdened."

Solomon has seen plenty of veterans fall through the cracks, he said, because the VA runs as a corporation and, therefore, cannot feel for the veterans. The problem is explainable and understandable, he said, but that doesn't mean it is excusable.

"It doesn't hate these veterans," Solomon said of the VA, "but it doesn't feel sorry for them because it's just a machine."

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**1.11 - AllGov: [Colorado Board of Health Refuses to Allow Marijuana for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; Tells Veterans to Stick to Opioids](#)** (23 August, Steve Straehley, 5k online visitors/day; CA)

The Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment and its Board of Health voted last month to deny those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) access to medical marijuana, despite the recommendation from the state's chief medical officer that it add marijuana to the list of approved treatments.

"It is our brothers and sisters who are committing suicide every day. We know cannabis can help. We're not going to go away," John Evans, director of Veterans 4 Freedoms, told The Denver Post. "We've legalized it. We'll take the tax dollars from our tourists (for recreational marijuana) before we'll help our vets."

The six board members who voted against the proposal said it was because there's not enough evidence that marijuana is a safe and effective treatment for the condition. "I'm struggling with the science piece," board member Dr. Christopher Stanley said, according to the Post. Part of the reason for that is that the federal government makes it difficult to study marijuana's therapeutic uses.

So, victims of PTSD, many of them veterans, will continue to be treated with opioid drugs that can lead to addiction, overdose and many other unpleasant side effects.



“When we see that veterans are able to use medical cannabis and not use so many pills, it can have an extraordinarily good impact, with the pills themselves causing a lot of problems.” Michael Krawitz, the director of Veterans for Medical Marijuana, told Courthouse News Service.

Now, four war veterans and a victim of sexual assault have sued the state to force it to add PTSD to the list of conditions for which marijuana may be prescribed. Nine states currently have already done so.

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## 2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

**2.1 - Mail Tribune: [ACCESS struggles to find available rentals for homeless veterans](#)** (23 August, Kaylee Tornay, 435k online visitors/mo; Medford, OR)

Dana Biondo sits reading a book about spiritual secrets to financial prosperity just a few feet away from what has been his home for a month: his Honda Civic. He slept only four hours the night before. He kicks off his shoes and relaxes in Bear Creek Park before he'll get back in his car and drive to meet a potential employer later.

"I really make it my intention to be grateful," he says.

Biondo is one of the estimated 462 homeless veterans in Jackson County. ACCESS Inc. hopes to find each one a home with the help of a \$6 million, three-year grant awarded in April by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The grant is part of \$93 million given to nonprofits across the nation to combat the problem of homelessness among veterans.

Four and a half months later, the organization has placed several veterans in homes but continues to struggle with a low vacancy rate among rentals and a shortage of willing landlords.

ACCESS has been receiving VA grants to aid veterans since 2012, but they were well under \$1 million and had to be split with other nonprofits across five counties. With the increased funding, says Support Services Director David Mulig, the organization has vastly more resources to impact the problem of homelessness among veterans.

"We want to make sure any veteran who wants a home has a place to live," says Mulig.

Finding those veterans — and places to put them — was the next step after securing the money. ACCESS already offered housing services, but ramped up promotion for its new range of veteran services with TV and radio ads. Mulig says more than 200 veterans have called or emailed to receive help in the past two months. Each veteran is assigned to a case manager, also a veteran, who works with them and landlords to find a stable and agreeable housing situation for both.

The nonprofit got more calls from veterans than landlords, unsurprising in an area that had a rental vacancy rate under 2 percent in May. According to Mulig, 48 property owners contacted ACCESS since April about potential rentals; 33 of those ended up committing. Case managers weigh factors such as disabilities or whether a veteran is chronically homeless or has small children to determine priority in being placed when housing is short.

ACCESS offers incentives to landlords for renting to veterans, including guaranteeing rent for the months agreed upon, doubling security deposits and frequently communicating with the tenant's case manager in case of any problems. Since 2012, Mulig says, ACCESS has placed 297 veterans in households. With family members, that number becomes 451 people. He can recall only one situation in which a tenant had to vacate because of a conflict with a landlord.

"I think that a big part of it is the stereotypes around someone who is homeless," Mulig says. "If you walk around and talk to people about what they think about the homeless population, they'll say they're the ones begging for money, the ones who are always under the influence. There's this whole stereotype around that kind of homeless individual."

Biondo, meanwhile, has been lining up interviews and opportunities to find work where he can. He has a range of marketable skills, thanks to years of employment in food service and retail after his service as a Navy cook from 1979 to '81. Now, he looks to friends for the occasional couch to sleep on or place to shower while he searches for housing with the help of his case manager. He isn't angry about being homeless after serving his country, he says, but he adds that part of him feels that it's not right.

"I can't feel sorry for myself because I'm not the only one," he says.

ACCESS staff say they want to hear from every veteran in need and every landlord who can offer a place.

"I have learned quickly that the people who come into an organization and ask for help and share their stories must really want to get back and have their lives stabilized," Mulig says.

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**2.2 - The Times: [Housing redevelopment leaves disabled vet in the lurch. Willie Glenn seeking affordable place to live](#)** (23 August, Joshua Silavent, 129k online visitors/mo; Gainesville, GA)

Willie Glenn rolls up to the curb in his electric wheelchair, glad to escape the "war zone" of construction that has enveloped his home in recent weeks.

"Getting in and out ... it's not easy," he said.

The renovations to this apartment complex at the corner of Forrest Avenue and Bradford Street in Gainesville are designed to attract higher-income tenants.

And so all the former residents have cleared out, their apartments now gutted. Dumpsters in the parking lot are full and workers are swinging their hammers with an echoing finish.

"It's lonesome over here ... since the neighbors moved out," Glenn said.

Lazy afternoons once spent hanging outside with friends are now spent in a basement apartment curled up with the television.

“Now, I’m completely separated from that,” Glenn said. “It’s like being in a jail.”

A 63-year-old disabled Navy veteran, Glenn was given an extra 30 days to find a new home. But that deadline is near and his prospects remain slim.

Glenn has called Gainesville home his entire life, save for a few years spent in the military during the Vietnam era, and did sheetrock and electrical work before health problems forced him into retirement.

He had his left leg amputated about 7 years ago following medical complications from heart disease.

But Glenn’s attitude never seems to wax or wane. His perseverance is constant and cannot be tamed. His penchant for friendly conversation remains, but is not to be exploited.

For a time, Glenn received a pension check from Veterans Affairs, close to \$1,000 a month, but that was cut once he started receiving Social Security.

“That was a major part of my ability to pay my bills and rent and everything,” Glenn said, adding that he now lives on just \$595 a month. “It’s hard.”

The financial cost of moving, coupled with a lack of housing options, has pinned Glenn in.

The complex he currently resides in is privately owned, but Glenn is thankful for the break he was given on rent, paying just \$395 a month.

Still, he’s hard-pressed to find a home at that same price elsewhere in the city.

“For one, my whole check wasn’t enough to pay a lot of places ...” he said. “Of course, I’ve got to find the cheapest way out.”

The demand for affordable housing far exceeds supply in Gainesville, where about 28 percent of residents live below the poverty level, compared with a statewide average of just 17.4 percent.

“In Gainesville, the population has increased so much in the last 10, 15 years that, as far as affordable housing for handicapped and disabled, it’s limited,” he said.

The city already has a cap on the number of public housing units allowed, set at 500.

And Frank Norton Jr., a local real estate mogul and CEO/chairman of The Norton Agency, has conducted a survey for the Gainesville Housing Authority that reveals just how much need for subsidized housing exists in a city with many low-income and working-class families.

A roof over one’s head is “the foundation of pretty much everything,” Glenn said, adding that he’s only been able to get on the waiting list for government-subsidized units.

Glenn said he’s getting along with the help of relatives, a “loving church family” and the support of local programs like Meals on Wheels.

“I can’t say enough about them,” he said.

But with storm clouds shadowing a fading blue sky on a recent summer morning, like a mirror held up to his own life, Glenn stared down his uncertain future.

“Nothing’s for sure,” he said.

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**2.3 - Walla Walla Union-Bulletin: [Is there an acceptable level of homelessness?](#) (22 August, Sheila Hagar, 64k online visitors/mo; Walla Walla, WA)**

Just as people and governments wish everyone had a job, they also wish everyone could also have a place they can call home.

But the reality is that neither wish will ever come true.

Currently Walla Walla city and county governments and social service nonprofits are wrestling with what to do to alleviate area homelessness.

But what is an acceptable level at which they can claim success?

As of an annual point-in-time count done in January, 576 people in 316 households met the federal definition for being homeless in Walla Walla County. That works out to about one-tenth of 1 percent of the county’s population of 59,000.

The definition applies to people who are chronically homeless for whatever reason, to those who have had four periods of homelessness in the past three years, to people living in transitional housing or temporarily living with family or friends.

Of the 56 identified on January as chronically homeless, about three dozen are well-known local housing and social-service providers, and most suffer from addiction and mental illness, said Harvey Crowder, director of the county’s Department of Community Health.

Among them, there are less than a handful who will probably always decline to be housed, he added.

Susan Kralman, homeless coordinator for Walla Walla County, uses the yardstick of other experts helping house veterans to answer the question, she said.

The New York-based group Community Solutions, for example. That organization, as it helps unhoused veterans, says homelessness can be considered ended when the number of those coming into the system do not exceed the number of families placed in housing within 30 days.

The Department of Veterans Affairs states an efficient community system is one that ensures homelessness for veterans is rare, brief and recurring, where no one is forced to live on the street and everyone has access to the supports they need.

Another benchmark of a successful program is when people want to avoid staying on the street and move quickly to permanent housing.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness says that when a community has identified all its veterans experiencing homelessness, has a plan and timeline for housing these men and women, and has adequate service systems and resources that are sustainable to meet the veterans' needs, the homelessness situation is adequately tackled.

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#### **2.4 - Westside Today: [Brentwood Reports: West L.A. VA 'housing is not in itself a solution'](#) (23 August, Larry Watts, 26k online visitors/mo; Santa Monica, CA)**

Brentwood Community Council Chair Larry Watts Reports on Last Week's Meeting of the Westside Regional Alliance of Councils:

Congressman Ted Lieu attended the monthly meeting of the Westside Regional Alliance of Councils (WRAC) this week. He was peppered with many questions relating to veterans and the ongoing development of a Master Plan for the WLA VA Campus in Brentwood.

His responses reflected a genuine commitment to our veterans and to improving operations for veterans at the WLA VA Campus. He acknowledged that the VA had allowed the campus to wither and was not fully carrying out its mission to provide services to veterans, as exemplified by the padlocked front gate.

Congressman Lieu made clear that as part of the Master Plan, the VA is determined to improve services to veterans on the campus, including addressing the needs of homeless veterans. However, he made clear it neither makes sense nor is it the VA's objective to have the campus become the depository for large numbers of homeless veterans. He pointed out that housing is not in itself a solution.

The underlying causes, which may be substance abuse, mental health issues, etc., require treatment and must be provided to allow veterans to escape from long term homelessness. However, these supportive services cannot be successfully delivered by housing large numbers in any single location. Accordingly, using HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers, the VA intends to seek housing for homeless vets throughout GLA and not concentrate them on the WLA VA Campus.

For the most part this will require finding private housing.

The VA, along with the City of LA and the County of LA are identifying private property owners throughout GLA who will accept homeless vets as tenants. Importantly, we were told HUD-VASH vouchers not only provide rental assistance, they include case management and clinical services provided by the VA.

According to Lieu, the VA has found housing for about 1,800 vets so far this year under the HUD-VASH program. That's frankly quite amazing if the total homeless vet population in GLA is actually around the 4,000 figure mentioned by the VA at last week's Design Open House. But my experience is that the number seems to be something of a moving target. The Congressman acknowledged this and suggested this variation apparently arises in part because of the highly publicized push to provide accommodations for homeless vets in GLA. As a result, he said

homeless vets from other areas appear to be moving here to take advantage of the VA commitment to locate housing in GLA.

Congressman Lieu said one obstacle preventing the VA from helping all homeless vets is legal. The VA is forbidden by current law from providing services to any vet who received a dishonorable or bad conduct discharge. He had no data on the number of homeless vets who received a dishonorable or BCD. My guess would be that the homeless vet population likely has a larger percentage with a disqualifying discharge status than the general vet population. Because of this, Lieu is pressing legislation to allow the VA to help homeless vets without regard to the category of discharge they received.

On the so-called “enhanced use leases” question, Congressman Lieu and Senators Feinstein and Boxer are sponsoring legislation to allow the VA to carry out leases at the 387-acre campus with third parties that benefit disadvantaged veterans, including homeless, disabled, aging and women veterans. He explained that help for veterans is one subject with genuine bi-partisan in Washington and he is hopeful the bill will become law.

On a tangential issue, the Purple Line is not scheduled to reach the WLA VA Campus until 2035. Funds to build the line will become available over time through local sales tax and other local revenues. The Congressman was asked whether the federal government could loan the MTA money to speed up the timetable for completing the Purple Line. This would make it easier for vets to get to the VA for medical or other appointments. It should also help our overall Westside transportation gridlock. Lieu will check on this.

For more information about the West L.A. VA Master Plan, visit [www.helpouselavets.com](http://www.helpouselavets.com).

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## **2.5 - Yakima Herald-Republic: [Next Step Housing, other groups helping local veterans who need a place to call home](#) (23 August, Phil Ferolito, 300 online visitors/day; Yakima, WA)**

Vietnam veteran Bill Marsh was frail and malnourished when he was plucked from the Union Gospel Mission a year ago this month by the case manager for a local housing provider.

Clad in a T-shirt, shorts and raggedy shoes at the time, Marsh, 62, possessed only a wallet containing nothing but his identification card, recalled the case manager, Rigo Dominguez with Next Step Housing.

Moreover, Marsh has glaucoma and is nearly blind.

“He had nothing — winter would have been hard on him,” Dominguez said in a recent interview. “He wasn’t smiling. He was pretty broken.”

But much has changed for Marsh. Now he has an apartment, receives Social Security and eats regularly, thanks to Next Step Housing, a nonprofit that provides the homeless with long-term and permanent housing while connecting them with other services such as medical care.

“He’s got a good life now,” said Diana McClaskey, the deputy director of Next Step. “He’s got people who care about him and he’s connected to services.”

Marsh might still be at the mission if it weren't for a five-year national push by the Obama administration to end homelessness among veterans by the end of 2015. Though that goal isn't likely to be reached by December, significant strides have been made, with a 33 percent decrease in veterans homelessness since the push began in 2010. This year, 49,993 homeless veterans were counted nationwide on a single day in January, compared to more than 66,490 in 2010, according to the annual Point In Time Count conducted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In Yakima County, the number of homeless veterans has dropped from about 60 to 40 over the past five years, according to Dave Brown, coordinator of Yakima County's veterans program.

Increased outreach to local service providers by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs coupled with HUD housing vouchers and grants are driving the effort. Like Next Step in Yakima, many housing providers across the country are deliberately moving veterans to the top of the list.

Service providers hope to continue the effort, as a downsizing of the military will see roughly 40,000 service members discharged over the next three years. The Obama administration has requested an additional \$1.4 billion for programs to prevent or reduce homelessness of veterans in 2016.

Here in Yakima, Next Step received a \$324,000 grant from the Home Depot Foundation to build 16 apartments devoted to housing veterans. Next Step also received a \$44,000 HUD grant to help with operational costs of the new apartments. Those units — at the Pear Tree Place development on Powerhouse Road — opened in December 2013.

The county's veterans program this year received 78 housing vouchers from HUD and a \$10,000 grant from the Yakima Valley Community Foundation. The grant money is being used to help veterans pay for deposits on rentals, and for motel rooms to keep them off the streets.

Brown said roughly 400 veterans a year come into his office seeking assistance with rent, utility bills and food, or need help connecting to the VA for benefits.

Multiple sources are at work in the county to combat the problem, and Brown's office serves as a hub, connecting veterans to those sources, which include the VA, housing options with Next Step and an eight-bed transitional house for veterans on South Sixth Street. His office also earmarks about \$40,000 a year of its roughly \$154,000 annual budget for food and gas vouchers and to help veterans pay rent and utility bills.

Local charities and the public also donate food for his office's pantry, as well as coats, shoes and other items.

"We have a caring community," Brown said. "Yeah, we want the VA to do what they're supposed to do, but we also have to do our part as a community to partner."

Sitting in his upstairs apartment one afternoon, Marsh described how his military service was interrupted by the onset of glaucoma at age 18. He'd been in Vietnam eight months when his vision began to deteriorate. He was honorably discharged as a result, but didn't seek early treatment that could have reversed the effects of the blinding disease.

He said he came to Washington after he returned stateside, and he eventually slipped into a life of alcoholism and homelessness. He spent six months living in a mission in Spokane before coming to Yakima about two years ago, where his sister offered to take him in. But living with her didn't work out, and he wound up at the Union Gospel Mission.

"But I'm all right now," he said.

He likes his apartment, which is in the same building as other apartments for veterans.

"I met some new guys," he said. "They wanted to put me downstairs, but I said no. I hold on to the rails, count the steps. I can make it."

His apartment has one couch, a large flat-screen TV and a dining table.

"I can't see the TV, but I can listen to it," Marsh said. "The guy downstairs, Ray, he said if I get bored to go down and talk to him."

Of the 16 apartments for veterans at Next Step's campus at 2900 Powerhouse Road, half are permanent housing and the rest are long-term housing funded by HUD vouchers intended to help veterans until they get back on their feet.

Those in permanent housing pay rent equal to 30 percent of their income. If they have no income, they don't have to pay anything, said McClaskey.

Sometimes veterans eventually land good jobs and leave Next Step, she said. And when that happens, a case manager begins sweeping area shelters in search of a veteran to fill the vacancy, she said. That's how Marsh was found.

Veterans are not the only ones that Next Step helps. The nonprofit based in Yakima also provides housing for those recovering from alcohol and drug abuse as well as those with disabilities. There are more than 160 units serving individuals and families at its complex off Powerhouse Road, including an eight-bed facility for adults in early recovery from drugs and alcohol.

Next Step is largely funded by the state Department of Commerce Housing Trust Fund and the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, with additional funding from an array of other grants and donations and tax credits for investors in low-income housing.

Alcohol and drugs are not allowed at Next Step, and Marsh has no qualms about that. He's been sober more than a year now. "It feels good," he said. "It was hard for me, but now I just don't do it. If someone is drinking or something like that, I just say 'No, I don't do that.'"

His new friend downstairs, 61-year-old Ray Knight, also a Vietnam veteran, said he began living in a camper trailer decades ago after he divorced his wife of 14 years. He's been living at Next Step for nearly two years now.

Vietnam veterans account for the majority of homeless veterans nationally and locally, and the less-than-warm reception they received after returning from the unpopular war coupled with a lack of resources has much to do with it, Knight said.



“Drunks, drug addicts, they get that way from their service over there,” he said. “That doesn’t happen to everyone, but the ones that it does, society turns its back on them.”

Knight said he struggled getting help when he returned. “Issues surrounding medical — s---, you earned it when you served, why do you have to fight for it when you get back?” he said.

County veterans’ program coordinator Brown agrees with Knight.

“Vietnam got it the worst,” he said. “They didn’t get the help. Our hope is we don’t let another generation go through that.”

Veterans are twice as likely to become homeless than those who have never served in the armed forces for several reasons, said Ron Opsal, who supervises health care for the homeless at the Veterans Affairs’ Walla Walla office.

Post traumatic stress often leads to substance abuse and mental health issues as combat veterans struggle to adjust back to civilian life, he said.

“You get out of the military, you don’t have that structure and you don’t have that job that follows,” said Opsal, a Vietnam-era veteran.

For many, finding work is difficult once separated from the military. Often, skills learned in the military aren’t applicable in the civilian world, he said.

“A gunnery sergeant, for example — it’s hard to find work that correlates,” he said, referring to a noncommissioned officer who manages firepower and logistics for a unit. “The training that we get in the military doesn’t always translate into the real world. It’s not anyone’s fault. That’s just kind of how it works.”

Ending homelessness for veterans doesn’t necessarily mean that there wouldn’t be any homeless veterans on the streets. Rather, it would provide enough resources to immediately house veterans as they become homeless, Opsal said.

Besides, getting accurate counts on the homeless is difficult at best, he said.

Those who couch surf, temporarily staying with friends or family, are not counted, he added.

Homelessness is a fluid problem. “Even though we’re housing veterans, there’s always new ones that pop up when they get out of the service,” Opsal said.

And the problem could swell with the military downsizing over the next three years, he said.

“We have lots of services, we have our clinic there they can access,” he said. “We’ll just have to deal with them when they come back, which is why we’re here.”

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**2.6 - Hill Country Community Journal: [Local presentation fields questions on new VA apartments](#)** (24 August, Bonnie Arnold, 300 online visitors/day; Kerrville, TX)

A presentation about the “Freedom’s Path” veterans housing at the local VA Medical Center campus was offered recently in Kerrville, and small groups of area veterans with questions about the apartments attended either of two sessions.

Karen Weeks, director of asset management for Community Asset Management Group of Sarasota, Fla., the company building the apartments; and Jeanne Klobedans, regional vice president for Pinnacle, offered information and answered questions.

Application packets were available that day for prospective tenants.

The ladies said they were meeting with local VA administrators that day to arrange having an office in the Kerrville VA hospital.

Weeks and Klobedans said they would publicize contact information for the new application office as soon as the location in the Kerrville VAMC building is set and a phone number is available.

Weeks can be emailed directly at [kweeks@beneficialcom.com](mailto:kweeks@beneficialcom.com).

Legal requirements say the paperwork in an application packet can’t be more than 120 days old, so they recommended applicants turn in their completed paperwork to the new office at the VA beginning in early September.

Phase I, 49 apartments, is scheduled to be finished by late November; and the first tenants to begin moving in during December.

Compliance, qualifications

Speakers emphasized if an applicant’s reported income is even \$1 over the rent-to-earnings ratio, when the application is 100-percent verified, the applicant will be denied.

“We send employers verification forms,” Weeks said.

The “Tenant Selection Criteria” information says, “Freedom’s Path at Kerrville will prioritize housing for military veterans who have received active duty honorable discharges with service-connected disabilities, with a special emphasis on housing combat-disabled veterans.”

Applicants must have U.S. Government-issued identification for all adults, with proof of age.

Applicants must supply verifiable employment or prove ability to pay their portion of the rent.

If self-employed, an applicant must produce bank statements which show sufficient income to meet minimum income requirement, or pay an additional deposit.

The rent to earnings ratio was listed as:

One bedroom, one bath – 50 percent of “Area Median Income”, \$521/month; 60 percent of AMI, \$0.

Two bedroom, one bath – 50 percent of AMI, \$628; 60 percent of AMI, \$762.

The form lists a \$300 security deposit, of which \$150 is a required fee to hold an apartment off the market; and is nonrefundable if the approved applicant delays completing the rental process more than 72 hours.

There's a chart on the "selection criteria" listing maximum allowable income, including families with children, under the 50 percent and 60 percent AMI. For instance, a family of two can make a maximum of \$23,850 or \$28,620 respectively.

Credit ratings excluding student loans and medical accounts will be checked in detail, as will an applicant's rental history and criminal background.

The rental application packet is 13 mostly single-spaced pages, two of them 8.5x14 inches. The ladies spent more time on compliance than other sections in their presentations.

They distributed packets, and said attendees could begin looking over the requirements.

#### Questions

When attendees asked questions, some were on finances, but others were personal concerns.

Q. Will these apartments be open only to veterans?

A. Weeks said they are "pretty much first come, first served," but they are looking at vets first, their core purpose. But, she added, they have to fill all 49 apartments.

Q. Are you allowing non-veterans? When Weeks' answer was, "That's not our intention," the man said, "That's not the question." She then said, if a non-vet qualifies, the compliance people can't stop him or her from renting, but they intend to look at vets first.

Q. Who pays which utility bills?

A. The tenant pays rent and electricity. Cable and phone service are optional, not provided. The company pays water bills and provides pest control.

Q. Are pets allowed?

A. Yes, with size and weight limits; a deposit; and proof of veterinarian care.

Q. Will transportation be provided to grocery stores, non-VA doctors, and other shopping?

A. The ladies said, "We will be working with transportation systems in Kerr County, and it will be on a schedule," such as, to H-E-B on two specified mornings a week. They said the ART bus already operates here; and vets also can already call VA Social Services for free rides.

Q. Will transportation be provided from the new apartments to the VA hospital for appointments and treatments?

A. No, staffing isn't available for that.

Q. Can the \$300 security deposit be waived?

A. They said, generally not.

Q. Will a cleaning service come in to clean my apartment?

A. No, tenants must keep their apartments up themselves, including the vinyl plank flooring planned (instead of carpeting).

Q. How often is the AMI set and if I don't qualify one year, can I reapply?

A. The AMI is set annually, and yes, vets can reapply.

Q. If a veteran gets paid under a 100-percent disability, does he make too much money to qualify?

A. Yes, and that's why they are looking at other categories to fill the apartments.

Q. Are apartments wheelchair accessible?

A. A few are 100 percent, they said, while others are "adaptable."

Q. Will they have CO2 detectors?

A. No, there will be smoke detectors, but there are no gas connections in the complex.

The ladies said they expect a waiting list to be created in the new leasing office at the hospital.

Once an applicant is notified to bring in required documents, the person has a specified length of time to show up with all paperwork and ID. If he or she doesn't respond quickly, the qualifications person will go on to the next name on the list.

Veterans can call Alan Hill's office at 315-3101 for more information.

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### **3. Ending the Claims Backlog**

**3.1 - The Tampa Tribune: [Editorial: Local VA office makes progress on claims backlog](#)**  
(24 August, 947k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

It's been a steady stream of troubling reports from Department of Veterans Affairs facilities across the country over the past few years as stories about patient backlogs and administrative failures make the headlines.

So the recent news that the VA's regional office at Bay Pines in Pinellas County has made substantial progress in reducing the backlog of disability claims while increasing the accuracy of the claims is deserving of recognition.

As the Tribune's Howard Altman reports, the VA's top local administrators say the disability claims backlog has dropped from 36,000 two years ago to 6,500 this year, the lowest number since the office began tracking the backlog in 2007.

According to the VA officials, the percentage of completed disability claims decisions rose 15 percent over last year, and the average wait time for a claims decision dropped on average by 133 days compared to two years ago. Additionally, a program to tackle homelessness among veterans is helping thousands of them get a roof over their heads.

Granted, the statistics are coming from administrators within the VA, and some top officials at other VA facilities have been accused of deliberately mischaracterizing the wait times for veterans needing medical attention.

But there is no reason to believe the local officials are being less than forthcoming.

Their report comes after several years of blistering press accounts of fraud and mismanagement at VA facilities and calls from Congress for the VA to clean up its act. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki resigned in 2014 amid reports that veterans had died awaiting medical treatment as the VA's bureaucracy moved at a snail's pace.

The VA's regional office at the Bay Pines complex attracted unwanted attention for allegations that files were misplaced, and a whistleblower was fired after trying to bring attention to the problems.

Congress passed an emergency measure allocating \$17 billion to revamp the agency, which operates 1,000 hospitals and outpatient facilities that serve 9 million enrollees.

The money was part of a bill that focused on driving down the delays veterans face in receiving care while giving greater authority to the VA secretary to fire top administrators found to be incompetent or corrupt.

The regional office at Bay Pines is the nation's busiest claims center, and we hope the good news announced recently is an indicator that progress is occurring at facilities across the country.

VA Secretary Robert McDonald, who replaced Shinseki, is an Army veteran and longtime business executive brought in by President Obama to bring accountability to the sprawling VA bureaucracy. He has been working to change a culture that rewarded bad behavior for years.

Forcing sick veterans to wait months for a decision on a medical claim is a national disgrace that brought unwanted attention on the VA locally and across the nation.

But it resulted in a laser focus on reducing the claims that appears to be working, and that is encouraging news.

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#### **4. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill**

**4.1 - The Washington Times (AP): [University repays VA nearly \\$150K for benefits' overpayment](#)** (23 August, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

ELIZABETH CITY, N.C. (AP) - Elizabeth City State University has repaid the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs nearly \$150,000 for overpayment of veterans' benefits after a VA audit found the school miscalculated or incorrectly reported those benefits in more than 100 instances.

The Daily Advance of Elizabeth City reports (<http://bit.ly/1Je0EQF>) the audit caused a suspension of ECSU's ability to certify students for veterans education benefits that help pay for college costs.

University spokeswoman Linita Shannon says the school is working with the VA to determine how much more money may be owed. She says the goal is hold all the veterans harmless.

The state agency that monitors colleges and universities for compliance with rules on disbursing veterans' education benefits halted ECSU's ability to certify students on May 1. The suspension was lifted July 1.

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**4.2 - The Free Lance-Star: [Editorial: Colleges reaching out to veterans helps all](#)** (24 August, 2.7M online visitors/mo; Fredericksburg, VA)

Someone who worked on computer systems for four years in the military shouldn't have to enter college without any credit for the training received in the military.

Some colleges in Virginia agree with that and are working to make sure veterans who enroll get credit for classes taken in the military.

Germanna Community College announced last week that it is one of five community colleges in the state to receive \$150,000 in grants to improve on its efforts.

Germanna is to be commended for seeking the grant and finding ways to ease the transition from the military to the campus culture.

After two lengthy wars and the downsizing of the armed services, more veterans will be taking advantage of earned benefits, including college tuition.

But Germanna wants to offer more than that. The grant will also pay for mentoring programs to ease the way to becoming a civilian. Life without reveille and taps is an adjustment and the longer someone is in the military, the more difficult it can be.

Germanna's new veterans mentor is William Anderson, a retired Marine colonel, and he wants to match each new student with a mentor who also has military experience.

The University of Mary Washington also has programs to help veterans get college credit for classes or training received in the military. The American Council on Education puts out a military guide that presents credit recommendations for formal courses and occupations offered

by all branches of the military. These credit recommendations appear on the service member's joint services transcript.

The number of credits given for military courses is based on reviews conducted by college and university faculty members who are actively teaching in the areas they review. It's also based on the college's curriculum and the required courses for a specific degree program.

At UMW, a student who has been in military service may receive up to eight credits in physical education, with one credit awarded for each full year of service of active duty. A maximum of 30 military credits will be accepted following the ACE guidelines.

UMW currently has about 300 students who are receiving some benefits from the Veterans Administration.

The grants awarded by the Department of Labor to Germanna and other community colleges will enable the administrations of those schools to see what type of classes and transitional programs work. The findings can be shared throughout the community college system.

Unemployment rates for U.S. military veterans fell last year, but joblessness among their ranks remains higher than the civilian population, government reports show. The unemployment rate among veterans who joined the military after 9/11 fell to an average of 7.2 percent last year from 9 percent in 2013, but it remains about 1 percentage point above the rate for the civilian population.

The Obama administration and Congress have pushed several measures, including tax credits for companies employing veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Programs at Germanna and UMW aimed at assisting veterans to get the credit they've earned should help make veterans more attractive to prospective employers. As schools experiment with programs, the success stories should be shared with other institutions.

It's good for the veterans, the employers and a nice way to say thanks for your service.

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**4.3 - Stars and Stripes: [Academic accommodations can aid troubled veterans](#)** (23 August, Heath Druzin, 1.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

PHOENIX — Relocated to an empty clinic in the Phoenix Veterans Affairs Health Care System after going public about dangerous patient care problems, Dr. Katherine Mitchell needed a project to stay busy.

With the rate of suicides increasing within the Phoenix system, she started studying victims' case files and found a pattern that seemed tragically easy to address: Of four who reported struggling in college, three had not received widely available but little-known academic accommodations for mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries.

The fourth was already failing before he received any information.

“There’s a lot of myths and a hesitation to use academic accommodation because all the soldiers come from a very strong warrior background where asking for accommodation can be a sign of weakness,” she said. “It’s not a sign of weakness; it’s a strategy to use to make it through school.”

From her research and collaboration with veterans, Mitchell has drafted a first: a veterans’ guide to reasonable academic accommodation for mental health issues, for use by doctors, VA caseworkers and veterans. With so many returning veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars poised to begin using their GI Bill money for college, Mitchell hopes the next step will be for the VA and veterans service organizations to use the guidelines to educate veterans on their options and help them formulate academic plans.

Academic accommodations are available for a range of disabilities. Students dealing with mental issues from post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries commonly are given additional time to take tests, note-taking assistance, breaks during lectures and tutoring.

Mitchell has submitted the guidelines to Federal Practitioner, a professional journal of the VA, the Department of Defense and U.S. Public Health Service health care workers.

She said that there likely were a number of factors in the Phoenix suicides, but failure in college can compound problems associated with post-traumatic stress and depression.

“Whenever you have academic failure, it helps snowball other stresses in your life,” she said.

Mitchell, who helped uncover the ongoing national Veterans Affairs health care scandal and has testified in front of Congress, was looking at suicide charts when she discovered the wait-time issue. She was working at the empty clinic — where she had been assigned after complaining about patient care problems in the Phoenix VA emergency room — when she found patterns in patient scheduling that reflected the existence of secret wait lists. She and Dr. Samuel Foote blew open a nationwide scandal that cost the Phoenix director, Sharon Helman, her job.

After Mitchell forwarded findings of improper care to the VA’s inspector general’s office, she said she was put on administrative leave and forbidden to look at suicide charts.

The order still stands, she said.

Seeking help not in vets’ nature

The Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees anyone with physical or mental disabilities academic accommodations. The disability does not need to be connected to military service, but the student must seek help and register with the campus disability resource center or admissions office. That means they need to know about the benefit in the first place, which has been a major hurdle.

“I think people aren’t aware of it,” Mitchell said.

Dan Standage understands the importance of veterans knowing their academic rights. As a blind former Marine, Standage spent years doing battle with professors to get the help he needed to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Arizona. As director of



disability in education for Student Veterans of America, he worked with Mitchell to craft the language of her guide, and he hopes to incorporate it into his group's outreach efforts.

Veterans need a push to seek help and assurances that they're not getting special treatment, he said.

"They're really bad at taking care of themselves," he said. "The way we're trained in the military is, 'I'm going to take care of the team because the strength of the wolf is the pack, and the strength of the pack is the wolf.'"

Trying to get through school with a disability, though, is "like eating soup with chopsticks," Standage said. And while many professors seek to help disabled students, Standage said some see accommodations as cheating and need to be reminded of their obligations.

"Disability scares people and that's because most of the time they've never been around it," he said.

#### A tool for achievement

Iraq veteran Gary Saleh, 29, who was medically retired after multiple traumatic brain injuries, said he arrived at Cochese Community College in Sierra Vista, Ariz., determined to better himself but unsure how he would overcome his trouble with concentration, memory problems and anxiety. Fortunately for him, another student asked a professor about academic accommodations in front of the class.

"I had no idea that college even offered that," Saleh said.

Uneasy at first with asking for help, he waited another week before deciding to check on accommodations. Now in the second semester of a two-year associate degree in cybersecurity, he gets extra time on tests, is allowed to take breaks as needed and can record lectures.

"These tools are what helps me achieve what I need to achieve," he said. "Every once in a while, everyone needs a little help."

As Mitchell sees it, beyond being an issue of fairness, it's also a medical concern, and she hopes going over her guidelines with incoming veterans will become a normal part of the doctor-patient relationship at the VA.

Veterans are often older than their classmates and are coming out of a very different environment, raising their anxiety about college. The vast majority of veterans who use academic accommodations will not have suicidal thoughts. However, given the high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries among returning veterans and the ongoing suicide crisis in the military ranks, Mitchell said anything that can reduce stress and improve mental health should be welcomed.

"I can't prevent all suicides," she said, "but what you do for anyone who is struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts is you try and stack the cards in their favor."

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## 5. Women Veterans

**5.1 - Boston Herald: [Women vets meet to talk business](#)** (23 August, Marie Szaniszlo, 2.5M online visitors/mo; Boston, MA)

Two hundred women veterans and military spouses from across the country have gathered in Boston this weekend for a three-day crash course in starting and growing their own businesses.

The Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship, or V-WISE, conference at The Westin Copley Place kicked off Friday with a keynote address from Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James, who shared lessons from her 30 years of senior national security experience and from her prior work in the private sector, including her role as president of Science Applications International Corporation's Technical and Engineering Sector, where she was responsible for 8,700 employees and more than \$2 billion in revenue.

"We in the Air Force love it when people stay with us as a career, but not everyone does, so we want to make sure we're helping veterans make that transition," she said in an interview with the Herald.

James said she wants women veterans and spouses, who either have started their own business or are contemplating starting one, to expect curve balls; to be prepared to "zigzag" and be unafraid to fail; to understand the importance of mentoring and building a network; to be upbeat, persistent leaders; to never compromise on ethics; and to remember to have fun.

"As women's roles in the military expand, so should the opportunities and services available to them when they come back home," said Giselle Sterling, Boston's first female commissioner of veterans services. "At the end of the day, it comes down to equal opportunity. We're committed to providing them with the opportunity to become successful entrepreneurs."

That may never be more crucial than today, when the unemployment rate for post-9/11 women veterans is 11.4 percent, more than twice the rate of their male counterparts, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"Many women are navigating the balance between setting conditions for a professional career and reconnecting to family roles, which, during their service, may have been difficult," said Mike Haynie, a former Air Force major who now serves as vice chancellor of Syracuse University and director of the Institute for Veterans and Military Families. "The power of business ownership is it offers you the opportunity to craft a vocation for yourself in a way that can accommodate both of those objectives."

New ventures are most likely to succeed, he said, when entrepreneurs build a product or service focused on solving a problem they feel passionate about.

Air Force Reserve Lt. Col. Kelly Robinson of East Longmeadow may be the perfect example.

After being on active duty for six years, Robinson found herself in a constant battle of wills with her 3-year-old daughter, Rachel. So she went online, printed out "cute" pictures of everyday children's activities like eating, brushing teeth and taking a nap. Then she put Velcro on the back of them and attached them to a vertical strip on the wall to make a pictorial schedule of Rachel's day.

“The very first time (Rachel) saw them, it was like I had a different child,” said Robinson, 39. “Suddenly we were on the same page for what felt like the first time. She happily went from step 1 to step 2 to step 3, and it was clear to her now what she had to do to get there.”

Robinson realized there could be a market, designed a schedule made of magnets and in 2010 launched SchKIDules.com.

Since then, her schedules have sold in 13 countries. But with no formal business training, she came to the V-WISE conference, hoping to find a mentor, learn about marketing and grow a network of connections.

“It’s time,” she said, “to up the ante.”

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## 6. Other

**6.1 - The Wall Street Journal (CIO Journal): [VA Officials Dinged for Using Free Yammer](#)**  
(23 August, Angus Loten, 37.5M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

Department of Veterans Affairs officials are being called out for encouraging agency staffers’ use of a version of Yammer without proper administrative oversight.

Since at least 2013, senior agency officials appeared to endorse the workplace use of the social-networking tool, owned by Microsoft Corp., without seeking approval by the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, as required under agency rules, according to the findings of an internal probe released this week.

Rather than pay for an upgrade that offered greater control over user communications, agency officials felt a free version of the tool “was good enough,” according to the report by the VA’s Office of the Inspector General.

Yammer, a web-based tool which has been likened to Facebook Inc. for the workplace, enables the creation of social networks inside companies and other organizations, allowing employees to exchange messages, files, documents, videos and other data.

The upgrades would have allowed senior VA officials to moderate conversations and document sharing on the network.

Among other findings, investigators said Stephen Warren, the agency’s former chief information officer, hosted a June 2013 question and answer forum on VA Yammer, a social network created with the tool in 2008 by an agency IT project manager, which was followed by some 170 users. By August 2015, there were more than 25,000 agency email addresses registered as active users on the site, the report said.

But without administrative oversight, workers “downloaded and shared files, videos and images, risking malware or viruses spreading quickly from the site,” the report said.

Investigators found at least one case where sensitive data may have been shared on network, citing a reply to a post by a VA Yammer user that said: “Please delete the .pdf with the IP address immediately! IP addresses are VA protected information and may never be posted in a public space – even if only VA public.”

They also found a number of posts that were “non-VA related, unprofessional, or had disparaging content that reflected a broad misuse of time and resources,” the report said.

A VA Yammer post in April 2013, for instance, asked “Who else likes [name’s] coat today?” that received 29 responses over two weeks, the report said. In another, a VA Yammer group with 584 members shared a slideshow on “10 Tricks to Appear Smart in Meetings.”

Among other recommendations, the report said senior agency officials should ensure that “VA Yammer is formally evaluated, approved and/or disapproved” for agency use, while determining if “appropriate administrative action” needs to be taken against any agency employees or contractors.

In an email statement sent to CIO Journal on Friday, a VA spokesperson said the agency was reviewing the situation: “While making available tools to allow employees to engage, remain connected, and share ideas, we must also consider the appropriate use of employee time, stewardship of taxpayer resources, and protection of sensitive information,” the statement said.

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**6.2 - Raw Story (The Guardian): [Chat network used by Veterans Administration staff was a major security risk, investigation says](#)** (23 August, Sam Thielman, 4.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A chat network used by staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was a major security risk and open to anyone who had ever been a contractor or an employee at the VA, an internal investigation found.

According to the VA’s office of the inspector general the chat software, a Microsoft product called Yammer, “did not have an administrator or system set in place to ensure removal of former VA or contractor employees”. Only an administrator could remove an employee from the system, so everyone who had ever logged maintained access to the service.

The report, published this week, found current employees of the department used it not just to share sensitive information but to exchange insults.

When quizzed about how exactly the network was supposed to stay secure without oversight, an official whose name is redacted from the document told the investigators: “It’s kind of like a self-policing, everybody’s job is to be responsible.”

Not everybody was not being responsible, the inspector general’s office found. One user figured out a way to make a digital copy of any VA employee’s ID card – which are keyed to multiple forms of ID and a set of fingerprints – and happily posted instructions on Yammer.

“Figured out how to copy the [Personal Identity Verification (PIV) Public Key Infrastructure (PKI)] Certificate to windows if a card is lost or not working,” wrote the user. “[A]ll the email encrypted with the certificate can still be accessed without the card.” The user then attached a post with helpful screenshots embedded entitled “Installing your PIV PKI certificates to your PC”.

“Although we found that the process he detailed did not successfully export PIV PKI certificates, he posted a process that he believed would directly circumvent VA’s IT security,” wrote the investigators.

Some users at least tried their best: “Please DELETE the .pdf with the IP address IMMEDIATELY!” read another post.

Others at the VA were aware of the problem, too, according to one exchange:

User 2: So, if someone leaves the VA and nobody sends a message to have that account suspended, can the former employee still participate in the VA Yammer groups?

User 1: Yes. They theoretically could. They just need to sign into yammer. Keep in mind, yammer is not behind the firewall, so anyone with a connection to the internet can gain access. Yep, even Hackers. Hmm, now that makes me curious about security.

William Cerniuk, the Veterans Health Administration technology director, said he had balked at the price of an upgrade for the service that would have made it more secure when pressed by investigators. Cerniuk “said that he found that the paid version cost ‘\$30 a seat per year’ and that ‘it wasn’t worth paying’ for the fee-based enhancements of Yammer ‘over the free ... The free was good enough’”, according to the report.

Employees used the service to trade barbs, as well:

User 3: [Name], seriously. Why do you have to be so mean-spirited?[...] You’re a bitter bitter person and it just makes me sad for you. I’m done reading anything with your name on it.

User 4: Wow, [Name]! Is free speech banned on Yammer? And talk about mean spirited and name calling... Just Wow!

There were also concerns about the service’s general crumminess, the report’s authors wrote – messages often went to the wrong recipients, and emails with no relevant content from Yammer came thick and fast. “We further found that Yammer regularly spammed and excessively emailed users, as well as VA employees who had no interest in joining the site, and users were unable to remove the Online Now instant messaging feature, resulting in every user violating VA policy simply by logging onto the site.”

Microsoft declined to comment for this story.

The report came as a separate study by mobile security firm Lookout revealed that half of the more than 14,000 government employees it surveyed had used their personal mobile devices to access their official emails, and 49% downloaded work documents onto those devices irrespective of whether or not the device had been approved for use.

Many government agencies, including the Pentagon, do not yet have a bring-your-own-device program. A spokeswoman for Lookout confirmed that the respondents’ employers included “a healthy mix of intelligence, defense and civilian” agencies.

“You’ll hear a lot of people in security when these breaches happen say, ‘We need all these advanced controls!’” observed Steve Ward of IT security firm iSight. “And they’re right, but it’s also true that we aren’t even doing the easy stuff well. Clean up your house. Practice effective hygiene. Document your processes and adhere to them. It’s not shocking – I’ve left companies and still have credentials that still haven’t been turned off a year later.”

Ward noted that a lax approach to data security wasn’t unique to Hillary Clinton’s email accounts. “You shouldn’t be able to access your assets on the network with a device that isn’t approved,” he said. “If you aren’t creating, enforcing and monitoring policies, you’re setting yourself up.”

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**6.3 - Inquisitr (Video): [Veterans Affairs Ruled Responsible For Marine’s Death As VA Shown As Largest Non-Military User Of Ashley Madison](#)** (23 August, 918k online visitors/mo)

A Veterans Affairs investigation into the death of Marine Jason Simcakoski ruled that Veterans Affairs is responsible for the death of the Marine while the VA is embroiled in yet another scandal. With the revelation that Veterans Affairs is the largest non-military federal user of the cheating dating site Ashley Madison, employees who used the site may have had their records compromised in this sensitive breach of information.

Investigators ruled that the Tomah, Wisconsin VA Medical Center was responsible for the death of Simcakoski because they failed to properly prescribe his medications. When Simcakoski was found unresponsive, staff failed to respond properly in treating him.

Jason Simcakoski died on August 30, 2014 during a stay at the VA Medical Center’s short stay mental health unit. As reported in Stars and Stripes, Simcakoski was given 13 different medications by the staff at the Veterans Affairs facility. It lead to mixed drug toxicity. Simcakoski was given several drugs that are prescribed for sedation, and staff psychiatrists prescribed additional drugs that increased the effects of his previously prescribed medications.

Because Simkakoski has privileges to leave the facility, doctors claimed he obtained additional drugs outside of the facility. The investigation concluded the he had enough drugs in his system to cause the sedation, and the drugs were prescribed by the facility. When Simkakoski was found unresponsive, staff failed to determine a heartbeat and properly use equipment to perform CPR investigator’s report said.

“Furthermore, we learned unit staff stopped CPR when facility firefighters arrived [expecting they] would take over the CPR efforts ... however, firefighters at the facility are not designated as first-line staff to provide hands on emergency care.”

To add to the problems of Veterans Affairs, it was revealed that the records for the cheating site Ashley Madison indicated that at least 22 Washington D. C. city employees, in addition to those who worked for Veterans Affairs, were among those who records had been compromised. The dating site is used to cheat on significant others.

The single domain with the most Ashley Madison users is the Department of Veterans Affairs with 104. Over 15,000 of the accounts used to sign up for the site were associated with government or military domains. Only users whose information has been compromised will be notified of the breach to their information.

There has been no word yet as to whether there will be any disciplinary action imposed on the Ashley Madison website or whether or not users were using the site during work. As reported by the Inquisitr, Congress has moved to make it easier to fire bad employees.

What action should be taken against employees in the death of Marine Jason Simkakoska? What do you think of Veterans Affairs employees using the Ashley Madison site?

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**6.4 - The Spokesman-Review: [Do more to honor vets](#)** (24 August, Herb Postlewait, 779k online visitors/mo; Spokane, WA)

Aug. 16 marked the 70th anniversary of the official end of World War II. The Washington State Veterans Cemetery in Medical Lake celebrated the day by honoring the area's veterans. The 16 million who served have been called "The Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw.

There were no local elected officials present; not from Spokane, Spokane County, Airway Heights or even Medical Lake. The base vice commander was present, as well as several active-duty military personnel. Since Fairchild Air Force Base is the single largest employer, some semblance of recognition would seem to be in order. The Mann-Grandstaff Veterans Affairs Medical Center, which supports our veterans, is also a large employer.

Without the large number of retired veterans and active-duty personnel living in greater Spokane because of the aforementioned organizations, the area's economy would suffer. The Spokesman-Review sent no one to cover the event, nor did KHQ.

As a matter of fact, very little is done in greater Spokane to honor our veterans. Even on such an important anniversary.

Herb Postlewait

Spokane

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**6.5 - The Grand Island Independent: [Patriot Tour stop includes a poker run for first time; goal is 48 states in 100 days](#)** (23 August, Jeff Bahr, 518k online visitors/mo; Grand Island, NE)

A group of motorcycle riders didn't just bring an American flag to the Veterans Affairs Medical Center on Saturday morning. They also greeted some of those who live there.

About 25 veterans and family members were sitting in front of the center when the Nation of Patriots Tour arrived. The 35 people on the Nation of Patriots Tour walked over to talk to the veterans after disembarking from their motorcycles.

One of the people who received a friendly greeting was Dennis Jackson, who was in the Marines from 1970 to 1974.

"I did two tours in Vietnam," he said. "But God was with me. I came back home, and will go and do it again if they call me. At 63, they might not call me. But I'd go in a heartbeat to serve my country as long as they ask me. There's nothing better than America."

Jackson, who's in a wheelchair, had open heart surgery a month ago.

"But it wouldn't deter me if the president said, 'Hey, we need you,'" Jackson said.

Jackson was a radio operator in Vietnam. Near him were two other former radio operators in Vietnam, David Key and Rick Masimore. They said they were lucky to survive because enemy snipers looked for radio operators first, in order to sever communications.

Key arrived in Vietnam in 1973 as a Marine, and he's still a Marine, he said. A Marine is a Marine for life, he said.

American flag to 48 states in 100 days

A procession of 26 motorcycles and several vehicles traveled from the Bosselman Travel Center near Interstate 80 to the VA Medical Center as part of the Patriot Tour's annual visit to Grand Island.

Between May 23 and Sept. 5 of this year, an American flag will be transported to 48 states.

Saturday's visit to the VA Medical Center included a transfer of the flag from Gary Smith of North Platte to John Van Winkle of Farwell. Van Winkle, a member of the Dannebrog American Legion, is one of about 10 people who will take the flag to Omaha today. That group will also include Mike Rowley of St. Paul and Tom Whalen of Greeley.

The flag involved in the tour each year has either flown on foreign soil or on a U.S. ship.

One of the people watching the flag transfer was Dan Steburg, who was in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968. The former North Platte resident, who is 74, spent 32 years in the military — 28 in the Army and four in the Navy.

Also seated outside the VA Medical Center was Joe LeJeune, who served in the Army for "22 years, four months and 27 days. But who's counting?" he said.

When LeJeune joined the Army at 17 in 1960, he "found a home," he said. His service included four years in Germany, three years in Korea and three in Vietnam. LeJeune, 72, lived in Juniata for more than 20 years.

'Stand here in freedom'



The transfer ceremony Saturday included remarks by Marty Gordon of Grand Island, one of the local organizers of the tour, and Smith, who is state chaplain for the Patriot Guard Riders. Smith thanked the veterans and saluted them "because we can stand here in freedom."

The Nation of Patriots Tour began in 2008. Local participation was different this year in that it had a poker run for the first time. That's because the local involvement took place on a Saturday rather than the usual Sunday, Gordon said. Following lunch Saturday at the United Veterans Club, poker run participants set off for Doniphan, Wood River and Cairo. If the group met its fundraising goal of \$1,000, the money would stay in Grand Island, Gordon said.

The group that assembled Saturday morning at Bosselman Travel Center included nine people from North Platte. Some of those people, including Henry Russell, made the trip to the same Grand Island parking lot the day before. Those people helped deliver the unclaimed ashes of two veterans to Fort McPherson National Cemetery near Maxwell.

Fritz Lee of St. Paul took part in the Patriot Tour on Saturday "to support my fellow veterans and have a good time." Lee was in the Navy for 22 years. His son, Jason, did two tours in Afghanistan. Jason's son, Austin, is in the Marines.

Larry Graff of Farwell took part to represent his father, Don, and to help the veterans. Don, 87, is a World War II veteran. He lives at a nursing home in St. Paul. Larry Graff's daughter, Jenny, is married to Jason Lee.

Groups taking part in the effort included the Central Plains American Legion Riders and the Tri-Cities Harley Owners Group.

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**6.6 - Fayetteville Observer: [Student who wants to be doctor receives DAV scholarship](#) (23 August, Drew Brooks, 426k online visitors/mo; Fayetteville, NC)**

A Fayetteville student is \$20,000 closer to achieving her goal of becoming a doctor. Hannah N. Farmer received the top scholarship from Disabled American Veterans at the organization's national convention in Denver this month.

Hannah, who has volunteered to work with veterans for 786 hours over four years, was recognized with the organization's Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship.

She donated her time to the Fayetteville Veterans Affairs Medical Center, officials said.

Hannah, 18, and seven other youth were recognized during the convention for their service.

Other recipients received scholarships between \$5,000 and \$15,000.

"Hannah is an exceptional young person with a bright future ahead of her," said Marc Burgess, the DAV national adjutant. "Her nomination package notes that she never waits to be assigned a task, but instead shows the initiative to get things done. Her dedication and positive attitude are traits I personally admire, and that I believe will make her a great medical doctor someday."

In accepting the scholarship, Hannah said she was honored to be recognized by the room full of veterans.

"I am incredibly grateful to all of you for this amazing opportunity," she said.

She will use the scholarship at Coastal Carolina University, where she plans to major in biology, with an ultimate goal of becoming a physician.

"Hannah's compassion and care for veterans is truly remarkable," said John Kleindienst, the DAV national director of voluntary services. "Her work ethic is incredible. This young lady works two jobs, has a 4.3 GPA in an honors program at her school and still dedicates what little spare time she has to caring for the veterans in her community who've sacrificed for our way of life."

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**6.7 - Bradenton Herald: [USF instructor Eric Hodges helped win \\$150,000 grant for program to study veterans and the humanities](#)** (24 August, James A. Jones Jr., 262k online visitors/mo; Bradenton, FL)

MANATEE -- The National Endowment for the Humanities recently awarded a \$150,000 grant to Eric Hodges, an instructor at the University of South Florida, Sarasota-Manatee, and two colleagues at Virginia Tech to develop a summer teaching institute focusing on veterans issues.

"The problem is there is a huge disconnect between the general population and veterans. Less than 1 percent of the population serves in the military," said Hodges, who is a 36-year-old U.S. Marine Corps veteran. "I did my dissertation at Virginia Tech on military veterans and their reintegration into society."

For the planned three-week institute funded by the NEH grant, 16 professors who teach humanities and liberal arts at various colleges and universities around the United States will be brought to Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., for two weeks to grapple with veterans issue. The group will also spend a week at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Working against a backdrop of American involvement with wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan, the professors will study and compare how philosophers, writers and historians throughout the centuries have recorded the experiences of veterans.

Among the speakers invited: Jonathan Shay, author of "Achilles in Vietnam," which examines the devastation of war, comparing the psychological trauma suffered by soldiers of Homer's "Iliad" with the post-traumatic stress disorder of Vietnam vets.

Also speaking at the institute will be Marquette University professor James Marten, author of "Sing Not War: The Lives of Union and Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America."

Hodges is working with Jim Dubinsky and Bruce Pencek of Virginia Tech to put the institute together. Even the soldier fortunate enough not to have PTSD may have other problems ranging from "moral injuries" to survivor guilt stemming from service.

Short term, Hodges expects the institute to yield an anthology of findings by the scholars.

Long term, he would like to see colleges begin to offer veterans studies programs similar to womens or African-American programs.

Such programs are rare in the United States with Syracuse University and the University of Utah being exceptions, Hodges said.

"Florida as a state, and this community, have a great desire to help veterans," Hodges said. "Ultimately, the goal is help society get a better understanding of what veterans are going through."

Todd Hughes, veterans service administrator at USF Sarasota-Manatee, thinks a course combining veterans issues and humanities could help vets reentering civilian life.

"A direct study like this is an amazing opportunity. We are a separate community in a way, with a set of commonalties that unite us in a way only a fellow veteran can understand. If this was implemented, maybe it could help others understand us and help combat veterans transition home in a way never seen before," Hughes said in a press release.

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**6.8 - Arkansas Democrat-Gazette: [North Little Rock firm opens after raid](#)** (23 August, Scott Carroll, 189k online visitors/mo; Little Rock, AR)

NORTH LITTLE ROCK -- An energy company opened Thursday after being raided by federal agents.

Powers of Arkansas had been closed most of Wednesday while agents searched the company's offices at 5440 Northshore Drive.

Agents could be seen removing numerous boxes from the business, but it was unknown what was seized.

Powers of Arkansas spokesman Steve Davison, contacted Thursday by phone, said the agents were from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Inspector General. He said they had a search warrant and DAV Construction, which shares office space with Powers of Arkansas, was the target of the raid.

"Powers of Arkansas has cooperated completely with the federal authorities and has provided all requested information. DAV Construction Company is the focus of this investigation," Davison said.

Calls to the VA department's Office of Inspector General hadn't been returned Thursday.

Powers of Arkansas offices in Springdale and Heber Springs weren't part of Wednesday's raid, according to Davison.

He declined to comment further.

"We really don't know much right now ... We don't have much to say," he said.

Powers of Arkansas president and Chief Executive Officer Ronald Alan Hope told the Democrat-Gazette on Wednesday afternoon the raid was a "total surprise," but it seemed to involve DAV Construction. Hope didn't return calls seeking comment Thursday.

State business records list Hope as an officer at DAV Construction. James Wells of Sherwood is listed as company president.

No one answered the door at Wells' home in Sherwood on Thursday afternoon. A phone number listed for Wells was out of service.

DAV Construction has received more than \$19.9 million in federal contracts from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, VA and U.S. Department of Defense, federal records show. Many of the 64 federal contracts it received since registering in Arkansas in 2007 have been for heating, ventilation and air-conditioning services.

Several of those contracts were obtained through a federal program for small businesses owned by service-disabled veterans.

Also raided Wednesday by federal authorities was Kullander Construction at 7820 Cantrell Road in Little Rock. The company's vice president, Mikel Kullander, serves as the vice president of DAV Construction, according to state records.

Kullander has received more than \$3 million in federal contracts, all from the U.S. Department of Defense, since 2007, the last year such data were available.

Kullander and the company's president, Karl Kullander, didn't return calls seeking comment.

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**6.9 - Muskogee Phoenix: [Local veterans' creativity recognized nationally: All three take part in VAMC's Open Studio](#) (24 August, Mark Hughes, 96k online visitors/mo; Muskogee, OK)**

Three local veterans from Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center have won first, second or third place awards in the nationwide Veterans Creative Arts Competition.

Each year, veterans treated at VA facilities compete in a local creative arts competition, Nathan Schaeffer, public affairs specialist, said. The competition included 51 categories in the visual arts division this year, ranging from oil painting to leatherwork to paint-by-number kits, Schaeffer said.

There are also 100 categories in the performing arts pertaining to all aspects of music, dance, drama and creative writing, he said.

After regional winners are chosen, a national selection committee chooses the first, second and third place winners, Schaeffer said. Nationwide, VA medical facilities use the creative arts as

one form of rehabilitative treatment to help veterans recover from and cope with physical and emotional disabilities, he said.

Winning first place for “group patriotic prose” for “The Pledge” was Doug Simmons of Muskogee, along with Connie Lockwood, Wanda Lockwood and Debra Clark.

Don Johnson of Muskogee won second place for his collage entry “Mr. D.” Third place in creative writing essay was awarded to James Martin, 74, of Muskogee for his essay “The Warrior.”

“The basic idea in the essay is that we tend to glorify war and warriors because of all the notoriety of post-traumatic stress disorder by soldiers coming back in this day and age,” Martin said. “WW II and Korean war vets have PTSD and they weren’t recognized for that. ... It was called shell shock, and they were chastised for that.

“I got to thinking that we glamorize war and it’s really not a glamorous thing at all, and that’s when all these thoughts came together,” he said.

Simmons said that “a lot of doctors never went through combat or saw dead or burnt bodies like I did.” That’s the reason he enjoys Open Studio, because “you just talk to other veterans,” he said. “It helps me relieve some of the pressure I feel and some of the things I’m going through that some of these veterans went through in Vietnam.

“These guys are easier to talk to than psychiatrists because they’ve never gone through combat or seen dead or burnt bodies like I did,” Simmons said. “It’s easier to talk to someone who’s been through combat.”

All of the winners are in a class, open to all veterans, that focuses on creative writing, music and art as a kind of therapy, said Deborah Moreno, recreational therapist and creative arts coordinator at the medical center.

“I wanted vets to have an alternative avenue of dealing with issues of anxiety, depression, PTSD and pain,” Moreno said. “Medication doesn’t always help.”

Moreno said that Open Studio is from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Monday through Friday in the second floor auditorium.

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**6.10 - Sci-Tech Today: [Smartphones, Apps Are Liberating the Blind and Visually Impaired](#)**  
(23 August, Pete Carey, 45k online visitors/mo; Calabasas, CA)

Ruben Morales, a blind 59-year-old retired engineer who lives in Morgan Hill, has used a specialized screen reading program for years to write and run spreadsheets on his desktop computer.

But just this month, he figuratively cut the cord to his desktop and joined the mobile revolution. Morales was visiting the Veterans Affairs Department's Western Blind Rehabilitation Center in Menlo Park learning how to use an iPhone's features for vision-impaired people.

"It's pretty amazing," Morales said, demonstrating how he can call up a song and play it with a few taps. "Whatever I can do on the computer I can basically do it on the iPhone. It has the same capability."

The smartphone, a gadget designed for the sighted, has turned out to be a godsend for the blind and visually impaired, making them more independent than ever before.

With VoiceOver, the iPhone's built-in gesture-based app that reads text on a touch-screen aloud, or Google Android's TalkBack, blind users can access anything on their phones. The user activates apps with a few gestures -- single finger to explore and find buttons, one-finger touch to identify things on the screen, and double-tap to push the button after it's located.

"It's a learning curve, but you can learn to do every single thing on an iPhone that anyone else can do," said Lee Huffman, editor of AccessWorld, published by the American Foundation for the Blind. "These devices are opening up a whole new world."

It didn't look like it would turn out that way at first.

"The blind community started getting really panicky" when smartphones and later, tablets, took off following the iPhone's debut in 2007, researcher Joshua Miele, associate director of Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute in San Francisco, recalled. "Touch-screens were a real concern."

But in 2009, Apple included VoiceOver in its mobile operating system, and followed up with the personal assistant Siri in 2011, launching a new world of mobility for the visually impaired. Google added TalkBack, a screen reader, to its Android operating system in 2009 and Google Now, a personal assistant, in 2012. Microsoft mobile has similar features.

"It's made a huge difference, productivity-wise," said Jennison Asuncion, accessibility leader at LinkedIn in Mountain View, who is blind. "I use my mobile phone probably even more than lot of people."

Erin Lauridsen, 32, a trainer at the Independent Living Resource Center in San Francisco, has been blind since birth and grew up using expensive, clunky, single-purpose devices for doing course work in school. "When the iPhone 3GS came out with VoiceOver built in it was a huge game-changer for me and a lot of other people," she said.

She uses an app called BlindSquare for navigation; Money Reader to identify currency denominations; and Voice Dream Reader to assemble audio play lists of documents from many sources. She also uses Uber and a lot of other popular apps.

"I'm on an equal footing with what everyone else does -- the Yelping, Facebooking and Twittering," she said.

Visually impaired people want to use their mobile phones like anyone else, said Astrid Weber, who researches user experience at Google, visiting visually impaired people in their homes to see what they need and how they use technology.

"Mobility is really important for them," she said.

Google Now -- the Android personal assistant -- is popular with vision-impaired users, said Eve Andersson, manager of Google's accessibility engineering. Her vision-impaired parents use it all the time, she said. "They ask their phones questions, ask it to call me, ask it for directions and create reminders. They love being able to do that with their voice."

For years there have been screen readers for desktop computers. OutSpoken, developed by Berkeley Systems in the late 1980s, was the first for the Mac, according to Smith-Kettlewell's Miele, who worked for the company.

But while VoiceOver and TalkBack broke the tether to the desktop, third-party apps still have to be made accessible to the disabled.

There's a legal issue too. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires websites and mobile applications to be accessible, said disability rights lawyer Lainey Feingold, although regulations are still being worked on by the Department of Justice.

Google announced Google Impact Challenge: Disabilities last year with a \$20 million grant for technology innovators in the nonprofit community who work on technology to make people with disabilities more independent. "We're actively looking for proposals," said Brigitte Hoyer Gosselink of Google.org.

Adobe, Dropbox, LinkedIn, Yahoo, Facebook, Twitter, Intuit, Microsoft, and others have jointly asked universities to train computer students in accessibility software design and are requiring new hires to demonstrate some familiarity with it.

Something as simple as labeling buttons so that VoiceOver can read them aloud can make a big difference, developers say.

Ari Weinstein, co-founder of the San Francisco startup DeskConnect, said that when its task organizer Workflow was released "we got a bunch of people from the visually impaired community reaching out and saying, 'Hey this looks like a really great product but I can't use it because I can't see the screen and you have no VoiceOver.' We spent a couple days, maybe a week, implementing really great accessibility features making it compatible with Apple's VoiceOver." The product won an Apple 2015 Design Award for its accessibility features.

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**6.11 - MSNBC (Video): [Weekends With Alex Witt](#)** (23 August, 39k broadcast viewers; New York, NY)

In this 30-second video, former Donald Trump advisor Roger Stone promotes the newly updated book Time to Get Tough: Make America Great Again!, in which Mr. Trump presents his vision of VA reform.

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