



# Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

11 December 2015

## [1. Top Stories](#)

**1.1 - The Washington Post (Federal Eye): [VA official pushes back against lawmakers, saying 'You can't fire your way to excellence'](#)** (10 December, 20.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A Veterans Affairs official on Wednesday defended the department's decision to demote but not fire two senior executives who collected \$400,000 in a relocation scheme, and pushed back sharply against lawmakers for pressing for punishment rather than accountability for the VA workforce. "In my many years in the private sector, I've never encountered an organization where leadership was measured by how many people you fired," Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson told the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

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Sen. Marco Rubio said Thursday that the Department of Veterans Affairs needs to fire not just the top managers but also the lower-level employees involved in blocking treatment of veterans, as he laid out his own plans to clean up an agency that has become a public symbol of Obama administration dysfunction. The Republican presidential candidate said the VA's ineptitude touches him personally, as he introduced his older brother...

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**1.5 - Military Times (AP): [Marco Rubio calls for VA reform while campaigning in Iowa](#)** (10 December, Catherine Lucey, 540k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Marco Rubio used a real-life example to talk about his commitment to the Department of Veterans Affairs — his big brother. The Republican presidential candidate and Florida senator appeared in Iowa Thursday morning with his brother Mario, 65, an Army veteran who lives in

Jacksonville, Fla. In his speech, Marco Rubio called for reforming a system plagued by long delays for those seeking care and allegations of falsified records.

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**1.6 - The Fiscal Times: [Why Does the VA Own a 5-Star Luxury Hotel in Paris?](#)** (10 December, Martin Matishak, 486k online visitors/mo; New York, NY)  
Congress thinks it's time the scandal-plagued Department of Veterans Affairs got out of the Parisian luxury hotel business. Pershing Hall is a five-star boutique hotel in the heart of Paris, where rooms cost \$500 to \$900 a night. The building, which once housed a brothel among other unsavory businesses, was purchased by the America Legion in 1928 to honor World War I general John "Black Jack" Pershing and his troops.

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## **[2. Access to Benefits/Care](#)**

**2.1 - The Arizona Republic: [Vietnam veterans to host Agent Orange Town Hall, Veterans Voice: Agent Orange is tied into Vietnam but it was also used in Korea and in the United States](#)** (10 December, Arthur G. Sloane, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

Agent Orange has been causing problems for many families for many years. Agent Orange is tied into Vietnam but it was also used in Korea and in the United States. A little known but important fact about Agent Orange is that it may be passed on to family members through genetics causing many childhood diseases. For these reasons and many others Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1011 that meets the third Wednesday each month in Mesa...

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**2.2 - The Wichita Eagle: [Officials: Wichita VA investigating allegations by surgical trainees](#)** (10 December, Tim Potter, 1.2M online visitors/mo; Wichita, KS)

Allegations by surgical trainees at the Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center in Wichita are under investigation, officials said Thursday. Those allegations have led the KU School of Medicine-Wichita to remove the trainees from a surgical service involving a surgeon at the VA center, school officials said. The action was taken to protect the learning environment for surgical trainees, officials said. The VA is investigating the allegations, officials said.

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**2.3 - WAVY-TV (NBC-10, Video): [Local veteran tries to recover caregiver benefit](#)** (10 December, Chris Horne, 1.2M online visitors/mo; Portsmouth, VA)

An Army veteran of two tours in Iraq is trying to get back into a program that enables a friend or family member to help with in-home care. Gregory Bush, 44, served as a Patriot Missile operator and then in military intelligence as part of the Third Infantry. Following rocket and IED attacks, he returned from duty with several cognitive and physical problems. "I had traumatic brain injury, a frontal lobe injury," Bush said.

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**2.4 - TCPalm.com: [Feds release \\$25 million for Copas nursing home in Tradition](#)** (10 December, Keona Gardner, 416k online visitors/mo; Stuart, FL)

The federal Veterans Affairs has released \$25 million to pay for the Ardie R. Copas State Veterans' Home in Tradition. The money was released earlier this week and will pay 65 percent of the \$39.7 million needed to build the 120-bed facility, said Steve Murray, communications director of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs. The state will pay the remaining \$13.9 million.

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**2.5 - St. Cloud Times: [Vets get chance to talk about VA care](#)** (10 December, Kevin Allenspach, 329k online visitors/mo; Saint Cloud, MN)

Veterans in Central Minnesota will have a chance to talk about the care they receive from the St. Cloud VA Medical Center on Tuesday night with Washington-based representatives from the American Legion. A special town hall meeting will be from 7-10 p.m. at the St. Augusta American Legion Post 621, 1894-247th St., St. Augusta. It's the first time since 2012 that the American Legion has made such a visit to the area.

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**2.6 - WNCT-TV (CBS-9, Video): [Veterans voice concerns over VA clinics in the East](#)** (10 December, Josh Birch and Jessica Jewell, 239k online visitors/mo; Greenville, NC)

Dozens of veterans gathered at the Greenville VA to learn about the latest on VA programs and seek out resources for help as part of a Veterans Town Hall. The Department of Veterans Affairs said it will serve veterans within 30 days of making an appointment. Officials said any longer wait times would be excessive. However, wait times have continued to be a problem, despite the VA's goal. In Jacksonville, excessive wait times have dropped about 14% over the past year.

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**2.7 - Idaho Press-Tribune: [What you veterans said in your survey answers](#)** (11 December, Sen. Mike Crapo (R-ID), 178k online visitors/mo; Nampa, ID)

I recently wrote about the release of the results of my 2015 veterans survey. This is the first in a series of columns in which I will discuss the details of the survey results. The survey showed that veterans' satisfaction with the services they receive remains relatively stable in comparison to last year's survey, and improvements are needed, especially in responsiveness and timeliness.

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**2.8 - WLS-TV (ABC-7, Video): [Food Pantry Serves Veterans At Hines VA](#)** (10 December, Hosea Sanders and Sylvia Jones, 175k online visitors/mo; Chicago, IL)

The Greater Chicago Food Depository is one of the only food banks in the country to operate a food pantry at a veterans' facility. When the Greater Chicago Food Depository opened a food pantry at the Edward Hines Veterans Administration late last year, they know there was a dire need. As times get tougher, veterans say they need the help now more than ever.

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**2.9 - Task & Purpose: [Vets Using Marijuana Medicinally Head To States Where It's Legal](#)** (10 December, James Clark, 102k online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

For some veterans and their families, a Nov. 11 provision allowing Veteran Affairs doctors to recommend marijuana in states where it's legal, means that they're packing up and heading to greener pastures. The legislation, which has yet to pass through the House, does not change existing laws that prevent the possession or distribution of medical marijuana on VA property, nor does it do anything for veterans in states where it's not legal.

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**2.10 - The Huron County View: [Medical center promoting telehealth care for veterans](#)** (10 December, John Bonke, 46k online visitors/mo; Bad Axe, MI)

Veterans in Huron County have additional options in care through telehealth. The Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center in Saginaw, and its nine community based outpatient clinics throughout the mid and northern lower peninsula, one of which is located in Bad Axe, have been utilizing telehealth to deliver care to Veterans for 17 years. Telehealth was first introduced to the VA in 1998.

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**2.11 - The DO: [House Committee on Veterans' Affairs discusses community care, As part of the agency's efforts to improve access to health care for veterans, the VA plans to consolidate community care programs](#)** (9 December, 12k online visitors/mo; Chicago, IL)

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs recently held a hearing to examine the Department of Veterans' Affairs' (VA) plans to consolidate non-department community care programs under a single new Veterans Choice Program. The plan includes streamlining eligibility criteria for all community care, and optimizing referral and authorization systems to minimize delays and eliminate unnecessary administrative burdens.

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### **[3. Ending Veterans' Homelessness](#)**

**3.1 - The Tampa Tribune: [U.S. push helps stem veteran homelessness, but Tampa lags](#)** (10 December, Howard Altman, 802k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

A three-year pilot program created to help end veteran homelessness was largely successful, but those taking part in Tampa had more lingering problems and nearly double the average rate of ongoing homelessness compared to those in four other locations, according to a study of the program released Thursday. Tampa-area homeless advocates say the study's findings highlight the region's economic and housing challenges. It also highlights other challenges...

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**3.2 - KPNX-TV (NBC-12, Video): [Encampment for homeless vets in Phoenix in danger of closing](#)** (9 December, Monique Griego, 87k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

Volunteers at Camp Alpha, an encampment for homeless veterans in Phoenix, on Wednesday said they were shocked to learn that rumblings about the City of Phoenix having an issue with the camp weren't just rumors. The camp, which sits on an empty lot near 15th Avenue and Hatcher, is owned by the same person who owns the building next door.

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**3.3 - The Coast News: [Oceanside accepts vouchers to help homeless veterans](#)** (10 December, Promise Yee, 20k vists/mo; Encinitas, CA)

City Council accepted 40 housing vouchers to help chronically homeless veterans on Dec. 2. The city received word of the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers award in April. Thirty-four of the vouchers have already been put to use. Angela Hanifin, city housing program manager, said 28 veterans who were receiving HUD assistance were switched to the VASH program, which includes support services.

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#### **4. Ending the Claims Backlog – No coverage**

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

**5.1 - Land Line: [Law aims to improve medical exam access for veterans](#)** (10 December, Mark Schremmer, 1.7M online vists/mo; Grain Valley, MO)

A section of Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act allows qualified Veterans Administration physicians to conduct commercial motor vehicle medical exams on veterans. The five-year FAST Act was signed into law by President Barack Obama on Dec. 4. The bipartisan legislation passed the U.S. House of Representatives on Dec. 3 by a vote of 359-65 and the Senate later that same day by a vote of 83-16.

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#### **6. Women Veterans – No coverage**

#### **7. Other**

**7.1 - Des Moines Register: [Marco Rubio calls for improving veteran care](#)** (10 December, Mackenzie Ryan, 3.3M online vists/mo; Des Moines, IA)

Marco Rubio called for improving the Veterans Administration through accountability, transparency and expanded health care choices Thursday, saying benefits should "follow" the veteran similar to how tuition benefits in the GI Bill follow students. Current VA services would continue, Rubio said, but veterans need choices when it comes to health care.

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**7.2 - Washington Examiner: [Rubio campaigns with brother, touts VA reform](#)** (10 December, Al Weaver, 2.8M online vists/mo; Washington, DC)

Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio was joined on the campaign trail Thursday by his brother Mario, a veteran, as the 2016 hopeful gave a speech on reforming the Department of Veterans Affairs. During his speech before a town hall in Des Moines, Iowa, Rubio spoke at length about his brother before diving into his proposed reforms, which center around renewed accountability and choice in health care.

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**7.3 - Washington Examiner: [How the VA became a 2016 campaign issue](#)** (11 December, Sarah Westwood, 2.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Reforming the Department of Veterans Affairs has transitioned from a cause promoted mostly by advocacy groups to one routinely debated on the campaign trail. From Hillary Clinton to Marco Rubio, candidates on either side of the aisle have weighed in on ways to fix the broken VA, injecting mainstream politics into a discussion once dominated by bureaucratic noise.

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**7.4 - Washington Examiner: [Veterans officials don't know what 'accountability' means](#)** (11 December, 2.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

It seems like only yesterday that some people were holding up the Veterans Administration as a shining example of how well government can do health care. Today, the agency has become a symbol of everything wrong with government. Rather than keeping the promises made to returning veterans, the self-centered bureaucracy of the VA has been caught sandbagging their applications for disability benefits. It has been caught using secret waiting lists to hide the poor performance of its health care system...

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**7.5 - Government Executive: [VA Deputy Says Administrative Leave For Employees Will Be Exception, Not Rule](#)** (9 December, Kellie Lunney, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Veterans Affairs deputy secretary on Wednesday said the department would stop "routinely" putting employees under investigation on administrative leave, instead giving them other job duties while the disciplinary process plays out. During a tense and at times combative hearing on Capitol Hill, Sloan Gibson told the House Veterans' Affairs Committee that administrative leave would be used sparingly going forward for employees under investigation.

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**7.6 - Government Executive: [Federal Paper Pushing Costs Taxpayers Millions](#)** (10 December, Charles S. Clark, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The federal government is the nation's largest disburser—\$600 billion a year in checks go out to suppliers from civilian agencies alone, according to the Treasury Department. So it may surprise some in this digital age that only 38 percent of the 19 million invoices filed by agencies in fiscal 2013 were submitted electronically. That left a pile of 12 million supplier invoices on old-fashioned paper, costing taxpayers an estimated \$230 million yearly to process.

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**7.7 - KCCI-TV (CBS-8, Video): [Rubio holds town hall meeting on veterans issues in Iowa](#)** (10 December, Cynthia Fodor, 530k online visitors/mo; Des Moines, IA)

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio held a town hall meeting with Concerned Veterans for America in West Des Moines Thursday. Close to 100 people showed up to hear how Rubio would fight to help veterans. He said the VA needs more accountability and transparency and said veterans need to have choices about where they can use their benefits.

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**7.8 - DVIDS: [Soldiers spread holiday cheer at VA Hospital](#)** (10 December, Sgt. Joshua Laidacker, 518k online visitors/mo; Atlanta, GA)

Soldiers of 3rd Infantry Division made a short trip from Fort Stewart, Ga., to Carl Vinson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Dublin, Ga., to spread holiday cheer, Dec. 9, 2015. Soldiers of 3rd ID visited Veterans in the hospital and extended invitations to a concert held on campus by the 3rd ID Band, also known as Rhythm of the Marne.

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**7.9 - WHO-TV (NBC-13): [Rubio Pushes Back at Critics: Says G.I. Bill Proof Veterans To Benefit Under His Idea](#)** (10 December, Dave Price, 363k online visitors/mo; Des Moines, IA) Military veterans can use government educational benefits at community colleges or the universities of their choice. So why shouldn't veterans be able to do something similar with their health care coverage? That was the argument Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio, a Florida Senator, made before several dozen military veterans and their families Thursday morning in West Des Moines.

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**7.10 - Quad-City Times: [Rubio lays out VA reform, military spending in Iowa stop](#)** (10 December, Erin Murphy, 253k online visitors/mo; Davenport, IA) Marco Rubio pushed for a stronger U.S. military and significant reforms in the country's veterans health care system during a campaign stop Thursday in Iowa. Speaking at an events center in this Des Moines suburb, Rubio, a Republican candidate for president and U.S. senator from Florida, called for an end to the military's portion of across-the-board spending cuts to the federal government and said the veterans health care system needs more accountability, transparency and consumer choice.

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**7.11 - Task & Purpose: [VA Nurse's Aide Is Still Employed Despite Manslaughter Charges, After allegedly beating a 70-year-old veteran to death, a Louisiana nurse's aid is still on the VA's payroll](#)** (10 December, Sarah Sicard, 102k online visitors/mo; New York, NY) Fredrick Harris, a nurse's aide is still working at the Veterans Affairs Department hospital in Alexandria, Louisiana, despite charges that he beat 70-year-old veteran Charles Lee Johnson to death in 2013. Though Francis Brian, Jr., the local coroner, found that Johnson had died of blunt force trauma, an internal VA investigation found his death to be accidental, according to The Daily Caller.

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**7.12 - The Huron County View: [Lutz VA Director to depart](#)** (10 December, 46k online visitors/mo; Bad Axe, MI) Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center Director Peggy Kearns has been appointed Director of Southern Nevada Healthcare System in Las Vegas. Kearns will depart to pursue her new role effective Dec. 27. There, Kearns will oversee operations to provide care to more than 54,000 Veterans with a VA staff of nearly 2,200 and oversee a budget of more than \$450 million.

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## 1. Top Stories

**1.1 - The Washington Post (Federal Eye): [VA official pushes back against lawmakers, saying 'You can't fire your way to excellence'](#) (10 December, 20.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)**

A Veterans Affairs official on Wednesday defended the department's decision to demote but not fire two senior executives who collected \$400,000 in a relocation scheme, and pushed back sharply against lawmakers for pressing for punishment rather than accountability for the VA workforce.

"In my many years in the private sector, I've never encountered an organization where leadership was measured by how many people you fired," Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson told the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

"You can't fire your way to excellence."

Exhibit A at a hearing called to press VA officials on why they have had limited success firing or disciplining employees accused of misconduct was the case of Diana Rubens and Kimberly Graves.

The senior executives were demoted one rank down to GS 15 on the General Schedule in November in response to allegations that they manipulated VA's hiring system for their own gain.

The agency's deputy inspector general found in a report this fall that Rubens and Graves forced lower-ranking regional managers to accept job transfers against their will. The women then took the vacant positions themselves, keeping their pay but reducing their responsibility as regional managers in the Veterans Benefits Administration.

But Gibson, reading from prepared testimony, said the inspector general's office exaggerated the actions, which the watchdog's office has referred to the Justice Department for criminal prosecution.

"We won't administer punishment based on IG opinions, referrals to the Department of Justice, recycled and embellished media accounts, or external pressure," Gibson said. "It's simply not right, and it's not in the best interest of the veterans we serve." He called the cases "failures in judgment" and not "ethical breaches."

VA and lawmakers in both parties have been at odds for more than a year over how the agency should address allegations of misconduct, particularly after last year's cover-up of patient wait times. Congress passed new rules to speed the dismissal of senior executives, but lawmakers have complained that the agency has been slow to put them into effect.

Gibson announced two changes to how VA will discipline employees: officials will no longer wait for outside investigations to conclude before moving forward with punishing employees who violate the rules, he said, and the agency will limit the time it places employees on paid leave.

But Gibson testified that VA cannot improve simply by firing its staff. It will focus on "sustainable accountability," he said, focusing on positive reinforcement of employees who follow the rules.

Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Fla.) was furious.

“Mr. Gibson, I think your statement is pretty damn inconsistent,” Miller said, according to published reports. “We’re all educated enough to know the definition of accountability but you and the secretary have decided to change that definition.”

Miller said he was “dumbfounded” by Gibson’s position on Rubens and Graves, according to published reports, and compared a decision to allow the women to keep their relocation bonuses to bank robbers who keep the money they stole.

A VA attorney testified that the agency cannot reclaim the \$400,000 because it was approved by other officials who believed the payments were merited.

“They were approved by senior officials based on their beliefs these individuals [Rubens and Graves] should make those moves, yes,” said Meghan Flanz, deputy general counsel, Stars and Stripes reported.

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**1.2 - Military.com: [New Transportation Law Has Provisions for Veterans](#)** (10 December, 6.5M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

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The new law can save veterans thousands of dollars of CDL training that may not be covered by the GI Bill if they have military experience driving similar commercial-type vehicles and want to get a civilian CDL. Also veterans can save the cost of the annual medical exam required for some commercial driving licenses if they visit VA medical facilities.

Section 5401 of the law contains a provision that exempts veterans from the driving test for a CDL license if that veteran had experience in the armed forces or reserve components driving vehicles similar to a commercial motor vehicle.

This exemption is good for one year after separation from active duty.

The law also directs states to credit military training and knowledge "for purposes of satisfying minimum standards for training and knowledge."

Currently, all 50 states offer skills test waivers to veterans who have been out of the military for 90 days or less.

More provisions of the law remove any state resident requirements for veterans who wish to get a CDL license, and allow VA doctors to perform any required CDL medical exams.

The law directs the Department of Transportation to enact these changes by the end of 2016, but expect some of them to be effective sooner.

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The city Fire, Health and Medical Department and the VA health care system in Phoenix on Tuesday began a six-month pilot program that is intended to ensure that Chandler veterans receive timely and appropriate care, including scheduling of follow-up medical services.

Under the project, city personnel responding to emergency medical calls will screen patients to identify veterans and start connecting them to VA medical services and benefits.

The project includes in-home visits from community paramedics who will assess patients' health care needs with VA nurse practitioners via mobile tablets.

Officials hope the effort will improve care and decrease the frequency of 911 calls and emergency room visits.

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**1.4 - The Washington Times: [Marco Rubio vows to clean up VA, says veterans deserve better](#)** (10 December, Anjali Shastry, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Sen. Marco Rubio said Thursday that the Department of Veterans Affairs needs to fire not just the top managers but also the lower-level employees involved in blocking treatment of veterans, as he laid out his own plans to clean up an agency that has become a public symbol of Obama administration dysfunction.

The Republican presidential candidate said the VA's ineptitude touches him personally, as he introduced his older brother, Army vet Mario Rubio, on the campaign trail in Iowa.

Mario Rubio served in special forces from 1968 to 1971 and had his teeth knocked in during a training mishap. He still needs dental work, but the VA is resisting his claim and is putting him through a bureaucratic nightmare, the Florida senator said.

Marco Rubio said that if he wins the White House, he will demand VA officials be more transparent in their work, will give more veterans the choice of going to private doctors and will impose accountability on the agency by making it easier to fire poor-performing employees.

"Those who are not doing a good job will be fired when I'm president," Mr. Rubio said.

The VA has become an unlikely issue on the campaign trail this year, after the agency faced embarrassing reports last year that many of its facilities maintained secret waiting lists, denying

veterans the timely care they need while department executives collected bonuses for appearing to manage their caseloads.

In Phoenix, a whistleblower said some 40 veterans died while stuck on the waiting lists.

More recently, the VA has faced criticism for failing to fire two senior executives who investigators concluded orchestrated their own transfers to new jobs, collecting nearly \$400,000 in relocation bonuses between them.

Mr. Rubio cited them as chief examples of people who should be fired, but said the housecleaning needs to go deeper.

The VA has bristled at those kinds of complaints.

Testifying to Congress on Wednesday, Deputy VA Secretary Sloan Gibson said firing people is a bad way to manage performance.

“You can’t fire your way to excellence,” Mr. Gibson said.

On Thursday, some congressional Democrats praised Mr. Rubio and other candidates for talking about veterans during the campaign — though they said focusing on firing employees is a distraction.

“I strongly agree the VA must be held more accountable for the quality of care and experience they are providing veterans, but focusing exclusively on firing VA employees is not an effective or sustainable approach,” said Rep. Mark Takano of California. “We should be talking more about recruiting and retaining the best talent, and less about policies that potentially violate the rights of VA employees, a third of whom are veterans themselves.”

Concerned Veterans for America shot back against critics of Mr. Rubio’s plans, arguing that those who don’t support stricter accountability for the VA and more choices for veterans “are fighting to preserve a system that has proven unable to properly serve hundreds of thousands of our nation’s veterans.”

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**1.5 - Military Times (AP): [Marco Rubio calls for VA reform while campaigning in Iowa](#)** (10 December, Catherine Lucey, 540k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Marco Rubio used a real-life example to talk about his commitment to the Department of Veterans Affairs — his big brother.

The Republican presidential candidate and Florida senator appeared in Iowa Thursday morning with his brother Mario, 65, an Army veteran who lives in Jacksonville, Fla.

In his speech, Marco Rubio called for reforming a system plagued by long delays for those seeking care and allegations of falsified records. As an example, Rubio cited his brother, who served in the Army from 1968 through 1971, and has been waiting on dental work for a service-related injury.

"He's had to file a claim and wait for a hearing, which could take anywhere from 18 months to three years. Meanwhile, he's stuck waiting for the procedures he needs," Rubio said.

"Mario is going through the exact same bureaucratic nightmare every other veteran in his situation has to go through," he added. "And like so many of them, he will tell you how confusing it has been, how even the forms he has to fill out seem almost intentionally complicated."

Rubio said his brother was injured during training and taken to a dentist, but the visit was never officially recorded. To date, the VA has not provided the periodontal work he needs.

Rubio spoke before more than 100 people gathered for a town hall sponsored by the conservative group Concerned Veterans for America.

Democrats in Iowa questioned Rubio's plans for veterans, arguing he would seek to privatize the health care system. In a call with reporters Wednesday, Iowa Democratic Party Vice Chair Danny Homan said: "Rubio isn't offering anything new. Just something dangerous."

Marco Rubio said he will bring more transparency and accountability to the VA, promising to get rid of underperforming workers and provide more public oversight. He would also make it easier for veterans to seek private care.

"When I'm president, benefits are going to follow the veteran; the veteran is not going to have to follow the benefits," he said.

He said there's a lack of accountability at the VA, in part, because "union bosses have rigged the system, making it almost impossible to fire VA employees no matter how bad they are."

Rubio took the opportunity to criticize Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton. He said she, if elected, would "keep the status quo" at the VA.

"The truth is we'll never be able to completely overhaul the system until we have a new commander-in-chief," Rubio said.

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**1.6 - The Fiscal Times: [Why Does the VA Own a 5-Star Luxury Hotel in Paris?](#)** (10 December, Martin Matishak, 486k online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

Congress thinks it's time the scandal-plagued Department of Veterans Affairs got out of the Parisian luxury hotel business.

Pershing Hall is a five-star boutique hotel in the heart of Paris, where rooms cost \$500 to \$900 a night. The building, which once housed a brothel among other unsavory businesses, was purchased by the America Legion in 1928 to honor World War I general John "Black Jack" Pershing and his troops. The U.S. government acquired the property in the 1930s after years of neglect and in 1991 transferred authority for the site to the VA, which almost immediately started looking for ways to sell the place.

The agency found a solution in 1998 when it signed a 99-year-lease with a French firm. The extraordinarily long lease, due to expire in 2097, was required under French law so the firm could invest millions to renovate the building, eventually turning it into a fancy little hotel a few blocks from the Seine.

As the VA works to recover from last year's scandal over mismanaged healthcare and regain trust on Capitol Hill, Rep. Mike Coffman (R-CO), who chairs a House Veterans' Affairs Committee subpanel, plans to introduce a bill that would allow the department to divest itself of Pershing Hall and funnel the money toward domestic construction projects.

"Managing property leases in Europe is not a core-competency of the Department of Veterans Affairs," Coffman, a Marine Corps veteran, said Wednesday in a statement. "It's ridiculous that construction projects in Colorado and elsewhere remain unfunded while VA keeps a ritzy Parisian hotel on its books."

How much VA would actually get for the property is unclear, since most of the price estimates were done before the building was rehabbed. In 1990 agency officials estimated the value between \$80 and \$100 million. In 1993 the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office assumed the department could sell it for about \$14 million.

Coffman's legislation, which he plans to introduce with three Democratic cosponsors after ironing out kinks with the VA and the American Legion, would require the department to pick a non-department entity such as the General Services Administration or a private real estate firm to conduct an assessment of the property's value.

The department received two initial fixed payments from the lease: \$533,000 in 1998 and \$467,000 in 2000. The lease also calls for payment of periodic rent of 800,000 French francs between 2001 and 2014, and 1.2 million francs between 2014 and 2097; presumably those payments would be converted to euros, which France adopted in 1999.

Any proceeds from the sale would be placed in the VA's construction coffers. Those accounts have come under intense scrutiny in the last year, especially after the department announced earlier this year it would cost around \$1.7 billion to build a replacement hospital in a Denver suburb, more than five times the facility's original \$328 million price tag.

Congress found a way to pay for the 184-bed facility in September, so any money from selling Pershing Hall would go to other projects.

Influential veterans service organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and even the VA itself support Coffman's idea.

"The VFW believes that VA should not be on the hotel business, but disposal of the hotel should be a business decision and not just an effort to no longer own the building," Raymond Kelley, the group's legislative director, said earlier this week during a House VA hearing.

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## **2. Access to Benefits/Care**

**2.1 - The Arizona Republic: Vietnam veterans to host Agent Orange Town Hall, Veterans Voice: Agent Orange is tied into Vietnam but it was also used in Korea and in the United States** (10 December, Arthur G. Sloane, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

Agent Orange has been causing problems for many families for many years. Agent Orange is tied into Vietnam but it was also used in Korea and in the United States.

A little known but important fact about Agent Orange is that it may be passed on to family members through genetics causing many childhood diseases.

For these reasons and many others Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1011 that meets the third Wednesday each month in Mesa will be presenting an agent Orange Town Hall meeting from 9 a.m. to noon Feb. 13 at the First United Methodist Church building, 15 E. First Ave. in Mesa.

Jack McManus from Washington, D.C. headquarters of the Vietnam Veterans of America and an authority on Agent Orange will speak, aided by Larry Mitchell, a local veteran.

Information: Michael Marks, 480-266-7883.

Government at 'work'

Interesting fact about how your taxes are being spent is that the two persons in high ranking positions at the Department of Veterans Affairs who were put on leave when the VA Hospital and clinic problems first came to light are being paid \$250,000 a year plus vacation and sick time and remain there.

One earns \$137,000 and the other \$113,000 a year.

How slow our government works.

Color guard needs help

Civil Air Patrol, United States Air Force Auxiliary Color Guard has a group of young cadets who earned first place in state competition for five consecutive years.

They have presented the colors at many community services such as Memorial and Veteran Day Services and funerals of veterans. In order for this six-member group to attend the National Cadet competition in Alabama, the members need to raise funds for their participation.

If you would like to help them send contributions to U.S. Air Force Auxiliary, Civil Air Patrol, Arizona Wing, Squadron 302, Deer Valley Airport, 932 W. Deer Valley Road, Phoenix, 85207.

Unified Arizona Veterans officers

Unified Arizona Veterans, which is made up of more than 50 veterans organizations in the Valley, elected new officers for 2016 at its Dec. 5 meeting.

Reggie Yates takes over as Chairman, with Judi Beischel as Vice Chair. Carol Culbertson continues for the eighth year as Secretary and Bob Hysko as Treasurer.

Newly elected Board of Directors are Gene Crego, Bob Dalpe and Dylan Dalzotto.

The UAV is the body that conducts the Arizona Veterans Hall of Fame ceremonies and is active in veterans legislation in the State of Arizona.

Health care director

The new Director of the Phoenix Health Care System, which includes the Phoenix VA Hospital and clinics in the Valley — with three more to come on line in the next year — is Deborah Amdor.

She is coming from her latest assignment as the Medical Director of White River Junction VA Medical Clinic in Vermont. She has also served in many other capacities with VA over the past 20 years. We wish her well.

Oral histories

El Mirage resident Johnny Johnson is offering to collect oral histories of veterans for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project at his own expense.

He will meet with you for an interview and video record your expense. He will give you a DVD for your family memories.

Interested? Contact him at [jhjohson17449@gmail.com](mailto:jhjohson17449@gmail.com). or 903-216-4943. This columnist does not endorse or sponsor him.

Veterans discounts

It always is worth asking if a business gives a discount to veterans.

I shopped at Chandler Fashion Mall Sunday and received a discount of 15 percent at two shops — The Walking Company and the Harry & David temporary store. The first will give it to you if you are active duty or retired and the second if you are a vet also.

Always ask!

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## **2.2 - The Wichita Eagle: [Officials: Wichita VA investigating allegations by surgical trainees](#) (10 December, Tim Potter, 1.2M online visitors/mo; Wichita, KS)**

Allegations by surgical trainees at the Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center in Wichita are under investigation, officials said Thursday.

Those allegations have led the KU School of Medicine-Wichita to remove the trainees from a surgical service involving a surgeon at the VA center, school officials said.

The action was taken to protect the learning environment for surgical trainees, officials said.

The VA is investigating the allegations, officials said.

The action stemmed from allegations by surgical residents in post-graduate training, said school spokeswoman Denice Bruce. The surgical residents were removed from the service Tuesday morning to protect the quality and integrity of the training program, said Paul Callaway, associate dean for graduate medical education at KU School of Medicine-Wichita. The removal will remain in effect until the allegations can be substantiated or refuted, Callaway said.

Callaway stressed that the removal applied only to a surgical service involving one surgeon at the Wichita VA center.

Neither Bruce nor Callaway knew the number of surgical residents affected.

They said that any specific information about the nature of the allegations would have to come from Veterans Affairs.

In a statement Thursday evening, John Orrell, public affairs officer for the Wichita VA center, said: "If there is a personnel matter that has to do with any staff member ... we will not discuss it for the sake of privacy."

Orrell also said in the statement: "We are extremely proud of our partnership with KU School of Medicine." The VA center and the school "truly have a symbiotic relationship," he said. "We are a teaching hospital, and we are not able to succeed in our mission without that relationship with KU School of Medicine and other health care groups and health care education groups."

Orrell added: "There have been no changes to our residency program at the KU School of Medicine. Our affiliation with the KU School of Medicine continues as normal."

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**2.3 - WAVY-TV (NBC-10, Video): [Local veteran tries to recover caregiver benefit](#) (10 December, Chris Horne, 1.2M online visitors/mo; Portsmouth, VA)**

An Army veteran of two tours in Iraq is trying to get back into a program that enables a friend or family member to help with in-home care.

Gregory Bush, 44, served as a Patriot Missile operator and then in military intelligence as part of the Third Infantry. Following rocket and IED attacks, he returned from duty with several cognitive and physical problems. "I had traumatic brain injury, a frontal lobe injury," Bush said. "Cognitive disorder, depression, anxiety, a lot of things."

Bush says his ankle had to be rebuilt and now walks with a cane, and he had to have two of his vertebrae fused. He applied for the Veterans Caregiver program two years ago and qualified. The program enables veterans to designate a friend or family member to help with personal care, cooking and cleaning, and helping the veteran with medicine and doctor appointments. The VA provides a stipend to the caregiver which varies by case. Bush says his caregiver's stipend was about \$1,900 monthly.

Bush named his then-wife as primary caregiver and his daughter Renee as secondary caregiver. When Bush and his wife separated, he was hoping to move his daughter into the primary position. That's when Bush learned he had to re-qualify. "For some reason they made me start all over again and that's where the problem began."

Hampton VA Medical Center would not comment on the case, citing patient privacy laws. Administrators say it's a recovery-based program. "The ideal outcome would be for someone to recover sufficiently where they could become more independent and could actually graduate out of the program," said Dr. Priscilla Hankins, acting Chief of Staff.

Hankins says there is no time limit on how long a veteran can get the caregiver benefit. "As long as they meet the criteria and qualifications they can continue in the program."

Bush is appealing to the VA to get back in the program and get his daughter named as caregiver. He says he's getting help from the staffs of both Senator Tim Kaine and Senator Mark Warner, and free legal advice from William and Mary Law School.

With or without the designation or the stipend, Renee Bush says she'll take care of her father. "I love my dad more than anything and I'm just trying to make sure I'm there for him through it all."

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**2.4 - TCPalm.com: [Feds release \\$25 million for Copas nursing home in Tradition](#)** (10 December, Keona Gardner, 416k online visitors/mo; Stuart, FL)

The federal Veterans Affairs has released \$25 million to pay for the Ardie R. Copas State Veterans' Home in Tradition.

The money was released earlier this week and will pay 65 percent of the \$39.7 million needed to build the 120-bed facility, said Steve Murray, communications director of the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs.

The state will pay the remaining \$13.9 million.

Construction at the 28.5-acre site on the south side of Southwest Tradition Parkway, across from the Brenntary at Tradition retirement community was slated to start next month but has been pushed back to late summer, Murray said. The home would be the first state veterans home to offer all private rooms. Spouses, including those of the same sex, will be allowed to share rooms as long as both are military veterans and need services, Murray said.

The home is named for the late Medal of Honor recipient and Fort Pierce native Sgt. Ardie R. Copas, who died while serving as a machine-gunner in Cambodia during the Vietnam War.

President Barack Obama awarded the Medal of Honor to Copas posthumously in March 2014.

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**2.5 - St. Cloud Times: [Vets get chance to talk about VA care](#)** (10 December, Kevin Allenspach, 329k online visitors/mo; Saint Cloud, MN)

Veterans in Central Minnesota will have a chance to talk about the care they receive from the St. Cloud VA Medical Center on Tuesday night with Washington-based representatives from the American Legion.

A special town hall meeting will be from 7-10 p.m. at the St. Augusta American Legion Post 621, 1894-247th St., St. Augusta. It's the first time since 2012 that the American Legion has made such a visit to the area.

"What we do is monitor what's going on in the VA system and we look at access as one of our measurements," said Roscoe Butler, American Legion deputy director for health care, veterans affairs and rehabilitation, who will be part of the delegation coming to St. Cloud. "We also look at reports from the attorney general's office and inspector general and reports in the media. We use those to help select sites. We've seen a lot of media information about the St. Cloud VA recently, and that's one reason why we're coming."

An internal investigation last year showed the St. Cloud VA suffered mass resignations of health care providers, sending patient loads soaring and leading to rampant cancellations of veteran health care appointments. It also found the center's leadership has fostered a work environment where employees are scared to report problems. Between 2011 and 2013, more than two dozen primary care doctors resigned.

Average workloads per doctor skyrocketed to 1,800 patients in July 2013, up by more than 400 patients from only a month earlier. Care delivery site data showed the appointment cancellation rate hit 40 percent. Employee satisfaction ranked among the lowest of any VA facility in the country in 2013 and 2014, according to statistics cited by investigators and the VA inspector general.

St. Cloud VA officials said that since the investigation was completed in January 2014, the facility has hired more doctors, decreased patient loads, instituted supervisory training and conducted regular employee town halls to improve communication.

"The wait times don't seem out of the norm right now, but we thought it would be good to go back for another visit anyway," Butler said. "We don't conduct site visits to find cause and effect. The reason we're there is we believe the VA is a system worth saving."

Butler said the Legion will use first-hand information to advocate for veterans with VA managers and Congress. "If staffing or other resources are a problem, we can bring those directly to the attention of legislators who can do something about it," he said.

The American Legion started conducting a roving series of town hall meetings titled "System Worth Saving" in 2003 — at the insistence of former American Legion National Commander Ronald F. Conley. In the wake of scheduling scandals in Phoenix and other accusations of failed care elsewhere in the country, the American Legion has sought to be a conduit between veterans who need care, the VA and elected officials. Part of this action has been creating "crisis command centers."

Since 2006, the American Legion Veterans Benefit Center Committee has facilitated visits to VA facilities. Officials meet with veterans and their families, administrators and employees from the

facilities. They investigate how each facility uses resources, and note successes, challenges and limitations at each site. The observations are compiled into after-action reports distributed to members of Congress, the VA and the public.

There are 11 members of the American Legion Veterans Benefit Center Committee, of which Butler is one.

Butler and the other visiting officials will be in St. Cloud through next Thursday. On Wednesday, they plan to visit the St. Cloud VA and speak with executives there. On Thursday, they will attend the opening of a rehabilitation center and also visit a St. Cloud homeless shelter.

"The town hall meeting is really important because that's the veterans' meeting," Butler said. "We're there to hear from them about the good, the bad or the indifferent about their care. If everything is great there, that's fine. But if they feel there are issues and concerns, we want to hear about those, too."

Butler said local VA leaders also will be on hand for the town hall meeting.

"When we're asked questions we can't answer, we try to turn that over to them to address," Butler said. "We also want to hear from them during the course of our visit." The committee wants to hear about staffing shortages, best practices and good work they are doing, he said.

Rep. Tom Emmer, Minnesota's 6th District congressman, earlier this fall said he will help craft legislation that would require reports such as the internal investigation from last year be made public. When Emmer made the announcement, he also said staff and leadership at the VA had agreed to go into mediation to resolve disputes.

To learn more about the American Legion System Worth Saving program, visit [www.legion.org/systemworthsaving](http://www.legion.org/systemworthsaving).

Butler said a report on the St. Cloud visit should be available from the American Legion early in 2016.

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**2.6 - WNCT-TV (CBS-9, Video): [Veterans voice concerns over VA clinics in the East](#)** (10 December, Josh Birch and Jessica Jewell, 239k online visitors/mo; Greenville, NC)

Dozens of veterans gathered at the Greenville VA to learn about the latest on VA programs and seek out resources for help as part of a Veterans Town Hall.

The Department of Veterans Affairs said it will serve veterans within 30 days of making an appointment. Officials said any longer wait times would be excessive.

However, wait times have continued to be a problem, despite the VA's goal. In Jacksonville, excessive wait times have dropped about 14% over the past year. Still, more than 26% of appointments in November 2015 took more than 30 days to schedule.

In Greenville, excessive wait times have grown from 10.8% in December 2014 to nearly 20% in November 2015.

Vietnam veteran Ken Jarvis said since opening the new clinic, his wait times at the Greenville VA have dropped to around two or three months. He said it's improved drastically in the past year, but doctors could do better.

"Right now they don't have that much time and they just do what's really necessary to get you through the door, through the door. That could change," Jarvis said.

Jarvis said patients only see a doctor for about 15 or 20 minutes, which isn't enough time to explain some problems.

Since moving to the new facility, the number of patients at the Greenville VA has increased from 9,000 to more than 13,000.

Deanne Seekins said although wait times can be several weeks, they try to get medical help to those needing it right away.

"If we're seeing a patient here at the Greenville clinic and they require urgent care, if they're having chest pain, then we send them right over to Vidant," Seekins said.

Since so much attention has been focused on PTSD with veterans, Seekins said mental health assessments are now part of primary care visits.

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**2.7 - Idaho Press-Tribune: [What you veterans said in your survey answers](#)** (11 December, Sen. Mike Crapo (R-ID), 178k online visitors/mo; Nampa, ID)

I recently wrote about the release of the results of my 2015 veterans survey. This is the first in a series of columns in which I will discuss the details of the survey results.

The survey showed that veterans' satisfaction with the services they receive remains relatively stable in comparison to last year's survey, and improvements are needed, especially in responsiveness and timeliness.

Travel-related challenges and wait times for appointments are two critical issues affecting veterans' access to needed services. Veterans have shared their concerns with severely delayed travel benefit reimbursements, and most veterans continue to be forced to travel long distances for services. Many of these issues appear to be bureaucratic.

Although Congress made changes in law to better enable veterans to get local, non-U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs care when they live distances from VA facilities, the changes have not been implemented as intended. I continue to work to improve local access, eliminate wait times and ensure that veterans needing travel reimbursement receive benefits in a timely fashion.

A total of 924 survey responses were analyzed. All comments from Idahoans were analyzed, even comments from those who took the survey more than once. Ninety-six percent of survey participants served in the U.S. military. The remaining four percent include family members, friends and those who have relationships with veterans. This significant response by veterans is extremely valuable, as veterans and their families know best the inner workings of the VA.

Timely and responsive service is an important component of customer service that directly impacts veterans' satisfaction with the VA. The VA must be prompt and complete in its responses to veterans' needs. Responsive service means that staff acknowledges and responds to the veterans needs and concerns; it means VA staff explain what the VA is doing in a particular circumstance and why the VA is pursuing that course of action. Far too often, survey participants expressed concern that the specifics of their situation were not considered.

Continued improvement in satisfaction with the VA requires diligence. Overall, the majority of participants (52 percent) characterized their experiences with the VA as "satisfying" or better. Fifty-one percent of participants in the 2014 Veterans Survey indicated they were satisfied or better with their VA experiences. Twenty-four percent of this year's survey participants responded that their experiences with the VA have improved "somewhat" or better.

However, the survey also showed that more work is needed to lower the proportion of those in the veterans community who report dissatisfying and very dissatisfying experiences.

Effective, clear and courteous communications between VA representatives and veterans remain crucial. Examples of positive and negative communication were evident. Within the Veterans Health Administration, good communication examples included the doctor making the patient feel heard and respected or the staff being accessible, helpful and providing information and feedback, even in circumstances with little or no progress. The veterans felt involved in their treatment and aware of the ongoing process.

Examples of bad communication include staff or doctors being rude or unresponsive, with veterans feeling as though the doctor is not listening or unaware of the patient's situation, feeling as though they cannot reach VA staff to ask questions, receiving no response about status of claims or feeling "left in limbo."

Although many veterans described themselves as reasonably satisfied with veterans services, they indicate they want improvements in responsiveness and timeliness.

I encourage you to read the survey results that can be found on my official website at [www.crapo.senate.gov](http://www.crapo.senate.gov). I am sharing them with the Veterans Administration and continuing to work to make improvements for veterans.

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**2.8 - WLS-TV (ABC-7, Video): [Food Pantry Serves Veterans At Hines VA](#)** (10 December, Hosea Sanders and Sylvia Jones, 175k online vistors/mo; Chicago, IL)

The Greater Chicago Food Depository is one of the only food banks in the country to operate a food pantry at a veterans' facility.

When the Greater Chicago Food Depository opened a food pantry at the Edward Hines Veterans Administration late last year, they know there was a dire need. As times get tougher, veterans say they need the help now more than ever.

Here at the Hines VA, many of these men and women have injuries seen and unseen. Yet, they all say medical care is not the only assistance they need.

"It's a very big help. I got a family of five, so it helps a lot," said Anthony Singletary, who served 1974-1977.

The Greater Chicago Food Depository opened an on-site food pantry in 2014 as a direct response to calls for help.

"Here in Cook County, there are over 60,000 veterans that live below the poverty line. The Hunger in America study told us that 18 percent of the households that access the food depository's network has at least one current or retired member of the U.S. armed forces," said Emily Daniels, Greater Chicago Food Depository.

For some veterans, the food they receive here meets a critical need.

"I ain't got no job. I'm unemployed and I got to eat. And they got real good food here and it helps me," said Cedrick Pipes, who served 1979-1981.

For others, it's one more way to leave no soldier behind.

"Mostly I do it because I have a friend, he's a Korean veteran, and he can't get around. His car burned down last year and so we're helping him out," said Stefan Cipot, 101st.

And at a time where many veterans say they feel forgotten, it's a reminder that they are appreciated.

"I just think it's a good deal. It's like 'thanks,'" said Walter Orobey, who served 1953-1955.

The Greater Chicago Food Depository also operates a pantry at the Jesse Brown VA Hospital. Between the two locations, they feed about 3,000 veterans each month.

If you would like to make a donation or learn other ways to give back to the food depository or to the Northern Illinois Food Bank, [click here](#) to learn how to help.

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**2.9 - Task & Purpose: [Vets Using Marijuana Medicinally Head To States Where It's Legal](#)**  
(10 December, James Clark, 102k online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

For some veterans and their families, a Nov. 11 provision allowing Veteran Affairs doctors to recommend marijuana in states where it's legal, means that they're packing up and heading to greener pastures.

The legislation, which has yet to pass through the House, does not change existing laws that prevent the possession or distribution of medical marijuana on VA property, nor does it do anything for veterans in states where it's not legal.

The spouse of a retired Army Green Beret, whose career spanned 26 years and included more than 50 combat missions, told Military.com that she and her husband will become "marijuana refugees."

Her husband's VA-prescribed medications caused him to suffer from severe side effects and one of his doctor's recommended he cut all but the most essential prescriptions, and use marijuana in lieu of the others. The switch helped, however, the couple lives in North Carolina, where weed is illegal. After testing positive for marijuana, her husband's doctors refused to refill his prescriptions for Oxycodone and Fentanyl, both of which are highly addictive.

After lobbying North Carolina's legislators for several years to change their laws on medical marijuana, the couple has decided to move in the coming year.

"No one seemed to care," she said. "As an advocate and a caregiver for my husband, it is my job to work towards legalization for medical cannabis. However, we will now be moving."

Before, to help him deal with injuries ranging from crippling arthritis to post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, her husband was prescribed Ambien so he could sleep; Propranolol for his tremors; Botox injections; Tramadol and Treximet for chronic migraines; and testosterone injections for his damaged endocrine system. Additionally, a civilian medical practice prescribed a daily dose of Oxycodone and Fentanyl to help him cope with the pain stemming from his many injuries.

"The injuries he sustained are not visible to most people. It isn't until someone watches him for a while do they recognize there is a problem," she told Military.com. "I get tired, I get angry and I get fed up. I no longer participate in any of the activities that I once did. I have completely lost who I am. Because my husband doesn't have visible deformities, outsiders rarely understand."

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**2.10 - The Huron County View: [Medical center promoting telehealth care for veterans](#)** (10 December, John Bonke, 46k online visitors/mo; Bad Axe, MI)

Veterans in Huron County have additional options in care through telehealth.

The Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center in Saginaw, and its nine community based outpatient clinics throughout the mid and northern lower peninsula, one of which is located in Bad Axe, have been utilizing telehealth to deliver care to Veterans for 17 years. Telehealth was first introduced to the VA in 1998.

In Fiscal Year 2015, which ended Sept. 30, the Aleda E. Lutz VA and its community based outpatient clinics, provided some form of telehealth care to 3,573 Veterans, which attributed to a total of 13,759 telehealth visits.

The idea behind this modality of care is two-fold: require less traveling for the Veteran throughout the state for his or her care; and tap into providers and specialists who could provide assessments, care and treatment plans virtually to the Veteran should a particular clinic not have a health care provider the Veteran needed to see.

Veterans are asked to talk with their health care team about the possibility of receiving care via telehealth should they be faced with long-distance travel.

There are various forms, including: Clinical Video Telehealth; Store and Forward Telehealth; Secure Messaging; and Home Telehealth.

- Clinical Video Telehealth

Clinical Video Telehealth (CVT) is real-time video interaction between a patient and a clinician. CVT provides veterans opportunities to see a variety of clinical specialists within close proximity to their homes. Veterans may be able to receive some services via a home computer - CVT to home. (Services vary within Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) facilities.)

- Store and Forward Telehealth

Store and Forward Telehealth (SFT) is taking an image at one location, uploading, transmitting and having the image interpreted by a specialty provider at another location. SFT modality allows veterans to be screened more timely and decreases lengthy wait times for traditional appointments. (Services vary within VISN facilities.)

- Secure Messaging

Secure Messaging is an electronic, bi-directional communication between patients and their health care teams. It allows patients with an upgraded MyHealth-e-Vet account the opportunity to send messages to their health care teams regarding non-urgent health-related issues.

- Home Telehealth (HT)

Home Telehealth (HT) bridges the mileage gap between the Veteran and his or her VA provider. HT is monitoring of patients in the home via monitoring/ messaging devices and/or toll-free phone interaction. Veterans may also receive services in conjunction with a “live” video connection. HT is offered to veterans who need to lose weight, have diabetes, congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and high blood pressure.

#### Bad Axe

The Bad Axe Community Based Outpatient Clinic opened in November 2010.

In FY15, there were approximately 60 patients who had numerous CVT visits with Healthcare Providers from the VA in Saginaw and other VA providers around the country, according to Aleda E. Lutz VAMC Public Affairs Officer Carrie Seward.

“In addition to these 60 veterans, we also have an average of 30 veterans every month use CVT visits to connect with their Mental Health Provider. Also in FY15, we completed 36 Store and Forward visits. These visits were for tele-dermatology and tele-retinal evaluations,” said Seward.

Some of the Clinical Video Teleconferencing services offered veterans from Bad Axe - so they don't have to drive and see a specialist - are: pulmonary, mental health services, point-of-care testing for anticoagulation products with pharmacy consultation, hearing aid fit testing and adjustments, veteran orientation to the VA health care system, various support groups, pain management, nutrition consulting, weight management programs (MOVE), post amputee prosthetic follow up, infectious disease, medication management, nephrology and pre- and post-operative visits with Detroit and Ann Arbor VA, Seward added.

All modes of telehealth are available to veterans in the Bad Axe CBOC, Seward also said.

Seward explained that for a veteran to access care, a veteran's health care team would talk with them about opportunities to use telehealth - as members of the team know what is available. The team would also assess the veteran to learn more about if the veteran has a computer and how tech-savvy that particular veteran may be. If the veteran can use home telehealth, they would be provided with access to equipment and orientation on how to use it.

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**2.11 - The DO: [House Committee on Veterans' Affairs discusses community care. As part of the agency's efforts to improve access to health care for veterans, the VA plans to consolidate community care programs](#)** (9 December, 12k online visitors/mo; Chicago, IL)

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs recently held a hearing to examine the Department of Veterans' Affairs' (VA) plans to consolidate non-department community care programs under a single new Veterans Choice Program.

The plan includes streamlining eligibility criteria for all community care, and optimizing referral and authorization systems to minimize delays and eliminate unnecessary administrative burdens. The plan also will build a network within VA and non-VA community providers, including a transition toward value-based payments to align with the health care industry.

The hearing, held Nov. 18, was the latest progress report on the ongoing efforts between the VA and Congress to improve veteran health care delivery by eliminating delays and access issues. As well, the VA Commission on Care—to which Joyce Johnson, DO, was appointed by President Obama—continues to develop its recommendations as part of these transformation efforts.

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### **3. Ending Veterans' Homelessness**

**3.1 - The Tampa Tribune: [U.S. push helps stem veteran homelessness, but Tampa lags](#)** (10 December, Howard Altman, 802k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

A three-year pilot program created to help end veteran homelessness was largely successful, but those taking part in Tampa had more lingering problems and nearly double the average rate

of ongoing homelessness compared to those in four other locations, according to a study of the program released Thursday.

Tampa-area homeless advocates say the study's findings highlight the region's economic and housing challenges. It also highlights other challenges — Tampa's generally older veteran's population and a lower rate of participation in opportunities for training and education.

The Veterans Homeless Prevention Demonstration program kicked off in Tampa and four other locations around the country in 2011 as part of the Obama administration's efforts to put all veterans into homes by the end of this year.

The administration is seeking to create what it calls a "Functional Zero" level of veterans homelessness, meaning "every veteran has access to the supports they need and want to avoid staying on the street and move quickly to permanent housing," according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

As of last week, there were still about 150 veterans and family members homeless in Hillsborough County, said Sara Romeo, executive director of Tampa Crossroads, which administered the demonstration program on behalf of what's now known as the Tampa Hillsborough Homeless Initiative.

The three-year demonstration program was designed to find ways to end homelessness quickly and to prevent homelessness for veterans at risk, by coordinating efforts of the federal Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor and Veterans Affairs.

The \$10 million program offered short-term financial assistance — including assistance for rent, utilities, and arrears — as well as case management by VA social workers and Labor Department employment services.

Participating veterans, many of whom served in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, experienced "substantial improvements in housing stability, employment and income that persisted after exiting the demonstration," according to HUD, which ran the program in central Texas; San Diego; Tacoma, Washington; and northern New York, as well as Tampa.

During that time, the program served 4,824 adults and children, including 2,023 veterans,

The study, conducted by Silber & Associates and the Urban Institute, found that six months after leaving the demonstration program, 76 percent of the veterans studied lived in their own place, employment nearly doubled, and monthly incomes grew by 41 percent.

"This study shows us that our collaboration across federal agencies is working," HUD Secretary Julián Castro said in a prepared statement. "By providing a roof and a place to call home, we're creating the stability needed to find employment and transition back into civilian life."

"Prevention is critical to ending homelessness among veterans but it's also the hardest part," said Mary Cunningham, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute and lead author of the report. "The promising nature of these early findings suggests that these new approaches are worth further testing."

Still, Tampa veterans faced the biggest ongoing challenges, according to the study, which interviewed more than 500 veterans who took part in the program, including 100 in Tampa.

In a survey of veterans taken between six months and a year after participating in the program, Tampa had the lowest percentage of veterans living in their own place and the highest percentages of veterans who were homeless or living with others.

The study also showed that veterans entering the program in Tampa faced the biggest challenges.

Tampa reported the highest percentage of veterans already homeless upon entering the program, at 19.4 percent, nearly double the national average of 10.5 percent. They also reported the lowest percentage of veterans with jobs and the highest percentage of those not working.

Among those working, Tampa had the lowest percentage in full-time employment. Among all veterans in the program, Tampa had the lowest rate of full-time workers.

Follow-up interviews showed that the employment picture for Tampa veterans improved, with 46.1 percent working of and those, 57 percent having full time jobs.

Income, however, remained an issue, according to the study.

Tampa veterans had the second-lowest mean monthly income when interviewed as they left the program, \$1,290, and during the later follow up, \$1,311. Only northern New York reported lower levels.

One reason for Tampa's showing may be that local veterans also reported the lowest percentages of participation in school or training 20.2 percent compared to the national average of 29 percent, as well as the lowest percentage of regular schooling leading to a degree, 10.3 percent compared to 19.7 percent, and the lowest percentage of veterans receiving GI Bill benefits for education at follow-up, 12 percent compared to 16.9 percent.



Tampa and the other demonstration program sites were located near major military bases, in this case MacDill Air Force Base.

The sites were selected based on a number of factors: the number of homeless veterans in the geographic area, the number of Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans who accessed healthcare through the VA between October 2002 and the first quarter of December 2009, the number of homeless veterans reported through the VA, the range and diversity of military represented in the selected sites, access to and availability of VA health care, overall geographic distribution, and capacity of the community to carry out the demonstration project.

More than 400 Tampa veterans were helped by the program, according to Cunningham, the study's principal author.

She said Tampa has generally older veterans, more of them with no income, lower rates of full-time employment and high rates of reported depression. Cunningham also cited "an unevenness in case management and a local employment partnership that was not as strong as wanted" as other factors contributing to Tampa's lingering homelessness problems.

The findings show just how challenging it is to help the homeless in Tampa, said Romeo, with Tampa Crossroads.

“Our lingering issues had more to do with our local resources than anything,” she said.

Tampa does not have adequate affordable housing, said Romeo, which is an ongoing problem.

“We had a very large unemployed general population due to the economy at that time, and we were experiencing the most foreclosures in our history,” she said. “So I believe that all of this came together to create the ‘perfect storm’ for homeless vets.”

The study results pointed out other problems as well, Romeo said, including a low hourly employment rate, “nearly non-existent” state assistance to veterans, an already large general homeless population — the third biggest in the country, consistent with its overall population rank — “with little or no systems of care in place.”

After that initial program for homeless veterans expired, Tampa became one of the first communities to switch to what’s called the “Housing First” model, said Romeo, which places people into housing immediately whether they have income or employment.

“Once they are housed we begin intensive case management for up to six months to deal with the issues that result in a vet becoming homeless,” she said.

The pilot project, said Romeo, was a precursor to the current Support Services for Veteran Families program, which she said has been very successful.

“I think the most important concept that came out of this report was the evidence we brought out to show that “Housing First” is the correct model to use for homeless individuals,” she said.



Since 2010, more than 360,000 veterans and their family members have been permanently housed, rapidly rehoused, or prevented from falling into homelessness through support provided by VA and HUD, according to the VA.

According to the most recent HUD homeless count, in January, 2015, there were 47,725 homeless veterans, which made up about 11 percent of all homeless adults.

“The VA, along with HUD and hundreds of community organizations across the country have reduced the estimated number of homeless veterans by more than 36 percent since 2010,” according to VA spokeswoman Jan Northstar. “VA’s joint program with HUD has made available housing vouchers for more than 79,000 veterans.”

She added that VA is “expanding other successful programs, such as Supportive Services for Veteran Families, to prevent tens of thousands of veterans and their families from becoming homeless each year.”

Ending homelessness “is a complex issue that takes a team to achieve,” said Karen Collins, a spokeswoman for the James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital.

Collins said Haley has used about 87 percent of its vouchers under a joint HUD-VA program to house veterans.

That means “781 formerly homeless veterans have permanent housing,” she said. “Our goal is to house at least 34 more homeless veterans by the end of January 2016, and we are optimistic that we will meet that goal.”

In addition, Collins said the 76 beds in the Grant and Per Diem transitional housing program and the 45 beds in the contract housing program “generally remain filled at about a 90-95 percent capacity, so we are effectively utilizing the resources we have to help end veteran homelessness.”

Haley, she said, “remains committed to working with our partners to reach functional zero and effectively end homelessness among veterans.”

Yet the problems linger.

Romeo said that the Tampa area still lacks adequate affordable housing for low income families, a community-wide system of care to prevent or rapidly rehouse veterans, enough local emergency shelter beds, or jobs paying a sustainable rate of pay.

In addition, the area has two of the nation’s busiest VA hospitals — the James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital and the C.W. Bill Young VA Medical Center,

Those hospitals “draw lots of new vets to the area, many of arriving homeless,” she said.

“We cannot find adequate and affordable housing for the last 150 or so veterans and their families now,” said Romeo.

“We have been able to identify 98 percent of homeless vets by name and they have been routed to programs to assist them to housing resources however, without affordable housing they can move into we are in trouble. We are right there in terms of functional zero and we will not give up until the last veteran is home.”

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**3.2 - KPNX-TV (NBC-12, Video): [Encampment for homeless vets in Phoenix in danger of closing](#)** (9 December, Monique Griego, 87k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

Volunteers at Camp Alpha, an encampment for homeless veterans in Phoenix, on Wednesday said they were shocked to learn that rumblings about the City of Phoenix having an issue with the camp weren't just rumors.

The camp, which sits on an empty lot near 15th Avenue and Hatcher, is owned by the same person who owns the building next door.

While he gave the camp the go ahead, City of Phoenix leaders say the mini tent city is violating city code.

"This, literally, has been news to us, as far as the city saying that we are in violation of anything," said Aaron Pomrenke who founded the camp back in October.

Pomrenke previously talked to 12 News about why he started the camp, saying it was a way to give homeless veterans a safe place to sleep while also connecting them with much-needed services.

"If they closed this place, you couldn't ... how could you throw them in the street," a Marine veteran known as Craig asked.

Craig credits the camp and its volunteers with getting him a job and much more.

"I got a safe place," he said. "[I] really do got a safe, warm place for me and my dog."

The city sent the following statement to 12 News about Camp Alpha.

*"We support Camp Alpha's goals of serving the homeless veteran community but it is an obvious code violation to set up a tent encampment in a vacant lot.*

*We have had discussion with the camp organizers.*

*The city does not have a building to move their operation in to.*

*Hopefully we can develop a plan for a solution."*

As of yet, the city has not issued a date for removal.

"We're trying to do good here," said Tori Sydo, a volunteer who's also married to a veteran. "We're not trying to march against the city or do anything wrong."

She and other volunteers are hopeful the city will work with them to find a permanent solution.

"Help us help them," Sydo said. "Tell us what you want us to do and give us a better solution, if you have one."

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**3.3 - The Coast News: [Oceanside accepts vouchers to help homeless veterans](#)** (10 December, Promise Yee, 20k vom; Encinitas, CA)

City Council accepted 40 housing vouchers to help chronically homeless veterans on Dec. 2.

The city received word of the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers award in April. Thirty-four of the vouchers have already been put to use.

Angela Hanifin, city housing program manager, said 28 veterans who were receiving HUD assistance were switched to the VASH program, which includes support services.

Eight more were referred to city housing by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and provided with vouchers.

Hanifin said the city has four additional VASH vouchers to award, and a long waiting list.

“We’ll be using all of them in the next month or two,” Hanifin said. “We’re asking the VA to stop sending referrals.”

Veterans in the VASH program are classified by the VA as chronically homeless.

Most are single males. Some have health issues and need continued assistance. Others flourish under the program, and become financially self-sufficient.

The VASH program provides partial rent payments and a case management worker to council veterans to self-sufficiency.

“The average client needs two years of supportive services,” Hanifin said. “Others (elderly and disabled) need support services for the rest of their lives.”

Hanifin said the VASH program also assures landlords that veterans have someone to fall back on.

“They have someone to call when something goes wrong and they need supportive services,” Hanifin said.

Hanifin said a tight rental market has created challenges, but so far veterans in the program have been successfully housed.

VASH vouchers are reissued annually. The city is seeking additional vouchers next year.

Veterans must have an honorable discharge to be part of the VASH program. Hanifin said veterans who do not qualify can receive HUD assistance.

The city has already set aside 30 of its regular HUD vouchers to house the chronically homeless. Six of those vouchers were awarded to veterans who did not qualify for VASH.

The Regional Task Force on Homeless 2015 annual homeless count reported Oceanside has 49 unsheltered homeless veterans and San Diego County has 631. The count did not include the number of veterans in temporary shelters.

The national goal is to end veteran homelessness.

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

**5.1 - Land Line:** [Law aims to improve medical exam access for veterans](#) (10 December, Mark Schremmer, 1.7M online visitors/mo; Grain Valley, MO)

A section of Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act allows qualified Veterans Administration physicians to conduct commercial motor vehicle medical exams on veterans.

The five-year FAST Act was signed into law by President Barack Obama on Dec. 4. The bipartisan legislation passed the U.S. House of Representatives on Dec. 3 by a vote of 359-65 and the Senate later that same day by a vote of 83-16. The 1,300-page legislation authorizes federal surface programs through fiscal year 2020, providing \$305 billion for roads, bridges and mass transit.

Section 5403 of FAST Act allows qualified VA physicians to perform medical examinations and provide a medical certificate to U.S. military veterans in the trucking industry.

"With so many of our veterans ready and eager to get back to work or transition into the civilian workforce, the last thing the federal government should be doing is making it more difficult for them to do so," said Rep. Rob Woodall, R-Ga., who introduced the legislation along with Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn.

"Forcing a veteran off the rolls of the VA doctor who knows them best simply because the doctor has not completed a separate, costly federal approval process does not make sense, nor does it promote public safety. Preventing fraud on medical exams is an important goal, and we can do so without adding new federal roadblocks to employment for the men and women in uniform who have served our nation honorably," Woodall said.

The provision seeks to maintain the doctor-patient relationships that veterans have with their VA physicians and to prevent veterans from having to undergo costly exams from unfamiliar medical providers.

The Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association supports the law.

"We know that many veterans receive a very high level of training in the military, making them perfectly suited to enter the trucking industry," OOIDA Director of Government Affairs Laura O'Neill-Kaumo told Land Line when the legislation was first proposed in October.

"We need to do all we can to encourage veterans to enter and stay in the profession, not discourage them. The process of finding approved medical professionals across the board is becoming increasingly difficult, so changing the process to help veterans –those already in the trucking industry and those wanting to start a new career driving a truck – makes complete sense." - See more at: <http://www.landlinemag.com/Story.aspx?StoryID=30245#.Vmo92EorJhE>

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## 7. Other

**7.1 - Des Moines Register:** [Marco Rubio calls for improving veteran care](#) (10 December, Mackenzie Ryan, 3.3M online visitors/mo; Des Moines, IA)

Marco Rubio called for improving the Veterans Administration through accountability, transparency and expanded health care choices Thursday, saying benefits should "follow" the veteran similar to how tuition benefits in the GI Bill follow students.

Current VA services would continue, Rubio said, but veterans need choices when it comes to health care.

“Veterans facing health problems of all kinds, including mental health issues, need to have the option to seek care from private providers in a way that also preserves traditional VA services,” he said at a West Des Moines event.

VA employees who are corrupt or negligent must be fired, and the system should publicly report metrics such as timeliness and cost-effectiveness of patient care, which would give insight into where it should improve, Rubio said.

The focus on veterans’ issues may help differentiate Rubio from Republican front-runner Donald Trump, as well as Texas senator Ted Cruz, who secured a coveted endorsement Thursday by Iowa evangelical leader Bob Vander Plaats, political watchers said.

“Right now, the conversation in Iowa is about Ted Cruz and Donald Trump,” said Chris Larimer, a political science professor at the University of Northern Iowa. “If (Rubio's) talking about immigration, it turns into a conversation about what Donald Trump is saying. Veterans benefits may be a safer or calmer issue to discuss.”

Rubio is sitting in fourth place in Iowa, according to a rolling average of polls, behind Trump, Cruz, and Ben Carson. In order to snag one of the coveted three tickets out of Iowa — meaning, if he wants to place in the top three on caucus night, Feb. 1 — he will need to differentiate himself from the field, Larimer said.

But some fear that Rubio’s proposals might chip away at and ultimately undermine the current VA system.

Danny Homan, the vice chair of the Iowa Democratic Party, said Rubio’s plan “would dismantle” a system that has developed specialized care for the often complex health needs of veterans.

The expertise gained by the VA system allowed doctors and other health experts to see and understand the relationship between Agent Orange and certain cancers, for example, which may not have otherwise been spotted.

John Derner, the American Legion’s Iowa adjutant, said reforms are needed but warned of taking them too far.

“It makes more sense to fix the VA Health System,” said Derner, explaining that a new choice option allows veterans to seek a different provider if wait times are longer than a month.

But veteran Shawn Christensen said he wants more private health care options. After sustaining a back injury while training with the Army in Texas, it took Christensen more than four years to win approval to see a specialist in Des Moines.

“You can’t imagine the red tape,” said his 75-year-old mother, Maxine Christensen.

And while many agreed that additional accountability is needed, veteran Daniel Gannon, who sits on the Iowa Commission of Veterans Affairs, said the state’s VA hospitals do an “outstanding” job.

“I think they do a very good job of holding people accountable,” said Gannon, explaining that Iowa’s hospitals regularly report operating statistics, such as wait times, to the commission. But he added: “I think nationwide, we do have issues. And that needs to be fixed.”

At the event, Rubio introduced his older brother, Mario, who served in the Army Green Berets before the Florida senator was born.

The candidate detailed his brother’s struggle to receive orthodontic care through the VA after he was hit in the mouth during jump school, bending his front teeth backwards. Despite being seen by a dentist at Fort Benning at the time, the Army did not record the visit – making follow-up care difficult.

Rubio recounted how his brother has been through the same experience as other veterans: Filing a benefits claim and waiting for a hearing, a process that can take up to three years.

“He’s often met with the same charm and efficiency at the VA that the rest of us find at the DMV,” Rubio quipped.

#### ABOUT THE EVENTS:

**SETTING:** An event room in West Des Moines, the Maintenance Shop in the Iowa State student union in Ames, and the Mediacom Outdoor Club in Iowa City.

**CROWD:** More than 100 in West Des Moines at an event held by the Concerned Veterans for America, and more than 200 in Ames, including mostly students, plus an overflow room of 50 people.

**REACTION:** The West Des Moines audience was friendly and gave Rubio a standing ovation as he concluded his remarks about veterans.

**WHAT’S NEXT:** Rubio will return to Iowa on Wednesday, his first campaign stop after the next GOP debate.

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**7.2 - Washington Examiner:** [Rubio campaigns with brother, touts VA reform](#) (10 December, Al Weaver, 2.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio was joined on the campaign trail Thursday by his brother Mario, a veteran, as the 2016 hopeful gave a speech on reforming the Department of Veterans Affairs.

During his speech before a town hall in Des Moines, Iowa, Rubio spoke at length about his brother before diving into his proposed reforms, which center around renewed accountability and choice in health care.

From the outset, Rubio touched on the age difference between the two, with Mario being 21 years his elder. Rubio told the crowd that Mario, 65, drove his mother to the hospital when he was born.

"Yes, he's that much older than me," Rubio said laughing, deviating slightly from his prepared remarks before explaining his brother's situation. Mario served in the Army from 1968 to 1971 upon his graduation from high school.

"Like many thousands of other veterans, Mario is struggling to get the care owed to him for an injury he suffered during his service," Rubio said, according to prepared remarks. "He was hit in the mouth while in jump school, bending his front teeth back in a way that became an orthodontic nightmare. He was driven to the dentist at Fort Benning where they did some initial work to correct the damage, but the Army never made an official record of the visit."

"Today, he needs more orthodontic work as a result of his injury, but the VA won't cover it. He's had to file a claim and wait for a hearing, which could take anywhere from 18 months to three years. Meanwhile, he's stuck waiting for the procedures he needs," Rubio explained, adding that his brother is "going through the exact same bureaucratic nightmare" other veterans have dealt with.

Rubio argued for more public oversight of the VA and the ability to fire "negligent" workers.

The Florida senator, who is third in the Washington Examiner's presidential power rankings, also pushed for increased choice to make it easier for veterans to get care from private providers.

This was Mario Rubio's first campaign trail appearance with his brother.

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**7.3 - Washington Examiner: [How the VA became a 2016 campaign issue](#)** (11 December, Sarah Westwood, 2.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Reforming the Department of Veterans Affairs has transitioned from a cause promoted mostly by advocacy groups to one routinely debated on the campaign trail.

From Hillary Clinton to Marco Rubio, candidates on either side of the aisle have weighed in on ways to fix the broken VA, injecting mainstream politics into a discussion once dominated by bureaucratic noise.

Rubio became the latest presidential hopeful to offer a solution for the VA's backlogged system by proposing to increase veterans' access to care in the private sector during a speech in Iowa Thursday.

It's a suggestion popular among Republican candidates who have used years of recent problems at the VA as another avenue to attack President Obama and, by extension, whichever Democrat aspires to replace him.

Clinton played right into that narrative in late October, when she said during an interview that the scandal involving manipulated VA wait times, among other controversies, has "not been as widespread as it has been made out to be" by Republicans.

But faced with a public backlash and overwhelming evidence that the VA suffers from corruption and an inability to handle growing demand, the Democratic front-runner was forced to backtrack and put forward her own plan to reform the agency.

Clinton's prescription for the VA centered around the same basic idea suggested by most of her Republican rivals: expanding veterans' private health care choices.

She also called for a "zero tolerance" policy for VA employees who abuse the system, such as the officials who created secret patient waiting lists at 110 facilities around the country to conceal delays in care.

Jeb Bush captured the momentum behind VA reform in his own official plan when he said the VA's problems "have brought to light the failed leadership of the Obama Administration" on veterans.

While Bush's plan also called for expanded veterans' choice, Clinton has attempted to characterize that policy, when it comes from a Republican, as an effort to "privatize" the VA.

Ben Carson's proposal to eliminate the VA ruffled veterans' groups who thought the plan went too far, but for the most part, Republicans have been in near lockstep in their criticism of the agency.

Carly Fiorina slammed sitting politicians' silence on the VA's failures during a New Hampshire townhall. Ted Cruz pushed veterans' choice on a bus tour in Oklahoma.

Republicans have accused Democrats of attempting to shield a failed status quo.

For example, when Rubio brought up a bill to give VA leadership the ability to fire any employee for misconduct, Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal blocked it because, like other Democrats and the White House, he said it would be unfair to the VA employees.

The VA has weathered intense criticism for its lack of accountability. In the wake of the national wait time scandal that contributed to the deaths of dozens of veterans, only three officials were ever fired.

A top VA official admitted last month that it is nearly impossible to fire an agency employee for any reason.

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**7.4 - Washington Examiner: [Veterans officials don't know what 'accountability' means](#)** (11 December, 2.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

It seems like only yesterday that some people were holding up the Veterans Administration as a shining example of how well government can do health care. Today, the agency has become a symbol of everything wrong with government.

Rather than keeping the promises made to returning veterans, the self-centered bureaucracy of the VA has been caught sandbagging their applications for disability benefits. It has been caught using secret waiting lists to hide the poor performance of its health care system, so its employees could make veterans wait for care without losing bonuses. It has been caught retaliating against whistleblowers on many occasions, and obstructing congressional investigations into all of this wrongdoing.

One manager even tried to spy on congressional investigators when they arrived at her facility to look into allegations of data falsification and whistleblower retaliation. She instructed her subordinates not to cooperate with them.

Despite documented cases of top officials participating in massive deceptions and coverups, and of further misdeeds that amount to cheating the taxpayer, the VA has failed to hold its managers and employees accountable. As of the last available count, fewer than two dozen people had been fired for what amounted to a pervasive, systemic act of evil against veterans at more than 100 different VA facilities. Why is this? Perhaps it is because senior officials don't even know what the word "accountability" actually means. And we mean that literally; they apparently don't know or understand its dictionary definition.

On Wednesday, VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson opened his testimony before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs with a combative statement, asserting in effect that his agency is being unfairly persecuted. He lectured the members of Congress whose investigations his agency has stymied, for wrongly applying the word "accountability."

"It seems the term 'accountability' has taken on a new meaning," said Gibson. "Instead of the dictionary definition — 'providing a record or explanation of one's conduct' — the term has become shorthand for firing people."

This drew a scathing response from Chairman Jeff Miller, R-Fla., and not just because it is the wrong definition to cite in this context. Our Merriam-Webster, like Miller's, defines "accountability" as "an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's action."

It is a truism that democratic government is representative and responsible. Representative means it acts on behalf of the people. Responsible, by definition, means that the people can throw the bums out. And that applies not just to elected leaders but to officials, too.

A willingness to take responsibility is a willingness to lose one's job if one fails. And Veterans Administration officials have demonstrably failed.

The idea of accepting responsibility for one's behavior, as least in the everyday sense of the phrase that even children understand, implies a willingness to accept punishment for wrongdoing. And there is no appropriate penalty other than firing for the hundreds or thousands of VA employees who continue to show willful, callous bureaucratic indifference toward the very veterans who are the sole reason for their agency's existence.

"You can't fire your way to excellence," said Gibson glibly. Actually you can. And we should. Perhaps Gibson would be a good place to start.

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**7.5 - Government Executive: [VA Deputy Says Administrative Leave For Employees Will Be Exception, Not Rule](#)** (9 December, Kellie Lunney, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Veterans Affairs deputy secretary on Wednesday said the department would stop "routinely" putting employees under investigation on administrative leave, instead giving them other job duties while the disciplinary process plays out.

During a tense and at times combative hearing on Capitol Hill, Sloan Gibson told the House Veterans' Affairs Committee that administrative leave would be used sparingly going forward for employees under investigation. Except for cases involving "egregious" behavior, most employees under investigation will simply be given another work assignment while they await their fate during a disciplinary review, Gibson said.

The VA, as well other federal agencies, has been criticized for allowing employees accused of misconduct, poor performance and even crimes, to stay on paid administrative leave for months, sometimes years. The House VA Committee has been asking the department for information related to employees on administrative leave since July 2014.

The Government Accountability Office found that VA had put 6,000 employees, or 2 percent of its workforce, on administrative leave for one to six months from 2010 to 2013. In fiscal 2014, the VA outspent all other agencies surveyed with respect to employees on administrative leave for a month or more, auditors found. A sample of 18 federal agencies spent more than \$80 million in 2014 for some employees to not work for at least one month, according to a recent GAO report.

Gibson also defended his decision to demote and reassign rather than fire two senior executives whom the department's watchdog concluded used their positions of authority for personal gain. The evidence against Diana Rubens and Kimberly Graves did not warrant firing, or the IG's criminal referral to the Justice Department, Gibson argued.

"I'm not going to recommend, I'm not going to propose a disciplinary action that is based upon media coverage, or an opinion that is expressed in the IG report, if it is not supported by the evidence," he said, adding that he knew his decision not to fire Rubens and Graves wasn't going to "sit well, with virtually everybody." The deputy secretary also said the department will no longer wait for the IG to complete its investigations -- which often can take several months -- before moving ahead with its own review and proposed disciplinary actions against employees, including removals. "We knew there was an issue with the relocation expenses months before the IG released a report," Gibson said, referring to the matter related to Rubens and Graves. "We're not going to wait anymore."

In a statement to the committee, the VA IG office said it "took exception to the inference that we based the subject report on 'unsworn hearsay conclusions.' All interviews conducted during the work on this report were sworn and taped interviews conducted by experienced senior OIG staff."

The department's watchdog in September concluded that Rubens, who was director of VBA's Philadelphia regional office, and Graves, who led VBA's St. Paul regional office, improperly helped create vacancies at their respective offices and volunteered to fill them. The two employees occupying those jobs at the time -- Antione Waller and Robert McKenrick -- were relocated to jobs (in Baltimore and Los Angeles, respectively) they did not volunteer for to make room for Rubens and Graves, who were working elsewhere at the time, according to the watchdog. VA paid roughly \$274,000 in relocation expenses for Rubens, and about \$129,000 for Graves, for a total of more than \$400,000.

After announcing their demotions in late November, VA then bungled the disciplinary process for Rubens and Graves because of an administrative error, delaying their punishment -- a misstep lawmakers repeatedly highlighted. "I find it ironic that you personally sent me two letters admonishing me for potentially damaging their cases against Ms. Graves and Ms. Rubens if I proceeded with our hearings in October, yet in the end, their cases were damaged due to the inability of VA's lawyers to simply keep track of critical evidence," said House VA Committee Chairman Jeff Miller, R-Fla., during Wednesday's hearing.

Gibson said that he hopes VBA employees understand that the department is "committed to holding senior leaders accountable for their behavior, but that we are also committed to doing what is supported by the evidence." The deputy secretary said he and VA Secretary Bob McDonald believe in "sustainable accountability," essentially performance-based management that results in "positive veteran outcomes." He emphasized that organizations cannot "fire their way to excellence."

Miller took issue with the tone of Gibson's opening statement, saying it reflected a "passive criticism" of the panel's efforts at oversight and reform. "I think your statement is pretty damn inconsistent," Miller said, criticizing VA for its "continued and pervasive failure to seriously discipline its employees" and its "ineptness" in handling the matter involving Rubens and Graves.

Miller later apologized for his profanity after Ranking Member Corrine Brown, D-Fla., took issue with it; he asked the record to be altered to say "dang" instead of "damn."

The chairman, and other members, however, were clearly frustrated with what they consider the VA's glacial pace in changing an entrenched bureaucracy and decades of mismanagement, as well as their efforts to root out bad employees.

"I think you are doing the best you can do, Secretary McDonald is doing the best that he can do, but you're both placeholders," said Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Colo., whose district is home to a delayed, over-budget and much-maligned VA facility construction project. "And you don't have the authority from the White House, you don't have the support from the president, to make the kind of changes that need to be made. ... This agency in the federal government was in crisis when you came in; it will be in crisis when you leave."

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**7.6 - Government Executive: [Federal Paper Pushing Costs Taxpayers Millions](#)** (10 December, Charles S. Clark, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The federal government is the nation's largest disburser—\$600 billion a year in checks go out to suppliers from civilian agencies alone, according to the Treasury Department.

So it may surprise some in this digital age that only 38 percent of the 19 million invoices filed by agencies in fiscal 2013 were submitted electronically. That left a pile of 12 million supplier invoices on old-fashioned paper, costing taxpayers an estimated \$230 million yearly to process.

But if government paymasters feel stuck in the paper era, help is on the way.

The cavalry charge is led by John B. Hill, the assistant commissioner for payment management at Treasury's Bureau of the Fiscal Service and the government's chief disbursement officer. It falls to him to ride herd on agencies implementing the Office of Management and Budget July 2015 memo outlining the shift to electronic invoicing, which he calls the "magna carta."

"The next generation of digitization is invoicing, the next chapter in a series on the government's squeezing out paper checks," Hill told Government Executive in his office lined with photographs showcasing Treasury's technological progress. "Think of all the innovations in online banking and bill-paying—it all came from a movement in government."

Electronic invoicing has given private companies real visibility into where their money is, something they care about a lot, noted Hill, a veteran of other Treasury accounting jobs, the Troubled Asset Relief Program, and the private information technology firm Computech.

Electronic invoicing is faster, saves money, boosts quality, reduces errors and improves customer relations. It's a pitch Hill makes to agencies across government—whether he's invited or not.

### Pockets of Resistance

Suppliers are pressuring agencies to make the switch. "When the government buys desktop computers from IBM or Dell, that can mean a paper invoice gets sent to 100 different agencies, when they could do it all in one single portal and format," Hill said.

Treasury itself, which, like the Defense Department is an early adapter of electronic invoicing, has used it to cut costs by about 50 percent in the last two years. Pentagon disbursers, in a program called Wide Area Workflow, have topped 90 percent of invoices done electronically, with the holdouts coming from classified projects.

Overall, 16 of the 24 agencies subject to the 1990 Chief Financial Officer Act have committed to switching to electronic invoicing, and the Obama administration's goal is full implementation by 2018. The agencies have watched as 95,000 of their suppliers have adopted it, 30,000 of them with contracts to a Cabinet-level agency.

The conversions are egged on by accounting experts and contractors. "E-invoicing is the way of the future in the public sector, and has been used in the private sector for several years, said Ann M. Ebberts, CEO of the Association of Government Accountants. "The question now is, do agencies each establish their own e-invoicing capabilities or do we continue to expand shared services to include e-invoicing? It's just good business to support a standardized, electronic, repeatable process—one that streamlines and automates not just for the sake of automation but

that can reduce the error rate and number of manual processes,” she added. “And if it speeds up payments, that’s better for everyone.”

Alan Chvotkin, executive vice president and counsel at the Professional Services Council, says his contractor members and his association are “strong proponents of the Treasury model,” having helped design the form of shared services for civilian agencies’ vendor processes. “But the challenge is you can’t have multiple versions. You need a common set of standards for invoicing and for the identification payment issue, and government is still researching those standards,” Chvotkin said. “It’s like the old Betamax versus VHS. They’re not identical and they have to be able to talk to one another.”

What resistance agencies do put up, Hill said, reflects the complexity of invoices relative to single electronic payments, which contain a relatively small number of data fields. “Invoice payments require a lot more work because they can be complex documents, with legal texts,” he said. “It’s an elaborate process in agencies in which they acknowledge received goods, then the accountants say yes, there is money in the account so to pay it and use this account. These are checks and balances.” To modernize the information technology, agencies need to invest \$100,000 to \$200,000 at a time when funds are tight.

But the agencies that he and two colleagues have been visiting since 2012 are “very receptive and want to do it,” he said. “They just have other priorities.”

Hill, who refers to his job as “the government’s chief check writer,” said the government’s pace in adopting electronic invoicing is actually rapid “compared to 50 years ago.”

Through automation and, later, software, the department converted 95 percent of such regular government payments as Social Security and veterans benefits from paper to electronic processing. In the 1950s, Treasury had 2,300 people printing checks at 22 locations, producing about 1 million checks during a single eight-hour shift. “1976 was the high-water mark, when we produced 700 million paper checks a year,” Hill said. Now, Treasury sends out more than a billion payments a year from plants in Philadelphia and Kansas City, Mo.

How did that change unfold?

“Electronic payments started right here in this office,” Hill said, pointing to a photo of his predecessor in the mid-1970s named Lester Plumly. He and colleagues realized that once the baby-boomer generation began to retire, the government would not be able to handle that many paper checks. So Plumly persuaded the Air Force payroll staff to begin a pilot in what would soon be known as electronic funds transfer.

Back then, procedures required that computer tapes be delivered to the Federal Reserve banks, prompting a joke that EFT actually stood for “extra fast trucks.” The experiment was a success, and with the subsequent digital revolution, Congress passed the 1995 Debt Collection Improvement Act, with the earliest electronic banking mandates that would set the stage for electronic benefits payments.

“There was a social aspect,” Hill said, recalling how elderly people made a ritual of collecting their monthly Social Security checks. By 2008, by which time debit cards with privacy protections were commonplace, it was noticed that as many as 5 million Americans were “unbanked,” many because they were homeless. A pilot was launched, and by 2010 Treasury regulators phased in an option for beneficiaries to collect their recurring benefits such as Social

Security or veterans payments or federal retirement using a fully protected bank prepaid debit card, Hill noted. "All of a sudden they're in the banking system, and from a social policy point of view, this has pulled more people into the banking system than any other federal program."

That becomes especially useful during disasters such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when government checks were frozen, Hill said.

It costs the government \$1 to process a paper check versus 10 cents to process funds electronically, Hill said. Since 2013, Treasury has been on course to save \$1 billion over 10 years.

Electronic invoicing in private-sector business-to-business transactions is almost entirely automated, and 50 governments in Europe and elsewhere have implemented it, many to help perform the accounting for their value added tax, Hill said.

"The external forces and the technology have matured, and businesses have worked the bugs out," Hill said. He predicted that most agencies will beat the 2018 deadline: The OMB mandate "confirmed what we already knew because the benefits sell themselves."

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**7.7 - KCCI-TV (CBS-8, Video): [Rubio holds town hall meeting on veterans issues in Iowa](#)** (10 December, Cynthia Fodor, 530k online visitors/mo; Des Moines, IA)

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio held a town hall meeting with Concerned Veterans for America in West Des Moines Thursday.

Close to 100 people showed up to hear how Rubio would fight to help veterans.

He said the VA needs more accountability and transparency and said veterans need to have choices about where they can use their benefits.

Rubio also spoke about ISIS, saying we are now at war.

Rubio has events scheduled Thursday in Ames for a Meet and Greet at Iowa State University at the Memorial Union at 12:15 p.m. and then onto Iowa City.

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**7.8 - DVIDS: [Soldiers spread holiday cheer at VA Hospital](#)** (10 December, Sgt. Joshua Laidacker, 518k online visitors/mo; Atlanta, GA)

Soldiers of 3rd Infantry Division made a short trip from Fort Stewart, Ga., to Carl Vinson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Dublin, Ga., to spread holiday cheer, Dec. 9, 2015.

Soldiers of 3rd ID visited Veterans in the hospital and extended invitations to a concert held on campus by the 3rd ID Band, also known as Rhythm of the Marne.

“Today was about reaching out to our veterans that are living in the veterans’ hospital, don’t have a lot of family, unable to get out and be a part of the community that we are in now, and just spreading that holiday spirit for them,” said Master Sgt. Jason Hunt, a senior signal intelligence analyst and noncommissioned officer in charge of brigade intelligence operations with 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd ID.

Soldiers who made the trip said the welcome was enthusiastic.

“I spoke with one veteran that actually broke down crying the moment we opened her door,” said Staff Sgt. Trevor Tapper, an electronic warfare specialist with 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, 2nd IBCT. “She was Air Force and she was really surprised we took time out of our own busy schedule to come spend time with her today. The invitation to see a concert and be our guest, I do believe, was overwhelming for her.”

Each Soldier spent time with different veterans in the hospital, so each one heard unique stories. Hunt recounted a story from an infantryman who served in World War II, arriving on Normandy Beach the day after the initial invasion. Tapper said the connection of service allows veterans to share stories like these easier.

“I don’t believe anyone understands the struggles of a veteran unless you are one,” Tapper said.

After visitations, the Soldiers and veterans gathered in an auditorium for the concert, which featured holiday music in varied styles.

Soldiers noticed that the veterans seemed just as pleased with the auditory entertainment.

“I love it, the smile on their faces and they were singing and rocking,” Tapper said with a wide smile. “It was worth everything. Priceless, really priceless.”

“The vets really appreciated it,” Hunt said. “The guys were dancing, boppin’ along and singing the songs.”

The band’s final number was a medley of each service’s song, so all veterans could be recognized. Many of them stood and sang proudly.

“It was nice to see those veterans, after so many years and years out of the service, that it’s still in their heart, it’s still in their blood,” Hunt said.

Both Hunt and Tapper said after the day’s events that they would encourage all Soldiers to participate in outreach to veterans.

“We have to continue to show respect for our seniors, for the guys who really have paved the way and set the stones for us to walk on,” Hunt said. “Every time we have an opportunity to reach out and give back, I think we need to take it.”

“Just like we don’t forget our fallen, we cannot forget those that are still living because they also paid a price,” Tapper said. “Doing that would not only continue to bring honor and credit to our organizations, but also to our values as Soldiers and what we continue to live every day.”

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**7.9 - WHO-TV (NBC-13): [Rubio Pushes Back at Critics: Says G.I. Bill Proof Veterans To Benefit Under His Idea](#)** (10 December, Dave Price, 363k online visitors/mo; Des Moines, IA)

Military veterans can use government educational benefits at community colleges or the universities of their choice. So why shouldn't veterans be able to do something similar with their health care coverage? That was the argument Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio, a Florida Senator, made before several dozen military veterans and their families Thursday morning in West Des Moines.

Rubio spoke at an event hosted by Concerned Veterans for America. Rubio has faced criticism from Democrats for saying he wants to "privatize veterans care." Rubio said he doesn't want to end government's involvement in providing care to veterans in the Veterans Administration system, but rather he wants veterans to have the option of getting care at private facilities.

He said that would help veterans, who either can't find the services they need at the government-run facility, or don't have a facility nearby. Rubio said, "Why should you not be able to take that benefit? Who does the benefit belong to? Does the benefit belong to the government or does the benefit belong to the veteran?"

Yesterday, Iowa Democrats sent out a pre-emptive strike at Rubio's visit. "Like the entire GOP presidential field, Marco Rubio's plans for our country's veterans are backwards and out-of-touch," said Danny Homan, union leader and Vice Chair of the Iowa Democratic Party.

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**7.10 - Quad-City Times: [Rubio lays out VA reform, military spending in Iowa stop](#)** (10 December, Erin Murphy, 253k online visitors/mo; Davenport, IA)

Marco Rubio pushed for a stronger U.S. military and significant reforms in the country's veterans health care system during a campaign stop Thursday in Iowa.

Speaking at an events center in this Des Moines suburb, Rubio, a Republican candidate for president and U.S. senator from Florida, called for an end to the military's portion of across-the-board spending cuts to the federal government and said the veterans health care system needs more accountability, transparency and consumer choice.

"To restore strength, I will reverse the defense cuts that politicians in Washington, including some Republicans now running for president, have fought to keep and even deepen," Rubio said. "The military will no longer be used as a pawn in budget negotiations."

Rubio framed his positions as a contrast to other Republican presidential candidates who have advocated for less military spending and foreign military intervention, in particular Sen. Ted Cruz, who like Rubio has been surging in recent polls on the race in Iowa.

“At the end of the day on these (national security) issues that we face in this campaign, in each instance which Sen. Cruz — and others, not just him — have been given a choice between neo-isolationism or the defense of our country, he’s chosen neo-isolationism,” Rubio said. “Whether it’s weakening our intelligence-gathering capabilities or voting against the defense bills or voting for a budget that substantially reduces our defense spending.”

Rubio said he can advocate for more defense spending without eschewing the GOP’s tenet of fiscal responsibility.

“I don’t believe they’re in conflict. I think it’s an issue of prioritization,” Rubio said. “As I’ve said repeatedly, I think the most important priority of the federal government should be national defense. And we should fully fund our defense needs before we do anything else.”

Rubio said that the federal government has gotten involved in areas, such as K-through-12 education, that are better left to the states and that the primary drivers of the national debt are programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

As for the veterans health care system, Rubio said more poor-performing workers must be fired, the agency must be more transparent, and veterans should be allowed the option of receiving their care at hospitals outside the Veterans Affairs system.

Rubio talked about his older brother Mario, a U.S. Army veteran who he said has had difficulty getting VA services for an orthodontic injury he suffered during his service.

“Mario is going through the exact same bureaucratic nightmare every other veteran in his situation has to go through,” Rubio said.

The event was hosted by Concerned Veterans for America, a conservative advocacy group with funding ties to the Kansas billionaire industrialist Koch brothers.

Pete Hegseth, CEO of the group and a veteran of the conflicts Iraq and Afghanistan, moderated a question-and-answer session with the audience, and the group issued a news release lauding Rubio’s reform plans for veterans health care.

Rubio’s plans also drew some critics.

On a conference call hosted by the Democratic National Committee, Iowa Democratic Party Vice Chairman Danny Homan said veterans are best served by the VA network.

“Iowa veterans rely on the specialized care provided by the VA to meet their oftentimes complex health needs,” Homan said. “But the plan that Marco Rubio supports to privatize the VA wouldn’t reform the system, it would dismantle it.”

While Rubio fielded questions from reporters following his national security speech, Cruz was receiving the endorsement of Iowa social and evangelical conservative leader Bob Vander Plaats.

Rubio, who was among the GOP candidates who sought Vander Plaats’ endorsement, shrugged off the news.

“We’re not going to drop out of the race. We’re going to continue to work hard,” Rubio said. “Obviously, Bob is someone we admire and respect, and we’d love to have their endorsement, but we want to get help from as many groups as possible, certainly those that share our values.”

At a second event, in an all-ages night club in Iowa State University’s Memorial Union, Rubio spoke to 100 students about the economy and college education. Despite making remarks to students of the four-year, public research university, Rubio stuck to his campaign stump speech of advocating for more students in vocational education to prepare workers for what he said are “some of the best jobs of the 21st century.”

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**7.11 - Task & Purpose: [VA Nurse’s Aide Is Still Employed Despite Manslaughter Charges, After allegedly beating a 70-year-old veteran to death, a Louisiana nurse’s aid is still on the VA’s payroll](#)** (10 December, Sarah Sicard, 102k online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

Fredrick Harris, a nurse’s aide is still working at the Veterans Affairs Department hospital in Alexandria, Louisiana, despite charges that he beat 70-year-old veteran Charles Lee Johnson to death in 2013.

Though Francis Brian, Jr., the local coroner, found that Johnson had died of blunt force trauma, an internal VA investigation found his death to be accidental, according to The Daily Caller.

In treating this as an accidental death as a result of a fight between Harris and Johnson, the VA gave Harris paid-time-off to recover. Meanwhile, Johnson was moved to a nursing home where he died from his injuries a few weeks after.

VA officials had no intention to punish Harris after it obtained its own ruling. Brian, however, turned the case over to the inspector general after discovering the blunt force trauma. The pending manslaughter charge resulted from a separate investigation from the IG’s office and local prosecutors.

As a result, Harris was arrested on Dec. 10, 2013, and held on \$250,000 bond. Once charged with manslaughter instead of murder, his bail was reduced to \$10,000. He was released after paying the fee on Dec. 17, 2013. He resumed work in April.

“After the incident, the employee was treated for his injuries and was sent home to recover and returned to work in a non-patient area on March 19, 2013. On April 5, 2013, he returned to patient care since the internal investigation did not find negligence on the employee’s part,” VA spokesman Randall Noller told The Daily Caller.

The VA has continued to employ Harris at the same hospital, and he will be paid for his work there until the scheduled date of his trial in March 2016.

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**7.12 - The Huron County View: [Lutz VA Director to depart](#)** (10 December, 46k online visitors/mo; Bad Axe, MI)

Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center Director Peggy Kearns has been appointed Director of Southern Nevada Healthcare System in Las Vegas. Kearns will depart to pursue her new role effective Dec. 27.

There, Kearns will oversee operations to provide care to more than 54,000 Veterans with a VA staff of nearly 2,200 and oversee a budget of more than \$450 million. Kearns has more than 32 years of VA experience and has a Master's Degree in Adult Health Education from Indiana University; and Master's in Organization and Management from Capella University in Minneapolis.

While recruitment efforts for a new Medical Center Director for the Aleda E. Lutz VA Medical Center are underway, Dr. Himanshu Singh, Associate Director from the Ann Arbor VA Healthcare System, will join the Saginaw Team as Acting Medical Center Director.

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