1. Top Stories

1.1 - The Arizona Republic: New director appointed at Phoenix VA hospital. Possible baggage: New director was accused of misleading a congressman about care at her previous VA post (22 November, Dennis Wagner, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)
The Department of Veterans Affairs has named a new boss for its troubled Phoenix medical center, appointing social worker Deborah Amdur to a position that has been through a series of fill-in leaders for the past year. "My No. 1 priority is to regain the trust of the veterans we serve," Amdur said in a telephone interview.

Hyperlink to Above

1.2 - Hartford Courant: Newington Yoga Center Owner Helps Veterans Cope With PTSD (22 November, Christopher Hoffman, 1.3M online visitors/mo; Hartford, CT)
Suzanne Manafort's work with veterans began with words on a page. Seven or eight years ago, the yoga instructor read a local newspaper article on how yoga helped veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. She decided to do her bit and began giving free classes at the Newington Veterans Administration hospital.

Hyperlink to Above

1.3 - Stars and Stripes (The Day): Conn. WWII Cadet Nurse Corps member doubtful group will receive veterans status (22 November, Julia Bergman, 1.2M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)
From 1943 until 1946, Yeznach was a member of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, a federal government program set up during World War II to address the nursing shortage on the home front. The women who served in the civilian group are not recognized as veterans by the federal government.

Hyperlink to Above

1.4 - The Buffalo News: Buffalo VA thanks vets with an early Thanksgiving dinner. Annual tradition aims to boost needy veterans and their families (22 November, Jonathan D. Epstein, 628k online visitors/mo; Buffalo, NY)
Dozens of military veterans young and old turned out for an early Thanksgiving meal at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Buffalo on Sunday, taking advantage of the opportunity for both free food and camaraderie with other former soldiers.

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1.5 - KUOW-FM (NPR-94.9): Guess Who’s Helping Seattle Homeless Veterans? Syrian Refugees (22 November, Liz Jones, 307k online visitors/mo; Seattle, WA)
The debate about resettling Syrian refugees has some people asking, “Why don’t we use that money on homeless veterans instead?” We asked homeless veterans in downtown Seattle what they thought.

Hyperlink to Above
2. Access to Benefits/Care

2.1 - The Washington Examiner: VA ignores problem keeping thousands of combat vets from getting benefits (23 November, Sarah Westwood, 2.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)
Thousands of combat veterans are still waiting to learn if they will receive health care benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs, but the agency is refusing to answer Congress's questions about the backlog.

Hyperlink to Above

2.2 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Elder Law: Veterans - Never Give Up (23 November, Julian Gray and Frank Petrich, 908k online visitors/mo; Pittsburgh, PA)
The Department of Veterans Affairs is a gigantic system with millions enrolled. While there are several “divisions” within the VA, as elder law attorneys, we spend our time assisting elderly veterans and their spouses in obtaining non-service connected disability benefits — otherwise known as “aid and attendance.”

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2.3 - WITI-TV (FOX-6, Video): Veteran makes grand gesture of thanks for Occupational Therapy Day: “For what they did for me” (22 November, Julie Collins, 638k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)
Over the past week, the city of Milwaukee has celebrated Occupational Therapy Day -- and this day came to be, thanks to a veteran at the Milwaukee VA. The Milwaukee VA has been helping veterans since 1869, and Marybeth Krause is one of the occupational therapists who has helped to get veterans back on their feet.

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2.4 - Argus Leader: Letter: VA Medical Center care rises above (22 November, Karen A. Jorgensen, 444k online visitors/mo; Sioux Falls, SD)
Thank you to our local VA hospital for the care my son received this summer -- from immediate surgery and the week he was there, through the months of out-patient care. After the surgery, they were in his room every hour to check on him and also to make sure those of us there with him needed anything.

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2.5 - Peninsula Clarion: VA moves forward with Choice fixes, veterans cite continuing issues (22 November, Megan Pacer, 39k online visitors/mo; Kenai, AK)
The Department of Veterans Affairs in Alaska is working on the second phase of a plan to fix bugs with the program set up by the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, but local veterans say nothing has changed.

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2.6 - Mooresville Tribune: Two days, $697,650 in benefits (22 November, Megan Sprague, 24k online visitors/mo; Mooresville, NC)
Veterans received approximately $697,650 in retroactive benefits over the course of two days, thanks to the help of the Benefits Action Center hosted by the town of Mooresville and the American Legion's Veterans Assistance and Rehabilitation Division.

2.7 - KOIN-TV (CBS-6, Video): KOIN 6 News at 11 (22 November, 23k broadcast viewers; Portland, OR)
This two-minute video reports on a local town hall meeting where Vietnam veterans talked about health problems caused by Agent Orange.

2.8 - News-Gazette: Journey Home enters into contract with Veterans Administration (22 November, Pat Hughes, 8k online visitors/mo; Winchester, IN)
There were a lot of smiles at the Journey Home on Thursday as officials gathered to officially announce the first time ever contract between the veterans homeless shelter and the Veterans Administration.

3. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

3.1 - TribLive (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review): Housing in former parsonage among Indiana County efforts to help homeless veterans (22 November, Debbie Black, 1.7M online visitors/mo; Warrendale, PA)
Bryan Cleveland found his life spiraling downward after he finished a stint in the U.S. Navy from 1986 to 1994. Like many other veterans who face major life changes after serving their country, Cleveland needed help. He found it at Tomorrow’s Hope, a transitional housing and veterans service center in Coalport.

3.2 - KGNS-TV (NBC-8, Video): County officials look to tackle veteran homelessness (23 November, Yocelin Gallardo, 900 online visitors/day; Laredo, TX)
County officials are looking to tackle the issue of veteran homelessness. Veteran homelessness is an issue across the nation, and locally, which has many officials discussing the topic.

4. Ending the Claims Backlog – No coverage

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

6. Women Veterans – No coverage
7. Other

7.1 - The Washington Post (Federal Eye): Even small awards to wayward feds make Uncle Sam look bad (22 November, Joe Davidson, 20.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)
The numbers are penny-ante, but that’s not the point. Bonuses awarded to federal employees who’ve had disciplinary issues present an image problem for Uncle Sam and fuel a narrative that undermines the workforce.

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7.2 - The Washington Post: Balancing American principles and American fears (22 November, Ken Hoagland, 20.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)
Regarding the Nov. 20 editorial “Fanning fear at home”: Many Americans want to do the right thing for Syrian refugees who are, after all, as much victims of our pullout from Iraq as they are of Islamic State violence and President Bashar al-Assad’s persecution. The easy accusation is that Americans who oppose increased immigration are bigots or are gripped with panic.

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7.3 - The Washington Times (AP): Movie to illustrate how golf helps veterans with PTSD (23 November, Brooke Carbo, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)
Cameras were rolling Nov. 16 as more than 80 veterans gathered here for the inaugural Veteran Golfers Association national championship. Led by Hollywood producer Charles Laga and director Giorgio Serafini, a film crew interviewed the competing veterans and gathered the first footage for a documentary on the role competitive golf can play in helping soldiers suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder.

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7.4 - The Washington Times (AP): Veterans on Patrol operates 3 camps to watch over homeless (22 November, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)
Veterans on Patrol is operating camps for homeless individuals in Arizona and expanding outreach in Tucson to other parts of the community. Military-style tents, 24-hour security and free meals are offered to veterans and women who stay at the camp near Tucson’s Santa Rita Park, The Arizona Daily Star reports (http://bit.ly/21bTmGl ).

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7.5 - WGRZ-TV (NBC-2, Video): VA holds Thanksgiving meal for homeless vets (22 November, 956k online visitors/mo; Buffalo, NY)
We’re celebrating Western New York with a holiday event for some local heroes in need. The VA held its 15th annual Thanksgiving dinner for homeless veterans on Sunday. The meal was provided through donations from the community and helped feed around 200 vets.

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7.6 - The Tampa Tribune: Legionnaire’s lingers at Bay Pines but experts say there is little danger (22 November, Howard Altman, 802k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)
Late last year, the bacteria that can cause the potentially fatal Legionnaire’s disease was found in half the sites tested in the mental health treatment building at the Bay Pines VA Medical Center. No patients or staff in the building contracted the disease and tests after cleanup efforts
showed only three of the sites tested positive for Legionella pneumophila, according to records obtained by the Tribune.

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7.7 - Military Times: Combat experience is factor in death penalty cases, experts say (22 November, Patricia Kime, 540k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)
Now a new report from the nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center argues that Muhammad's military experience and mental health condition should have been considered as part of his defense... In a broader context, the report also charges that the veterans on death row in more than 35 states face a legal system that poorly understands the trauma of war and the significant impacts that combat can have on the human psyche.

Hyperlink to Above

7.8 - Daily Hampshire Gazette: Buy a green light bulb in support of veterans (22 November, Trish Duffy, 368k online visitors/mo; Northampton, MA)
It is very heartwarming to see coverage in the paper in appreciation and thanks to our veterans from so many people. I'd like to see these people and others continue their support year-round by supporting the Green Light of Hope (www.greenlightavet.com).

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7.9 - Wicked Local – Wareham: Onset VFW opens doors for early turkey feast to Brockton VA residents, vets, seniors (22 November, Chris Shott, 336k online visitors/mo; Westford, MA)
The Dudley L. Brown Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2846 of Onset is usually a busy place year-round, but reserves a special part of its annual contributions to the community for the Saturday prior to Thanksgiving Day.

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7.10 - Quad-City Times: Clinton hits pocketbook issues in Clinton (22 November, Ed Tibbetts, 253k online visitors/mo; Davenport, IA)
Foreign affairs may be animating much of the 2016 presidential campaign now, but Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton talked about finances for working Americans Sunday and pitched a new tax break here. She also pledged to help with a host of other problems, including college and health care costs.

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7.11 - Reading Eagle: A Little school with a big heart (22 November, 213k online visitors/mo; Reading, PA)
Students at a Catholic school in Bally recently made a big impact on veterans. St. Francis Academy students collected 34 boxes of snacks and personal care items and delivered them to veterans at the Coatesville Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Chester County.

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7.12 - The Times-Tribune: Ogozalek helps fellow disabled vets through architecture (22 November, Josh McAuliffe, 190k online visitors/mo; Scranton, PA)
In his high school yearbook, Eugene M. Ogozalek listed two big post-graduation goals — becoming a Marine, and an architect. Mission accomplished on both counts.

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7.13 - KEYC-TV (CBS/FOX-12, AP, Video): Two Top VA Officials Demoted (22 November, Ashley Hanley, 37k online visitors/mo; Mankato, MN)
The VA says Kimberly Graves in St. Paul and Diana Rubens in Philadelphia have been demoted from senior executives, the highest—rank for career employees, to general workers within the Veterans Benefits Administration.

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7.14 - BizPac Review (Video): Only in Obama's America: VA bans 'Merry Christmas,' along with trees and music (22 November, Carmine Sabia, West Palm Beach, FL)
The Veteran’s administration in Salem, Virginia tried to play the role of Grinch this Christmas but a rabid backlash caused it to backtrack…slightly. Following a letter to employees banning Christmas trees and pro-Christmas speech the facility acquiesced Friday to allow a tree to be erected in the building, WSLS reported.

Hyperlink to Above
1. Top Stories

1.1 - The Arizona Republic: **New director appointed at Phoenix VA hospital. Possible baggage: New director was accused of misleading a congressman about care at her previous VA post** (22 November, Dennis Wagner, 2.6M online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has named a new boss for its troubled Phoenix medical center, appointing social worker Deborah Amdur to a position that has been through a series of fill-in leaders for the past year.

"My No. 1 priority is to regain the trust of the veterans we serve," Amdur said in a telephone interview. "And the way to do that is to deliver high-quality care that is timely."

Amdur previously served as director of the VA hospital in White River Junction, Vt., where she did not escape being caught up in the nationwide scandal over health care for veterans. In April, a newspaper report said she misled a congressman about conditions at her Vermont hospital.

Amdur will replace Glen Grippen, one of several interim directors to oversee the Phoenix hospital since former director Sharon Helman was fired last year amid allegations of wait-time manipulation, whistleblower retaliation and conflicts of interest. The Phoenix VA was the ignition point for a nationwide agency crisis over mismanagement, corruption and delayed care for veterans.

Amdur, who met recently with some members of Arizona's congressional delegation, will oversee a system with about 82,000 enrolled veterans who obtain services at the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center on Indian School Road, as well as several satellite clinics. The medical center has been in constant turmoil, and most of its leadership team has turned over since the VA controversy began 19 months ago.

Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., praised Friday's announcement, which comes just weeks after he and other members of Arizona's congressional delegation urged VA Secretary Robert McDonald to expedite the appointment of a permanent director in Phoenix.

“I am encouraged," said Flake, who met with Amdur earlier this week. "This action was long overdue, but sends the message that steps are being taken to improve accountability and leadership at the Phoenix VA."

Amdur holds a master's degree in social work and has been with the VA for two decades. Before leading the medical center in Vermont, she served as an administrator at national headquarters. Her titles there included chief consultant for the Care Management and Social Work Service, and VA deputy director over the Federal Recovery Coordination Program.

In April, the Washington Examiner reported that McDonald had appointed Amdur to investigate the Tomah, Wis., VA hospital, where opiates were so excessively dispensed that employees referred to the hospital as "Candy Land." The newspaper questioned that assignment. Based on documents it obtained, it reported that a month earlier, Amdur had "misled" Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., after he asked whether doctors at her hospital prescribed drugs that had been recalled.

According to the Examiner, Amdur sent Ayotte a letter denying that the hospital dispensed a recalled medication to a veteran. The Examiner said the hospital covered it up for years.
Amdur declined to discuss details of that incident because it involved patient privacy, but disputed the newspaper’s accusation, saying, "Absolutely not. I would never mislead a member of Congress."

Dan Caldwell, legislative and political director at the conservative Concerned Veterans for America, criticized Amdur’s selection.

"This is a pattern in the Department of Veterans Affairs. When a director gets in trouble at one facility, they just move her to another," Caldwell said. "We saw the same thing with Sharon Helman before she came to Phoenix. ... This hospital had serious issues, and still does. You'd think they would want a quality director there."

Amdur, who will start work next month, acknowledged she is inheriting a health-care system with a troubled history. She described her leadership style as "management by walking around," and said she promotes "a culture of psychological safety" where employees and patients feel free to speak up.

"This is a team effort," Amdur added. "I believe most employees come to work every day to make a difference in the lives of veterans."

1.2 - Hartford Courant: Newington Yoga Center Owner Helps Veterans Cope With PTSD
(22 November, Christopher Hoffman, 1.3M online visitors/mo; Hartford, CT)

Suzanne Manafort’s work with veterans began with words on a page.

Seven or eight years ago, the yoga instructor read a local newspaper article on how yoga helped veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. She decided to do her bit and began giving free classes at the Newington Veterans Administration hospital.

"I was inspired by that and started volunteering my time at the VA," said Manafort, owner of Newington Yoga Center.

Fast forward to today, and Manafort’s single class has grown into an integral part of the Connecticut VA’s PTSD treatment programs. Manafort — whom the VA now pays after she provided free services for years — runs weekly yoga programs at the VA’s West Haven and Newington campuses for veterans with PTSD. She also teaches yoga as part of the VA’s twice-yearly 12-week program for acute PTSD sufferers.

Manafort’s long-standing and deep commitment to helping former servicemen and women cope with the psychological scars of war has led some to call her a hero. It’s a label she dismisses immediately, calling it "embarrassing."

"I don’t feel like a hero," she said. "I feel like I work with heroes. The men and women I work with would stand in front of a bus for you and probably already have. They are the ones doing the work, not me."
Yoga, which originated in ancient India, is a discipline that includes multiple poses with spiritual and meditation components. It has many forms. The type Manafort teaches is Mindful Yoga Therapy. It emphasizes breath control with awareness of movement, meditation and other elements. The aim, Manafort said, is to live in the moment and not dwell on the future or the past.

"It's hard for all people, not just people with post-traumatic stress, to live in this moment, to stop thinking about what's going to happen tomorrow or what happened yesterday," she said. "It's learning to just enjoy this moment."

When used with other treatments, Mindful Yoga is an effective therapy for PTSD, Manafort said.

"It's clear that yoga, when combined with psychotherapy, is an amazing complementary therapy," she said. "[It's] the ability to find focus and quiet and peace for a few moments a day. When the two are combined with each other, it's pretty powerful."

What makes Mindful Yoga so effective in treating PTSD?

"It's really about the central nervous system," she said. "Someone with PTSD has an over-stimulated nervous system, hyper-aroused. [Yoga] helps to alleviate that overwhelming feeling and find a bit of quiet."

Dr. Aysha Saeed, director of integrated services at the VA's Newington campus, confirms that Manafort's yoga instruction has proved effective in treating PTSD. That is in line with studies that suggest the discipline may ease PTSD, she said.

"Our veterans who have been through the program have found it very helpful in managing their symptoms," Saeed said. "For some of them, it has been life-changing."

Manafort has witnessed such life-changing transformations. One Vietnam veteran recently entered the PTSD program taking 26 medications a day, unable to sleep and plagued with personal problems, she said.

After yoga and other therapy, he was able to get off all his medications, sleep and renew his life, Manafort said. He has since become a Mindful Yoga instructor, Manafort says.

"He's sharing what he learned with other veterans. He's pretty incredible," Manafort said, adding that about 15 veterans who have come through her program have gone on to become Instructors.

The yoga classes have the added benefit of bringing together people with PTSD, forming a community, Manafort said.

"It's men and women that are experiencing the same symptoms in their life and all are working to find help," she said. "They understand each other."

Manafort said only about half her students are veterans of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The rest served in Vietnam, she said.

"There's a lot of Vietnam veterans who are finally getting treatment," Manafort said. "They were ignored for a long time. When they retire, they sort of start to notice that they do need help."
Manafort, a Newington native who now lives in Burlington, has been a yoga practitioner for about 20 years and an instructor since 2004. Like her VA students, the married mother of two grown children found that yoga greatly improved her life

"I have a better appreciation for each day," she said. "I find balance in my body and mind."

1.3 - Stars and Stripes (The Day): Conn. WWII Cadet Nurse Corps member doubtful group will receive veterans status

Ledyard — In her wallet, Elizabeth Yeznach, 89, has a picture of herself from more than 70 years ago.

Yeznach is 17 years old in the picture, fresh-faced and smiling. She’s sporting a gray jacket with red epaulets and a matching gray hat — with a silver pin depicting the insignia of the U.S. Public Health Service — sits atop her short, curly hair.

From 1943 until 1946, Yeznach was a member of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, a federal government program set up during World War II to address the nursing shortage on the home front.

The women who served in the civilian group are not recognized as veterans by the federal government.

"At this point, I can't say that I've given up, but at the same time, I can't say that I really expect that anything is going to change," Yeznach said.

The cadet nurses who are still alive are now in their late 80s or older.

"As far as I'm concerned, I don't know how many are left," Yeznach said in a recent interview at her home.

State Sen. Cathy Osten recently presented Yeznach with a proclamation from the Connecticut General Assembly recognizing her service.

During the 2016 legislative session Osten plans to reintroduce a resolution that would recommend to the federal government that cadet nurses be recognized as veterans.

The resolution itself would not change their status.

"It's more than symbolic. It's a respect issue," Osten said by phone recently. "It's a rights issue."

Yeznach and others, Osten said, could be eligible for local property tax exemptions, for example.
In 1943, Congresswoman Frances P. Bolton, a Republican from Ohio, introduced a bill to establish a government program to provide grants to nursing schools to train more nurses to serve in military and civilian hospitals, health agencies and war-related industries.

The bill was passed unanimously and became law on July 1, 1943. The corps was formed, and the U.S. Public Health Service became its supervisor.

More than 180,000 women between the ages of 17 and 35, and who met the educational and physical requirements, enlisted to become cadet nurses.

Yeznach attended St. Francis Hospital School of Nursing in Hartford from September 1943 until she graduated in September 1946.

By 1945, cadet nurses were providing 80 percent of the nursing care in U.S. hospitals, according to a website dedicated to the group.

"We were the backbone of nursing," Yeznach said.

Once they graduated, Yeznach said, cadet nurses didn't even think about asking for recognition.

"Being women, nice girls, you finished your job and you went home," she said. "You didn't make any waves."

This issue of recognition is not a new one.

Yeznach has been active in trying to get recognition for cadet nurses.

Over the years, she's reached out to her local and federal delegates, and has traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify before the House Armed Services Committee.

In advocating for recognition, Yeznach said, "I'm not trying to make anybody else's service less meaningful."

Since 1995, there have been at least 10 bills introduced in Congress seeking to recognize cadet nurses as veterans.

"It's been a futile attempt," Yeznach said of the congressional bills.

The identical bill has been introduced by U.S. Rep. Nita Lowey, a Democrat representing New York's 17th District.

Bradley Mayes, director of compensation and pension service for the Department of Veterans Affairs, said the "VA does not question that the Cadet Nurse Corps provided valuable contributions in the nursing field. However, participation in the Corps alone does not meet the criteria specific to active military service and subsequent Veteran status."

In his remarks, Mayes noted that at least twice the secretary of defense "has accepted the unanimous recommendations of a review board that participation in the Cadet Nurse Corps alone is not appropriate for this status."
Cadet nurses "were neither employees of the Federal Government nor legally obligated to future Government service," Mayes said. "They received Federal scholarships while attending nursing schools that received Federal grants-in-aid, and they were allowed to resign at any time."

Certain cadet nurses chose to enlist upon graduation, and those who did and served honorably are considered veterans for VA-benefit purposes.

Some civilians who participated in World Wars I and II are eligible for VA benefits. The Women's Air Forces Service Pilots, known as WASPs, a civilian group, was recognized under the GI Bill Improvement Act of 1977.

Yeznach said cadet nurses are recognized at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. And in May, the public health service recognized the 72nd anniversary of the corps with a gala in Bethesda, Md.

There, cadet nurses were honored with lapel pins and certificates of recognition. Those who couldn't make it could have those items sent to them.

1.4 - The Buffalo News: Buffalo VA thanks vets with an early Thanksgiving dinner. Annual tradition aims to boost needy veterans and their families (22 November, Jonathan D. Epstein, 628k online visitors/mo; Buffalo, NY)

Dozens of military veterans young and old turned out for an early Thanksgiving meal at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Buffalo on Sunday, taking advantage of the opportunity for both free food and camaraderie with other former soldiers.

The brisk wind outside couldn’t put a chill on the atmosphere inside the hospital, as staff and volunteers served heaping plates of turkey, ham, stuffing, potatoes, corn and pie for dessert to veterans and their families seated in the basement cafeteria.

“They’re bringing their families, which is terrific,” said Judith Kaczmarek, acting human resources manager for the hospital, who started the annual dinner program 15 years ago. “Today’s a day to give thanks for their service.”

The food was purchased with money donated by veterans agencies or community supporters, and outside the cafeteria, volunteers staffed long tables filled with donated blankets, hats, gloves and other items that veterans could browse through and take on their way out. In all, officials expected to serve 150 to 200 sit-down meals to homeless and needy veterans.

“This is what the veterans need, to get out and socialize,” said James Curtis, a 50-year-old former Army paratrooper from Madison County, between Syracuse and Utica. He was deployed in Central America, Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia, the Sinai Peninsula, Norway, Finland and Denmark, and then at military bases in Washington State and Alaska, during his tour from 1984 to 1990. “It just gets them out so they can have a decent meal.”
“It’s beneficial to vets. It lets them get together with other vets,” said 34-year-old Gary Lawrence, from Elizabeth City, N.C., a former Army sergeant, who did security patrols and worked on Chinook helicopters from 2007 to 2014 in Iraq, Afghanistan and Korea.

Attendees largely consisted of veterans from the post-Vietnam War years, including some fresh from service or combat in the Middle East during the last few years.

“It brings back that camaraderie that you feel in the military,” said Elizabeth Demler, 48, a former Navy parts storekeeper from North Tonawanda, who served in shore patrol and at the Groton, Conn., submarine base from 1986 to 1989.

And even as the staff and volunteers thanked them, the veterans themselves were grateful for the meal and the care they receive.

“This is a fantastic thing that the VA does for veterans,” said Edward Szemraj, 81, of Tonawanda, who sat across from his son, Jim, 54. Edward was an Army chaplain’s assistant at Fort Dix, N.J., from 1959 to 1960, while Jim was a Navy seaman on the USS Lexington from 1981 to 1985.

Over the years, the annual dinner has become a popular and anticipated event, but the VA also marketed it this year through flyers at its facilities and on Facebook and other social media, and through its Homeless Veterans program managers, Kaczmarek said. Five employees of that program also ran shuttles to the event from homeless shelters and the VA’s various housing partners in both Erie and Niagara counties.

Kaczmarek said she did try holding the dinner on Thanksgiving one year, but realized that by holding it on the Sunday before, she can ensure the homeless and needy veterans get two special meals that week, since many other organizations provide free meals on Thanksgiving Day.

The Homeless Veterans program is located at 1298 Main St., next to the Veterans One-Stop Center, and offers primary medical care as well as referrals to emergency, permanent, and transitional housing provided through partners like the Western New York Veterans Housing Coalition, which has about 100 housing units for veterans clustered in the downtown area around the One-Stop Center. To reach the program, call 862-8885.

1.5 - KUOW-FM (NPR-94.9): Guess Who’s Helping Seattle Homeless Veterans? Syrian Refugees (22 November, Liz Jones, 307k online visitors/mo; Seattle, WA)

The debate about resettling Syrian refugees has some people asking, “Why don’t we use that money on homeless veterans instead?”

We asked homeless veterans in downtown Seattle what they thought.

In line at the Millionaire’s Club, veteran Greg Klutcher shared his view: "The whole reason veterans fought for what they did is so that people like that could come here. Everybody needs a helping hand sometimes."
Klutcher has been homeless for six months.

Also in line was Damon Lyons, a veteran who said he’d like to see more funding for homeless vets, but not at the expense of refugees.

“There should be middle ground,” Lyons said. “Those people are now in distress.” He’s been homeless for two years.

Lyons and Klutcher were at an event hosted by the Seattle area’s Muslim community. It’s called “Day of Dignity,” and it’s been hosted by the Muslim community for the last 10 years. They give out sleeping bags, haircuts and other items to hundreds of homeless people.

Among the volunteers were two brothers – Syrian refugees who came to Seattle with their family a few months ago. The brothers volunteer at events like this because they say they want to give back to the community that’s welcomed them.

Nabil Al-Salkini, 14, said he also "wants people to know that the image of ISIS does not represent us."

His older brother Yazan Al-Salkini described why their family left Syria more than four years ago. “Life stopped. We lost our home. It got bombed. Burned down. We couldn’t go to school because civil war started. Almost about to be persecuted or killed.”

About 40 Syrian refugees have resettled in the Northwest since the war started. President Barack Obama has pledged for the U.S. to take in at least 10,000 Syrian refugees next year.

But some in Congress have pushed back, citing security concerns.

Al-Salkini says he still believes that Syrians will still be welcome here.

“I really have hope that other people from my community who are seeking help as I do, have opportunity to come here and start a new life, as we are starting to do,” he said.

2. Access to Benefits/Care

2.1 - The Washington Examiner: **VA ignores problem keeping thousands of combat vets from getting benefits** (23 November, Sarah Westwood, 2.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Thousands of combat veterans are still waiting to learn if they will receive health care benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs, but the agency is refusing to answer Congress's questions about the backlog.

The waiting list includes nearly 2,000 applications that are sitting at just one office in Atlanta, but that the VA refuses to acknowledge as actual applications, according to an agency whistleblower.
Scott Davis, a program specialist at the Health Eligibility Center in Atlanta, said the VA is attempting to downplay the number of veterans waiting to be enrolled by ignoring the fact that those 1,833 veterans already applied.

Instead, he said, the agency plans to send out letters asking them to apply again in a poorly-timed outreach campaign set for the week of Thanksgiving.

"VA should have processed these applications, and this is how the backlog gets started," Davis told the Washington Examiner. "These applications sit and sit and sit."

"If you're not enrolled, you cannot get an appointment," he added. "They're acting as if it's the veterans' burden to correct this issue."

Davis noted the agency has refused to change the way it handles applications from combat veterans, even after a waiting list of 34,000 applications was exposed in July.

"The significance is that VA still is not paying attention to combat veteran applications for healthcare from Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. "You would think that the recent exposure from the media would have made them more aware."

Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, asked the VA on Nov. 2 to provide the committee with a list of combat veterans on the health care enrollment waiting list.

Although the VA was supposed to provide the list by Nov. 13, it had not done so a week later, a committee aide confirmed.

The massive backlog of enrollment applications masked the fact that one third of veterans waiting for their benefits died before the VA got around to looking at their information. Lawmakers are also probing those numbers, which were confirmed by an inspector general's report in September.

An apparent glitch in the VA's enrollment system continues to keep at least 29,000 combat veterans in an enrollment limbo, the VA told the Examiner Friday.

While combat veterans are supposed to be automatically eligible for health care benefits and therefore not required to submit information about their income, thousands of applications filed by those veterans have been set aside because they don't include income information.

Combat veterans' automatic eligibility expires after five years. In some cases, veterans applied for health care benefits well within the five-year window, but saw their eligibility for benefits disappear after the VA sat on their applications.

A VA spokesman said the agency doesn't have the legal authority to enroll veterans in the system automatically. The agency denied the income verification problem was an "error" in its system, claiming the process is "operating as it was designed."

"We have been working to refine and get better data to help enroll Veterans and to keep their records updated," said Walinda West, VA spokesperson. "We have publicly acknowledged that our enrollment data integrity and quality is in need of significant improvement; to that end, we have worked hard over the past year to address those issues."
The VA issued a "change order," or a request to fix the process so the means test no longer hampered combat veterans' applications, on July 13.

But Davis said the agency has allowed the change order to languish since then, declining to approve it despite public scrutiny of the backlog.

Miller said the VA's failure to fix the application process is "either blatant incompetence or cold-hearted indifference."

"The law hasn't required a means test from recent combat veterans since 2008, yet VA still hasn't come up with an efficient way to enroll these veterans in its health care system without one," Miller said.

"Clearly it's past time for some adult leadership at VA's Health Eligibility Center," he added. "In the meantime, VA must be open and honest with the public about the steps it is taking to solve this problem and hold the responsible employees accountable."

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2.2 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Elder Law: Veterans - Never Give Up (23 November, Julian Gray and Frank Petrich, 908k online visitors/mo; Pittsburgh, PA)

The Department of Veterans Affairs is a gigantic system with millions enrolled. While there are several "divisions" within the VA, as elder law attorneys, we spend our time assisting elderly veterans and their spouses in obtaining non-service connected disability benefits — otherwise known as "aid and attendance."

These benefits were designed to provide a monthly cash reimbursement benefit to qualifying veterans and their spouses who pay out-of-pocket medical costs — whether at home or in a facility.

Pennsylvania is in the top five state populations of veterans in the country, with between 700,000 and 1 million people (when you count the veterans' widows) who could qualify for benefits. Yet, only a very small percentage qualifies because of a complex application system and misinformation about the program.

Our experience over the years indicates that veterans often get their advice from an initial source, which may yield a negative result, and then never bother to inquire further. This would be like receiving a terminal medical diagnosis and not seeking a second opinion.

Here are a few of the top offenders we’ve seen that warrant further investigation before accepting the response:

1. “You can’t get aid and attendance when living at home." — Nonsense. The benefit is meant to reimburse out-of-pocket medical expenses regardless of your location. This could be in your home, a personal care home or nursing home, just to name a few. Even if you are living at home and a family member is providing care, there are still ways to obtain the benefit.
2. "You have too much money or income to qualify." — It’s a math problem actually. Did you know there is no set income or asset limit to qualify for VA benefits? The VA uses an age-weighted asset/income test to determine eligibility. Furthermore, there are legitimate estate planning techniques that can be employed to expedite financial eligibility.

3. "Why bother? If the veteran or his spouse dies before the VA application is approved, no money is paid." — There are ways to file for a post death payment to the surviving spouse or heirs as long as the original claim was properly filed and is decided after the applicant’s death. Many people do not realize you can obtain the retroactive benefits even after the applicant dies — but there are time constraints and the next of kin must follow up promptly with the VA.

There are many more inaccuracies floating around that stop would-be applicants from pursuing their aid & attendance benefits. We caution people to find out the real story from a qualified source of information, such as a VA accredited attorney.

In the words of Winston Churchill: “Never, never, never give up.”

Julian Gray and Frank Petrich are both certified elder law attorneys who practice in the Pittsburgh area at Gray Elder Law.

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2.3 - WITI-TV (FOX-6, Video): Veteran makes grand gesture of thanks for Occupational Therapy Day: “For what they did for me” (22 November, Julie Collins, 638k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

Over the past week, the city of Milwaukee has celebrated Occupational Therapy Day -- and this day came to be, thanks to a veteran at the Milwaukee VA.

The Milwaukee VA has been helping veterans since 1869, and Marybeth Krause is one of the occupational therapists who has helped to get veterans back on their feet.

"They're our nation's heroes. You get to see miracles every day," said Krause.

One of the miracles recently walked into the clinic. That's something veteran Jim Schroeder couldn't do just four years ago.

"I didn't care about anything. I didn't have no attitude until I ran into these people," said Schroeder.

"Jim holds a special place in our heart," said Jillian Taxman, occupational therapist.

Schroeder came to the VA Occupational Therapy Clinic three days a week for four years -- and he credits the work of his therapists for saving his life.

"I want to thank everybody for what they did for me. I wouldn't be around if it wasn't for you," said Schroeder.
Schroeder was so pleased with this group of therapists, he told Governor Scott Walker, who wrote them a thank you letter. And the thanks continued as a proclamation from Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett was read.

The group was also presented with an American flag that flew on top of the Capitol.

Schroeder lost 40 pounds during his therapy at the VA.

He continues his therapy three days a week by walking with other veterans in the "Walk A Mile Or More" group.

2.4 - Argus Leader: Letter: VA Medical Center care rises above (22 November, Karen A. Jorgensen, 444k online visitors/mo; Sioux Falls, SD)

Thank you to our local VA hospital for the care my son received this summer – from immediate surgery and the week he was there, through the months of out-patient care. After the surgery, they were in his room every hour to check on him and also to make sure those of us there with him needed anything.

It may not be the fancy hospitals we’re used to, but the care was as good and in some circumstances, above what the others do. It made no difference if they were CNA’s, R.N.’s, physician assistants, or the many physicians – the physical and mental care was great, as was the food and cleanliness.

Thank you to all and we look forward to seeing the construction done.

2.5 - Peninsula Clarion: VA moves forward with Choice fixes, veterans cite continuing issues (22 November, Megan Pacer, 39k online visitors/mo; Kenai, AK)

The Department of Veterans Affairs in Alaska is working on the second phase of a plan to fix bugs with the program set up by the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act, but local veterans say nothing has changed.

About 20 area veterans gathered in the McLane Commons at Kenai Peninsula College Friday night to hear from the Alaska VA’s associate director, Shawn Bransky, about where the department is at in terms of correcting issues with the bill, nicknamed the Choice Act. It was implemented in the state in 2014. Since then, veterans have cited difficulties scheduling appointments, while health care providers have said that they are not getting reimbursed.

Bransky said the VA has implemented the first of two phases in a plan to rectify these issues by creating a remote presence by staff from TriWest Healthcare Alliance, an Arizona-based provider tasked with delivering Choice Program services, in Alaska VA facilities. The second
phase, in which new TriWest staff will have a physical presence in Alaska communities, didn’t happen on time, Bransky said.

One issue the VA has addressed was that TriWest call centers were “scattered” across the Lower 48, which meant that Alaska veterans could be getting calls from people who didn’t understand some of their geography-specific limitations. Bransky said those call centers have been consolidated.

There is now one call center dedicated to only handling Alaska calls and schedules.

Another change implemented since the VA started gathering veteran complains in a series of listening sessions this fall is that TriWest will take over scheduling appointments.

“Now you as a veteran, if you have a consult, don’t have to call the Choice (phone) number anymore,” he said. “TriWest will actually call you as the veteran when they get your consult.”

Veterans at Friday’s session said this still does not make getting an appointment easier, since TriWest still needs to confirm the appointments with the health care providers. Communication between those entities doesn’t seem to be happening, veterans said.

Bransky said he has gotten feedback that once TriWest gets a veteran’s appointment times they don’t always work for a specific vendor, which results in multiple calls back to the veteran, sometimes from different staff members.

“The back and forth is taking time and that’s not a good process,” Bransky said. “The better solution of what we have had the conversation today with TriWest, is to do a three-way call between a veteran and a place of care to facilitate that.”

Another veteran expressed confusion over how to opt in or out of the Choice Program itself. Alan Mathewson is a commercial fisherman from Kenai who served in the U.S. Marine Corps. He said during the session that he was never notified about the switch to the Choice Program, and was told he had opted out of it the next time he tried to set up a medical appointment. The only notice Mathewson said he was given was a phone call over the summer about a town hall meeting to discuss the program, but he was unable to attend because of his fishing business. When his appointment was canceled recently because it couldn’t be authorized, Mathewson said he was given several phone numbers to call, and that no one he talked to could rectify the situation.

“They all had the same answer: ‘You opted out of the program,’” he said. “How could I have opted out of a program that I’d never heard of?”

Mathewson said he was told that once a veteran opts out of the Choice Program, he or she can’t opt back in.

Bransky said he would connect Mathewson and other veterans who cited program issues with other VA staff that attended the session in order to try to resolve them.

The seven new staff members needed to complete the second phase of the VA’s plan to address Choice issues should be hired in January, Bransky said. They were originally supposed to be hired by November, he said.
“Part of the seven people that we had looked at putting here was taking back the appointing process for the consult management,” Bransky said. “At that particular point in time we actually did not have any awareness that the contract change was going to come into play where now TriWest does the calling of the appointments, so we had to do a little bit of an adjustment on that piece.”

The seven new hires will be tasked with addressing problems with scheduling and other bugs in the Choice Program, Bransky said. One will potentially be stationed permanently in Fairbanks, and one could be permanently stationed on the Kenai Peninsula, Bransky said.

2.6 - Mooresville Tribune: Two days, $697,650 in benefits (22 November, Megan Sprague, 24k online visitors/mo; Mooresville, NC)

Veterans received approximately $697,650 in retroactive benefits over the course of two days, thanks to the help of the Benefits Action Center hosted by the town of Mooresville and the American Legion’s Veterans Assistance and Rehabilitation Division.

Held Nov. 12-13 at the Charles Mack Citizen Center, the Benefits Action Center was part of a four-day Veterans Day schedule of events that included a parade and a veterans-only job fair, as well as ceremonies at Glenwood Cemetery and at the Welcome Home Veterans Living Museum.

The idea for the Benefit Action Center came earlier this year, when Mayor Miles Atkins attended the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Washington, D.C.

“I met with the National American Legion and we began to talk about what we did last year, with our inaugural Veterans Day parade and how we wanted to be a more veteran-friendly community,” he previously told the Tribune. “As we were talking, the Legion told me how they were reaching out with benefit action centers around the country to help veterans navigate their benefits. I thought it was a great idea and invited them to come to Mooresville to set one up.”

During the Benefits Action Center, a task force comprised of personnel from the Winston-Salem VA Regional Office, the Salisbury VA medical facility, the Iredell County Veterans’ Service Office and the North Carolina Division of Veterans Affairs were available to provide on-site assistance for more than 200 veterans and their family members.

Services provided during the event included filing benefit claims, providing status updates on pending claims and appeals, enrolling veterans in eBenefits, and answering questions.

“Based on the numbers, the action center appears to have been a success and the results were incredible,” Atkins said after the event here. “I’m very pleased.”

He added that “out of the six action centers that the American Legion has set up across the state, this one was the most successful based off of the amount of money we were able to free up for these veterans.”
“Next year, we would like to stretch it out over three days instead of two, and help even more of our veterans,” Atkins said.

Jessica Stewart, existing industry manager for the Mooresville-South Iredell Economic Development Commission and who assisted in organizing the job fair and other activities throughout the week, said that “we had individuals come from all over the state to take advantage of the VBAC and Job Fair; it would be my hope that they found these events beneficial.”

“Words cannot express my gratitude for the sacrifice that our veterans make,” she said. “I am proud to a part of the team that organized the Veterans Benefit Action Center and Job Fair for the men and women that have served our county.”

Overall, Atkins said that he’s “really excited about the partnership with the American Legion and I definitely want to continue that in the future.”

“I’m also pleased with the relationship we’ve built with the VA in Winston-Salem and others throughout the state,” he said.

Going forward, Atkins said that the Veteran’s Day parade and events will “only get bigger and better” from here on out.

“We’re already planning what we want to do next year,” he said. “We want to continue to follow up with these efforts and keep helping our veterans get access to the benefits they have earned and deserve.”

2.7 - KOIN-TV (CBS-6, Video): KOIN 6 News at 11 (22 November, 23k broadcast viewers; Portland, OR)

This two-minute video reports on a local town hall meeting where Vietnam veterans talked about health problems caused by Agent Orange.

2.8 - News-Gazette: Journey Home enters into contract with Veterans Administration (22 November, Pat Hughes, 8k online visitors/mo; Winchester, IN)

There were a lot of smiles at the Journey Home on Thursday as officials gathered to officially announce the first time ever contract between the veterans homeless shelter and the Veterans Administration.

According to Naomi Nicastro, a VA representative from Fort Wayne, the Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) contract means that the VA will pay the Journey Home a per diem for each veteran who is living at the Winchester-based shelter.
3. Ending Veterans’ Homelessness

3.1 - TribLive (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review): Housing in former parsonage among Indiana County efforts to help homeless veterans (22 November, Debbie Black, 1.7M online visitors/mo; Warrendale, PA)

Bryan Cleveland found his life spiraling downward after he finished a stint in the U.S. Navy from 1986 to 1994.

Like many other veterans who face major life changes after serving their country, Cleveland needed help. He found it at Tomorrow's Hope, a transitional housing and veterans service center in Coalport.

“After the service, it went straight downhill,” said Cleveland, 48, who served as a nuclear machinist mate and saw deployments to the Persian Gulf, Libya, the Northern Arabian Sea and Afghanistan.

“I went into things I shouldn’t,” Cleveland said. “I was raised in an abusive environment. I was in an abusive relationship.”

In 2012, he got help from a Veterans Affairs office in Lebanon, which found him housing at Tomorrow's Hope. Now employed as a human relations representative at a company in Mechanicsburg, he said the Coalport facility “was a haven of hope to help me go from homeless status to being able to get ahead.

“It changed my perception. You can see your way out by talking, networking and getting counseling.”

The networking at Tomorrow's Hope has expanded to include churches in Indiana County, where other programs recently have been launched to assist homeless veterans.

Della Jean Manning of Penn Run and other volunteers from nine churches in Indiana County are preparing for their third annual Christmas party for the veterans of Tomorrow's Hope.

The event is set for Dec. 5 at the Coalport site. Volunteers will meet at the local non-denominational Brush Valley Chapel to assemble gift packages for the veterans.

According to Manning, who is a member of the chapel congregation, “There will be 54 veterans at our Christmas party,” including residents at Tomorrow's Hope and about 10 graduates of the program who are still struggling.

Manning said she and the other volunteers help these veterans throughout the year with food donations and by spreading word of their unmet needs. The annual party allows the veterans to enjoy a holiday gathering of camaraderie.
“To have a man say to me. ‘For four hours I was not homeless,’ it was all I could do to not cry,” Manning said. “They are very grateful for anything done for them. This is the most rewarding thing I’ve done in my 81 years.”

Donated clothing and personal items and other articles that have been purchased with contributed funds will be placed in gift bags for the veterans, who also will enjoy pizza, cookies and friendship at the party.

Each veteran will receive a new sweatshirt and sweatpants, a T-shirt, underwear, socks, gloves, a stainless steel coffee mug, a towel, a washcloth, personal hygiene items, a calendar, pen, pencil and word search book. Members of the Warm Up America knitting group in Indiana have made an afghan for each of them.

The program graduates also will receive a canned ham.

“It moves them,” said Mike Millward, CEO of Tomorrow's Hope. “It's something very special. It blows them away that people are generous.”

Millward said the veterans at Tomorrow's Hope come from all across Pennsylvania and other states through Veterans Affairs placements. “They vary in age from 20s to the oldest, who was 92 and a World War II veteran,” he said, noting most have served in wars.

“War is a very difficult and challenging thing with the reality and adjustment to civilian life,” he said. “It's tough for veterans.... Some have post-traumatic stress disorder. Some have injuries to the brain or drug and alcohol issues.”

In Indiana County, Manning said, “When there is a homeless veteran, the first place they go is the VFW or a Legion here. They may need help with bills or a place to live.”

A temporary home for homeless veterans may be found at the newly established Veterans Parsonage, which can house up to eight people. Established by a volunteer group formed through the Indiana Church of The Brethren, the home was created at the church’s former parsonage, along Route 286 just west of Indiana.

Kirt Anderson, the church’s part-time pastor and chaplain director at SCI Pine Grove, led the initiative and found help in the community to open the facility.

“My family did not need the parsonage,” Anderson said. “I wanted to reach out to the community.... All these doors opened for veterans. We had people volunteering to help.”

“We want to provide help for about six months,” Anderson said, but he added, “If (veterans) can't get on their feet in six months, we'll keep helping them.”

The facility is lacking a director. Until one is secured, volunteers will take turns running the shelter.

The home is fully furnished with a kitchen, dining room and living room with a television.
“We didn’t have any major upgrades,” Anderson said. “One repair was to change the steel cast plumbing to plastic. That needed to be done anyway. It is a well-built brick house with hardwood floors throughout.”

Donations are expected to cover operating expenses.

“We’ll be networking with other agencies,” Anderson said. “I don't want to have to depend on the federal government. Part of the vision is the community steps up. Anyone who donates can see where it goes. Every dollar given will go to expenses.”

As Anderson and volunteers were readying the parsonage for its first occupants, another local project to assist homeless veterans was coming to fruition through a partnership between Indiana County and the Northern Cambria Community Development Corporation.

Developed with both government funding and community donations, the Veterans Community Gardens is a new $1.2 million six-apartment complex on the opposite end of Indiana that is designated for homeless veterans. Now ready for occupancy. It can accommodate 10 people in five one-bedroom apartments and up to four people in one two-bedroom apartment.

“We are processing applications,” said Matt Barczak, executive director of NCCDC. “There were some minor interior completions to finish before occupancy.

“As soon as all the documentation is obtained, they will be able to get in. There are verifications and eligibility guidelines.”

Barczak said NCCDC works with the Indiana County Community Action Program and other agencies to help veterans.

“We have good relationships with other agencies,” he said. "We've reached out to Tomorrow's Hope to let them know. Having agencies working together, other facilities may have a vacancy if (veterans) can't stay here.

“There are different stages of homeless. The veteran may feel they are not homeless if they have somewhere to go to sleep on a friend's couch or stay somewhere. They may have a sense of pride that keeps them from going to a shelter.”

To assist veterans receiving help through the converted parsonage, contact the Indiana Church of The Brethren at 724-465-3280 and leave a message. A volunteer will return calls to set up a convenient drop-off of donated items. Monetary donations may be mailed to the church at 905 McKnight Road, Indiana, PA 15701.

To donate to Tomorrow's Hope, visit tomorrowshopepa.org.

3.2 - KGNS-TV (NBC-8, Video): County officials look to tackle veteran homelessness (23 November, Yocelin Gallardo, 900 online visitors/day; Laredo, TX)
County officials are looking to tackle the issue of veteran homelessness. Veteran homelessness is an issue across the nation, and locally, which has many officials discussing the topic.

They fought for our country now they struggle to find a home. County officials want to bring awareness to veteran homelessness.

Commissioner Jaime Canales says it needs to be a priority. The Laredo VA outpatient clinic proclaimed November 20th 2015 Veteran Homeless Awareness Day.

According to National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, about 12-percent of the adult homeless population are veterans. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that over 49,000 veterans are homeless on any given night.

Canales says it's a problem in the country and Webb County. National Hunger and Homeless Awareness week is recognized each year the week before Thanksgiving.

The Webb County Veteran Affairs want to use that platform to create a social movement to end veteran homelessness.

He says bringing awareness is the first step. Canales says these men fought for us and now it's time to fight for them.

### 4. Ending the Claims Backlog
- No coverage

### 5. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill
- No coverage

### 6. Women Veterans
- No coverage

### 7. Other


(22 November, Joe Davidson, 20.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The numbers are penny-ante, but that's not the point.

Bonuses awarded to federal employees who’ve had disciplinary issues present an image problem for Uncle Sam and fuel a narrative that undermines the workforce.

The latest example comes from a Social Security Administration (SSA) inspector general report this month that found the agency paid performance awards worth $145,000 to 240 staffers who had been disciplined for misconduct. Considering Social Security’s $12 billion budget and its
60,000 employees, the bonuses averaging $604 dollars to the wayward workers are barely noticeable.

Not only are the awards to the delinquents a minuscule part of the agency’s budget, SSA says they represent less than 1 percent of the total awards issued.

But awards to offenders look bad and raise skeptical questions from members of Congress protecting taxpayer interests. And though the numbers are tiny they take on added significance when coupled with other federal agencies that rewarded employees with scarred records.

Just last month, Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) blasted the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) for bonuses given to agents who were disciplined after attending sex parties with prostitutes in Colombia.

“It is a disgrace that taxpayer dollars are being wasted on those who violate our trust and abuse their positions,” Chaffetz said when the DEA report was issued last month. “If we want a culture of excellence in the federal workforce, we must penalize bad behavior and reward merit.”

Jon Adler, president of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association Foundation, argues an employee’s entire record should be considered when disciplinary action is contemplated. Chaffetz “should consider what was documented in support of the awards issued,” Adler said, “and recognize that the allegations of misconduct did not render those accused as useless.”

Penalizing bad behavior and rewarding merit in the federal workplace are at the top of the agenda for many who think the government’s current pay and reward system is out of touch with today’s needs. The appearance of rewarding bad behavior does not aid the case of federal labor leaders, who argue the current system is basically fine, but managers don’t operate its reward and punishment levers properly.

Already, Congress has considered legislation that would allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to revoke bonuses paid to workers involved in the VA’s wait list scandal. An Internal Revenue Service bill would prohibit “funds for bonuses or to rehire former employees unless employee conduct and tax compliance is given consideration.”

In the Social Security case, 126 employees were rewarded with an Exemplary Contribution or Service Award (ECSA) or a Recognition of Contribution (ROC) after getting a reprimand, 113 after a suspension and one was demoted. The awards were granted in fiscal year 2014 for performance in 2013.

Perhaps the poster child for the incongruous award of the year would go to the employee who received $325 after being suspended 45 days for possessing a weapon, “being rude and discourteous to the public and management” and a lack of candor.

Social Security paid the 113 who were suspended $62,000 in bonuses. They included 26 employees suspended for more than one reason, including one worker suspended for two months. The inspector general found individuals awarded:

- “$1,755, after SSA suspended the employee 14 days for providing information regarding a claim to an improper source.”
- “$1,430, after SSA suspended the employee 10 days for falsifying a timesheet.”
- “$800…after SSA suspended the employee 60 days for certifying false evidence resulting in the issuance of a Social Security number and for acting on the records of relatives and friends.  
- “$650 . . . after SSA suspended the employee 5 days for making 21 unauthorized transactions on his Government credit card. The credit card bill was 45 days overdue, and the employee owed over $1,300.”

The report noted that “SSA told us the 240 employees it disciplined for conduct issues were in good standing when they received their award.” It urged officials to consider revising their awards policy to “specify the types of conduct that would prevent individuals from receiving awards.”

That would need union consent for staffers in bargaining units. SSA would have violated its contract with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) had it withheld bonuses from 34 employees who are union members. “We are currently in the process of reviewing our award policies. Any changes to the award programs will likely require us to fulfill bargaining obligations with our unions,” said Nicole Tiggemann, a Social Security spokesperson.

Witold Skwierczynski, AFGE’s Social Security Council president, is open to that discussion. “I am not opposed to consideration of some restrictions of awards for certain individuals who have been disciplined,” he said, “if the misconduct is connected to the award.”

7.2 - The Washington Post: **Balancing American principles and American fears** (22 November, Ken Hoagland, 20.3M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Regarding the Nov. 20 editorial “Fanning fear at home”:

Many Americans want to do the right thing for Syrian refugees who are, after all, as much victims of our pullout from Iraq as they are of Islamic State violence and President Bashar al-Assad’s persecution. The easy accusation is that Americans who oppose increased immigration are bigots or are gripped with panic.

But fear that our government is incapable of doing even the most important jobs properly is not unfounded. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives lost assault weapons to Mexican drug cartels and covered it up. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention mishandled and lost deadly pathogens. The Department of Veterans Affairs ignored long waiting lists and then deceived the public about the facts. The Secret Service failed to protect the White House. Losing track of expired student visas is the dangerous norm today.

Few people trust our agencies to keep terrorists from entering as refugees. Some Americans believe we will lose track of people who enter. Sadly, we cannot trust that the job will be done right or that we won’t get stonewalled about lapses. To do the right thing (and helping suffering refugees is the right thing), we must have work we can trust and honesty about agency performance from the president on down. Today, we have neither.

Ken Hoagland, Arlington
PINEHURST, N.C. (AP) - Cameras were rolling Nov. 16 as more than 80 veterans gathered here for the inaugural Veteran Golfers Association national championship.

Led by Hollywood producer Charles Laga and director Giorgio Serafini, a film crew interviewed the competing veterans and gathered the first footage for a documentary on the role competitive golf can play in helping soldiers suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The documentary, “Operation Double Eagle,” will follow six veterans, all who suffer from PTSD on their journey to compete in the VGA championship, Laga said during a press conference at Pinehurst Country Club.

Laga said the idea was pitched to him by VGA president Josh Peyton, an 82nd Airborne veteran who established the organization here last year.

“Josh is very persuasive,” Laga said. “When he told me about how golf is helping veterans, it intrigued me.”

Through his work on another documentary examining the effects of secondary PTSD, Laga said he was aware of the havoc PTSD can wreak on returning soldiers and on the stigma surrounding the condition.

“What I found was that there was a certain amount of denial surrounding it that I’ve never understood,” he said.

But by working with the VGA, Laga hopes to open some of the doors closed to military outsiders.

According to Peyton, the VGA gives veterans a positive competitive outlet and a social network for dealing with PTSD.

“A lot of times these soldiers don’t know there’s anything wrong with them until their entire world crumbles,” Peyton said.

The film will be narrated by Tom Sizemore, who is known for starring in military films including “Saving Private Ryan” and “Black Hawk Down.”

Sizemore is in Pinehurst this week to serve on a Q&A; panel following screenings today of “Black Hawk Down,” the film in which he portrays ground commander Danny McKnight.

Sizemore went through 18 weeks of Ranger training to prepare for the role, an experience he said illustrated the importance of a support network for soldiers returning from traumatic situations.
“I didn’t realize how much those relationships mattered and the difference it makes to those men,” Sizemore said.

Underscoring the point, the actor said, is his own history with substance abuse.

“For years I tried to do it by myself and I couldn’t,” said Sizemore, a self-described drug addict who said he has been in recovery for four years. “It sounds simple, but when you’ve got a group of people to lean on you don’t feel so alone.”

The film is anticipated for release in about a year, depending on how deep into the featured veterans’ lives it delves, Laga and Serafini said. The film crew planned to backtrack after the tournament wrapped up Nov. 18.

The footage captured this week in Pinehurst will make up the end of the final product, Laga said.

“We want to avoid what’s been done before by not just exploring the dark side but showing that there is a way out,” Laga said. "For some, it’s the game of golf.”

7.4 - The Washington Times (AP): Veterans on Patrol operates 3 camps to watch over homeless (22 November, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) - Veterans on Patrol is operating camps for homeless individuals in Arizona and expanding outreach in Tucson to other parts of the community.

Military-style tents, 24-hour security and free meals are offered to veterans and women who stay at the camp near Tucson’s Santa Rita Park, The Arizona Daily Star reports (http://bit.ly/21bTmGl).

Men who are not veterans can camp for three days before they need to start helping out. Members have started regular visits to other Tucson homeless camps.

Veterans on Patrol set up Camp Alpha in Phoenix three months ago, followed by Tucson’s Camp Bravo about six weeks ago and the recent establishment of Camp Charlie in Nogales.

The group began Operation Park Sweep at the Tucson camp earlier this month, putting body cameras on undercover members and posting signs warning campers that dealing drugs or behaving violently will lead to calls to law enforcement.

Members say in one week, 29 syringes were found in the park. Some people in the group carry weapons on their hips.

Group founder and program director Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer said the goal is not to get people arrested, but members will report issues to police and even detain a person until authorities can arrive.
Meyer acknowledged that could be considered “borderline vigilante.”

Tucson police Sgt. Pete Dugan says the department has a working relationship with Meyer’s group.

“It really does appear they are out there helping the community and veterans,” Dugan said.

Rebecca DeLauer said she became homeless after losing a job. She says her ex-boyfriend harassed anyone who tried to help her, but he can’t intimidate Veterans on Patrol members.

“I can go to sleep without worrying,” she said.

Danny Barry, a homeless man who started camping at Santa Rita Park four months ago, says the group members are trying to be law enforcement.

“They need to just go,” Barry said. “They’re vigilantes.”

7.5 - WGRZ-TV (NBC-2, Video): VA holds Thanksgiving meal for homeless vets (22 November, 956k online visitors/mo; Buffalo, NY)

We're celebrating Western New York with a holiday event for some local heroes in need.

The VA held its 15th annual Thanksgiving dinner for homeless veterans on Sunday. The meal was provided through donations from the community and helped feed around 200 vets.

Organizers even offered rides for the vets as a way to make sure more people can come out to the annual dinner.

The dinner used to be held on Thanksgiving day but organizers say moving it up a few days means that homeless vets will have two chances to get a Thanksgiving meal this week.

7.6 - The Tampa Tribune: Legionnaire’s lingers at Bay Pines but experts say there is little danger (22 November, Howard Altman, 802k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

Late last year, the bacteria that can cause the potentially fatal Legionnaire’s disease was found in half the sites tested in the mental health treatment building at the Bay Pines VA Medical Center.

No patients or staff in the building contracted the disease and tests after cleanup efforts showed only three of the sites tested positive for Legionella pneumophila, according to records obtained by the Tribune.
But the results show the challenges hospitals face in dealing with a bacteria that’s commonly found in water supplies. And experts contacted by the Tribune say the test results show the hospital is doing a good job handling a problem that led to the death of a patient at Bay Pines 10 months earlier and vexes medical centers around the country.

The quarterly tests for Legionella pneumophila bacteria in September and December of 2014 were the first conducted at Bay Pines in Pinellas County following sweeping new Department of Veterans Affairs regulations on Legionnaire’s disease.

The September 2014 tests showed nine of 19 sites in Building 1 had the Legionella pneumophila bacteria. The next round of testing, in December, found 11 out of 20 sites tested positive for the bacteria.

After the hospital learned of the findings, officials conducted two “full building remediations” by flushing the water systems with high levels of chlorine, according to Heather Brauer, assistant chief of engineering. The results of two subsequent tests obtained by the Tribune found two sites tested positive for the bacteria in June and one in March.

In August, the Tribune filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the information. The request was made following a patient death from hospital-acquired Legionnaire’s disease in February and a lawsuit and other claims that the hospital retaliated against safety employees concerned about the bacteria.

The testing at Bay Pines began a month after the VA instituted a new policy, called Directive 1061, that required greater review and remediation nationwide for Legionella pneumophila. The directive was issued after six people died and more than 20 contracted the disease at a VA hospital in Pittsburgh in spring 2014. It requires the closer scrutiny at buildings where patients have overnight stays.

The testing at Bay Pines began in September 2014 and is now being performed quarterly. Results obtained by the Tribune were for testing through June.

There were 462 sites tested in six buildings on the Bay Pines campus. A lab in Pittsburgh found some form of the Legionella bacteria in 76 locations. Of those, 34 tested positive for the pneumophila strain — the most dangerous. In addition to Building 1, Legionella pneumophila was found in Buildings 100, 101 and 102 and the Fisher House. Other strains of the bacteria also were found in those buildings as well as in Building 71.

The tests were in addition to those initiated after a veteran being treated in Building 100 tested positive for Legionella pneumophila and died in February from resulting medical complications.

After confirming the Legionnaire’s disease case, “we restricted the use of showers in building 100 and also completed water testing” after the hospital found “a minor presence” of Legionella pneumophila in an ice machine in one of 13 areas tested Feb. 21 and 23, said Bay Pines spokesman Jason Dangel.

The VA, Dangel said then, “has a zero tolerance for any level of Legionella pneumophila.”

The level of the bacteria detected was 4.1 units per milliliter, well below the 10 units per milliliter allowed in potable water by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Dangel noted.
By comparison, the testing in Building 1 from September and December of 2014 found levels ranging from 20 units per milliliter to one unit per milliliter.

Since then, the highest level of Legionella pneumophila found at Bay Pines was once again in Building 1 — 90 units per milliliter found in June in a cold shower. Tests also found a level of 21 units per milliliter in a hot shower.

Quarterly testing began at Tampa’s James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital in November 2014, says spokeswoman Karen Collins.

“Our water safety committee was formed in April of 2014 and prior to that we had a Legionella prevention program in place,” Collins says. “There have been no deaths due to hospital acquired Legionnaire’s disease in the last 24 months. In fact I am not aware of any instances of any hospital acquired Legionnaire’s here during that time frame.”

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Two workers fired from the Bay Pines hospital safety team earlier this year say that they lost their jobs after pushing for tests on whether Legionnaires’ disease was present and that VA officials covered up the high levels of contamination in an area where the veteran who died of the disease was staying.

The two workers, Keith Litchfield and Narciso Martinez, make those allegations in individual claims filed to the Merit Systems Protection Board, an agency designed to protect federal workers, and in a federal lawsuit filed in April against the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Three other VA employees, including two still on the safety team, also are plaintiffs in the lawsuit, saying they were harassed by unit supervisor Darlene Powell. Two of the three employees filed affidavits with the protection board backing up Litchfield and Martinez.

The lawsuit accuses the VA of intentional infliction of emotional distress; defamation; negligent hiring, retention and supervision of their supervisor; and failure to train the supervisor.

Dangel declined to comment on the allegations because VA policy precludes commenting on pending legal matters.

However, water test results are provided to the hospital’s Water Safety Committee and to the regional and national VA offices, Dangel says.

After the patient died in Building 100, the hospital’s main center, test results obtained by the Tribune show that out of about 40 sites tested, only one showed a slight trace of the Legionella pneumophila bacteria — less than one tenth of the standard set by OSHA.

Still, Lee Blais, the attorney representing those suing the VA, said in an interview Thursday that the presence of Legionella pneumophila is “concerning, because it is an integrated water system and the bacteria could easily move from one building to another.”

Brauer, with Bay Pines engineering, disputes that, saying bacteria cannot travel between buildings because the system does not allow water to reenter the system from each individual building.
Legionnaire’s disease has been on the rise across the U.S. for the last decade, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

An estimated 8,000 to 18,000 people are hospitalized because of Legionnaires’ disease each year, according to the CDC, and that figure may be low because many infections are not diagnosed or reported. Each year between 2008 and 2012, 3,000 to 4,000 cases were reported to the CDC.

A number of possible reasons may explain the increase, including an older U.S. population, more at-risk individuals, aging plumbing infrastructure and climate, the CDC says. It may also arise from greater use of diagnostic testing or more reliable reporting.

As of last month, the most recent reporting period, the Pinellas County Department of Health reported 14 cases of legionellosis countywide, all of them caused by the Legionella bacteria, and 269 in Florida. That includes Bay Pines. In 2014, 13 legionellosis cases were reported in Pinellas.

Legionella is commonly found in water supplies in all buildings, not just hospitals, says Thomas Klein, emeritus professor of immunology at the University of South Florida Morsani College of Medicine.

The levels reported in the tests obtained by the Tribune “don’t sound particularly high to me,” Klein says. “They have tested positive, but they are not grossly contaminated.”

The fact there has been no spike in patients dying from the disease or even contracting it is a good sign, he says, adding that the VA’s new directive means the hospital “is doing what it should be doing.”

Klein, however, says he is “generally surprised” it wasn’t until after the deaths in Pittsburgh that the VA moved to require more stringent testing measures. The VA has decades of experience with Legionnaire’s disease, dating back to an outbreak in 1997 at a hospital in Los Angeles that killed more than 40, he said, leaving him “befuddled that it’s taken this long.”

The new VA program “is probably one of most stringent Legionella prevention programs in the nation,” says Janet Stout of the private Special Pathogens Laboratory in Pittsburgh, which conducted the Bay Pines testing.

The findings of the first two tests on Building 1 showed a greater risk for disease, Stout says. But those at the greatest risk are older patients, smokers, those with chronic lung diseases, diabetes and transplant patients.

The pneumophila species of the bacteria poses the most significant health concern because it can cause Legionella pneumonia or Pontiac Fever, says Dangel, the Bay Pines spokesman. “Legionella disease occurs after inhalation or aspiration of contaminated water. Most people who are exposed to the bacteria never become ill,” Dangel says.

Some sources of water send greater doses directly to the lungs than others and are harmful at lower levels, says Maggie Hall, spokeswoman for the Pinellas health department.
These include humidifiers and other misters producing aerosol that is directly inhaled into the lungs. A cooling tower, on the other hand, has much higher unsafe levels, measured in colony-forming units — a measure of microorganisms present in a sample.

“We recommend prompt cleaning and/or biocide when cooling towers have 100 CFU per milliliter and humidifiers have 1 CFU per milliliter,” Hall said.

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Before the new VA directive, officials at Bay Pines only tested for Legionella once a year, or after an incident such as an illness or system malfunction. After learning about the tests results in Building 1, the hospital “spent a lot of time investigating the infrastructure,” says Brauer, with Bay Pines engineering.

One of the problems, she said, was aging systems a change in use of some areas. Patient rooms, for example, became exam rooms where less water was used and higher levels of the bacteria could form.

The staff did two complete building remediations, including a robust system flush and higher chlorination levels to eradicate the bacteria, Brauer says.

In 2015 alone, Bay Pines performed full building remediation seven times and engineering employees put in more than 660 overtime hours to complete remediation-related work, Dangel says.

“As you can see, we take this issue very seriously. A tremendous amount of time and effort is dedicated to monitoring and maintenance of our water systems.”

It’s a never-ending battle, Dangel adds. Staff conducts regular surveillance of water temperature and oxidant residual levels in all patient care buildings.

Legionella “is something we constantly have to keep our finger on because there is a zero tolerance policy to ensure the safety of our patients.”

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7.7 - Military Times: Combat experience is factor in death penalty cases, experts say (22 November, Patricia Kime, 540k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

Over 22 days in October 2002, John Allen Muhammad and an accomplice terrorized residents of Washington, D.C., shooting 13 people while they shopped, dined, or stopped for gas.

Known as the “D.C. Sniper,” Muhammad was an Army veteran who had enlisted in the National Guard at age 18, transferred to the regular Army in 1985 and served three months as a combat engineer in the Persian Gulf War.

By his ex-wife’s account, Muhammad was once the “life of the party,” and a good soldier. But he returned home from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait a changed man, “moody, confused, diagnosed
with post-traumatic stress disorder,” Mildred Muhammad said during a speech on domestic violence at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall in 2012.

Shortly after Muhammad left the Army in 1995, his life began to unravel. He began abusing and threatening his wife, kidnapped his children, and in 2002, systematically began killing people across the U.S.

At his trial, Muhammad represented himself. He lost and was sentenced to death. In his final appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court before he was executed in 2009, medical experts said he lacked rational understanding to represent himself, was delusional and actually had three lesions in his brain.

Now a new report from the nonprofit Death Penalty Information Center argues that Muhammad's military experience and mental health condition should have been considered as part of his defense and he should not have been allowed to represent himself.

In a broader context, the report also charges that the veterans on death row in more than 35 states face a legal system that poorly understands the trauma of war and the significant impacts that combat can have on the human psyche.

Few states keep tabs of the number of veterans on death row, but extrapolation of data from several states, including California and Florida, which have the highest known numbers, indicate that 275 to 300 of the nation's 3,057 death row inmates have served in the military.

Richard Dieter, author of "Battle Scars: Military Veterans and the Death Penalty," said that in death penalty cases involving known veterans, most of the vets not only served in the military, but also deployed to combat zones.

"The issue is that they have combat experience, often facing shocking traumatic experiences of war and it had an effect on them," Dieter said. "Often, this didn't come out in trial and this seems, to me, like mitigating evidence that's out of line with receiving the death penalty."

In March, Vietnam veteran Andrew Brannan became the first person to be executed in the U.S. in 2015.

Brannan, who had been rated 100-percent disabled for PTSD by the Veterans Affairs Department, murdered a sheriff's deputy after he was pulled over for traveling 98 mph on a country road.

In a flurry of last-minute appeals, Brannan's attorneys argued that at the time of his trial, the medical community knew little about the psychiatric impact of combat.

"The nation's understanding has evolved so much in the past 14 years," said Tom Lundin, one of Brannan's attorneys. "This case violates the Eighth Amendment. It is cruel and unusual punishment for a combat veteran suffering from documented PTSD and he should not be executed."

Although the death penalty is being acted on with less frequency in the U.S., Iraq War veteran Courtney Lockhart may be one of the next to receive the punishment. The former Army private kidnapped and killed Auburn University freshman Lauren Burk, 18, as she was getting into her
car on campus in March 2008. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court declined to consider his case.

Lockhart spent more than 15 months in Ramadi, Iraq, during a time when 64 members of his brigade died in combat. A jury sentenced him to life without parole, but the judge overruled that and sentenced Lockhart to death.

Dieter said Lockhart’s trial attorneys “did little to investigate or portray his military background” and says many lawyers don't know how to handle such cases.

“They are not trained to explore what may have happened in the war zone, what kind of effect having your life threatened may have on your mental stability,” Dieter said.

He added that while PTSD or combat-related trauma "is no excuse," it is a factor that should be considered by the prosecution and the defense.

"There ought to be a check on a case if a veteran is involved," he said. "Not that they are different than teachers, firefighters, police officers or others who are in public service, but it should be delved into that veterans have experiences no one else has had."

The unique needs of veterans who enter the legal system were the primary reason that specialized "veterans treatment courts" were developed starting in 2008.

These courts remove veterans from the traditional court system and provide support, counseling and treatment by legal professionals familiar with veterans’ issues.

They handle only cases that can be adjudicated with probation, mental health treatment or community service. Still, the system has "raised awareness in communities of veterans in the justice system" and called attention to the mental health consequences of combat deployments, said Christopher Deutsch, communications director with Justice For Vets.

"More than any other time in our history, the public has an understanding for how much issues like PTSD affect men and women who have been in combat," Deutsch said. "The justice system as a whole is moving toward a place where judges want to have as much information as possible about defendants."

But, he added, national data on the number of veterans in the justice system is more than 10 years old, and the task of identifying vets and considering their unique needs still rests with individual courts.

"The vast majority of veterans return from service and lead exemplary lives and are heroes in our community. But we also have to accept that issues like combat PTSD can lead to violent behavior," Deustch said.

Michael Rushford, president and CEO of the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation, a nonprofit that supports the death penalty, said a veteran's military record should be considered by a jury in sentencing, one of many mitigating factors that may draw sympathy in sentencing.

But, he added, even in the cases of veterans sentenced to death, “the public has a right to have that sentence for the worse murderers. In some cases, we think it's the only appropriate sentence.”
Dieter's organization stopped short of calling for an across-the-board exemption for veterans facing the death penalty, and said DPIC officials wrote "Battle Scars" to call attention to the "forgotten cases, the unexplored cases."

"It's hard for a jury to put aside the multiple murders and cold-bloodedness of many of these crimes and say it's mental illness," he said. "But I don't think that should be off the table."

7.8 - Daily Hampshire Gazette: **Buy a green light bulb in support of veterans** (22 November, Trish Duffy, 368k online visitors/mo; Northampton, MA)

It is very heartwarming to see coverage in the paper in appreciation and thanks to our veterans from so many people. I'd like to see these people and others continue their support year-round by supporting the Green Light of Hope (www.greenlightavet.com).

I am very surprised that there was no feature article from the Gazette on this initiative and I am equally surprised that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hasn't encouraged the Green Light a Vet campaign or had the green light bulbs for sale.

So neighbors, on your next trip to the store, please pick up a green light bulb and proudly light the ray of hope and appreciation for our veterans.

Trish Duffy

Florence

7.9 - Wicked Local – Wareham: **Onset VFW opens doors for early turkey feast to Brockton VA residents, vets, seniors** (22 November, Chris Shott, 336k online visitors/mo; Westford, MA)

WAREHAM – The Dudley L. Brown Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2846 of Onset is usually a busy place year-round, but reserves a special part of its annual contributions to the community for the Saturday prior to Thanksgiving Day.

That is the day traditionally when post members and representatives of its Ladies Auxiliary combine to treat hospitalized military veterans and others to a complete turkey dinner in observance of Thanksgiving Day, five days on the horizon. Hefty portions of roast turkey, stuffing, potatoes, vegetables, cranberry sauce, bread and beverages are piled high on the plates of recipients, followed by desserts of pumpkin pie and apple pie.

“This is our 35th year of doing this dinner and our members and the Ladies Auxiliary look forward to it every year,” said Julio Roderick, the VFW’s Quartermaster. “It’s another way for us to help veterans and give back to the community.”
Officially, the Thanksgiving Dinner hosted by the post at its headquarters on Gibbs Ball Park Road is targeted at handicapped veterans residing at the Veterans Administration Boston Healthcare System facility in Brockton, but also includes all local military personnel and senior citizens. Roderick said the post receives various donations to defray the event’s cost, but generally picks up most of the tab for the program.

"We usually serve about 125 meals," Roderick said. "We have about 15 post members and Auxiliary members here today volunteering and helping out."

A small delegation of volunteers from the Wareham Unit of the Boys & Girls Club of New Bedford was also present Saturday, assisting in delivering trays of food to tables and collecting the trays after diners had partaken in their share of the feast. The unit’s program director, Larry Senna, supervised the youngsters.

“This is a good way for them to help out in the community and assist others in need,” Senna said. “We try to get our kids involved in as many of these programs as we can throughout the year.”

Roderick said that years ago, Brown VFW Post members visited the VA Hospital in Brockton for the Thanksgiving Day meal and also held an annual cookout on its grounds. “However, it got to be too much for us, so we decided to change it to this format,” he said.

Hospitalized veterans were transported Saturday to Onset by bus and vans donated by the VA Boston Healthcare System. Local senior citizens attending the function were largely transported by the Greater Attleboro and Taunton Regional Authority.

7.10 - Quad-City Times: Clinton hits pocketbook issues in Clinton (22 November, Ed Tibbetts, 253k online visitors/mo; Davenport, IA)

CLINTON — Foreign affairs may be animating much of the 2016 presidential campaign now, but Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton talked about finances for working Americans Sunday and pitched a new tax break here.

She also pledged to help with a host of other problems, including college and health care costs.

Clinton spoke to more than 400 people at a town hall meeting here, a one-stop campaign trip to Iowa where she is leading in the three-person race for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination.

Clinton proposed a new tax break to help people who are caring for parents and grandparents. The change, which would require Congressional approval, would allow people to offset up to $6,000 in expenses. The maximum annual tax benefit would be $1,200, according to her campaign.

The campaign said the benefit would phase out for people with higher incomes.
“I really do want to be a president who is there for you,” Clinton said Sunday.

Previously, Clinton has proposed tax breaks to help with college costs and high out-of-pocket medical expenses.

As part of her plan Sunday, Clinton proposed changing Social Security rules so that people who leave the workforce to care for a family member can get credit for it when their retirement benefits are figured. This measure also would need approval from Congress.

The campaign says 40 million Americans are caring for older adults, and many don’t get any help from the tax code for the money they spend. She added she would seek to expand help for people who provide respite for caregivers.

The campaign says the initiative would cost $10 billion over 10 years.

Clinton also acknowledged high out-of-pocket costs and deductibles that she says are a problem with the Affordable Care Act. “These are all fixable problems,” she said.

The former secretary of state told the crowd she would work to seek compromise with Republicans. But, in answering a question about veterans’ health care, she accused conservatives of seeking to use the issue to privatize the system. Republicans have accused her of minimizing the problems found inside the Veterans Affairs health care system.

One of the people who attended the town hall, Lavinia Engle, of Clinton, said she backed Clinton in 2008 and is doing so again this time because she has the most experience. But she also praised her approach to proposing help for people who take time off work to care for relatives.

“I think she’s really hit on the idea that sometimes people are working and their work isn’t valued,” said Engle, a school counselor.

Most of her remarks stuck to pocketbook issues, but Clinton did divert momentarily to praise the Iowa Hawkeyes college football team and its 11-0 record.

Recalling a recent conversation with her husband, who she called a “fanatic” about college football, she said he told her recently, “You know, I think Iowa is for real.”

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7.11 - Reading Eagle: [A Little school with a big heart](http://www.readingeagle.com) (22 November, 213k online visitors/mo; Reading, PA)

BALLY, PA - Students at a Catholic school in Bally recently made a big impact on veterans.

St. Francis Academy students collected 34 boxes of snacks and personal care items and delivered them to veterans at the Coatesville Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Chester County.
Joan Kelsch, second-grade teacher at St. Francis, said she couldn't have asked for a better response from the 212 students in the school, which is part of the Allentown Diocese.

"We're a little school with a big heart," she said.

St. Francis serves children up to eighth grade.

Sixteen students were selected - two from each grade - to load the items onto a bus and visit the hospital with the donations. The student body supported its classmates Wednesday morning by making signs and cheering with the pep squad.

"They were fabulous. They were respectful," Kelsch said. "They worked so hard, because the boxes were so heavy and there were 34 boxes to load and unload."

Two veterans at the hospital came out to speak with the kids when they arrived.

The act of kindness was part of a service project for the St. Francis students.

"I just thought that since the schoolwide theme this year was service, this was a great idea," Kelsch said.

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7.12 - The Times-Tribune: Ogozalek helps fellow disabled vets through architecture (22 November, Josh McAuliffe, 190k online visitors/mo; Scranton, PA)

In his high school yearbook, Eugene M. Ogozalek listed two big post-graduation goals — becoming a Marine, and an architect.

Mission accomplished on both counts.

Following his service in the Marines, Mr. Ogozalek was accepted into Tulane University’s School of Architecture, with the government footing the bill. While in college, he met his wife, Emilia, a native of Costa Rica.

Following graduation, he embarked on what’s shaped up to be a highly successful architecture career. Among his career highlights are designing the Mall at Steamtown, Scranton Police Dept. headquarters and the Reading Performing Arts Center, as well as the restoration of downtown Scranton’s Oppenheim and Samters buildings.

In 2004, President George W. Bush signed an executive order that mandated 3 percent of all government projects be set aside for service-disabled veterans like Mr. Ogozalek.

With that in mind, Mr. Ogozalek founded Willow Design Inc., which specializes in work for U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers throughout the country. Over the past decade, he’s worked on the Dept. of Homeland Security headquarters in Washington, D.C., the new Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System in New Orleans.
Though he officially retired earlier this year, Mr. Ogozalek still practices architecture, with a focus now on exposing fraud by government subcontractors who he says are illegally getting jobs that should be going to service-disabled-certified firms.

It makes Mr. Ogozalek feel good to know that his VA work has been a benefit to his fellow disabled vets.

“I’ve probably worked on about 30 VAs now. I’m delighted to have worked on these VA facilities,” Mr. Ogozalek said. “All the people in those hospitals are trying to do the best job they can. They have an enormous responsibility.”

7.13 - KEYC-TV (CBS/FOX-12, AP, Video): Two Top VA Officials Demoted (22 November, Ashley Hanley, 37k online visitors/mo; Mankato, MN)

Two high–ranking officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs have been demoted in response to allegations that they manipulated the agency's hiring system for their own gain.

The VA says Kimberly Graves in St. Paul and Diana Rubens in Philadelphia have been demoted from senior executives, the highest–rank for career employees, to general workers within the Veterans Benefits Administration.

The VA’s acting inspector general says in a report that Rubens and Graves forced lower–ranking regional managers to accept job transfers against their will.

Rubens and Graves then stepped into the vacant positions themselves, keeping their pay while reducing their responsibilities.

Rubens and Graves refused to testify to Congress earlier this month, telling lawmakers they were asserting their Fifth Amendment rights to protect themselves against self–incrimination.

7.14 - BizPac Review (Video): Only in Obama’s America: VA bans ‘Merry Christmas,’ along with trees and music (22 November, Carmine Sabia, West Palm Beach, FL)

The Veteran’s administration in Salem, Virginia tried to play the role of Grinch this Christmas but a rabid backlash caused it to backtrack…slightly.

Following a letter to employees banning Christmas trees and pro-Christmas speech the facility acquiesced Friday to allow a tree to be erected in the building, WSLS reported.

The decision directed that the tree be paid for via private donations and be displayed alongside decorations for Hanukkah and Kwanzaa but saying “Merry Christmas” or playing Christmas music would still be a no-no.
Veteran Vicki Jackson is among those happy to see the tree back at least.

“It’s like going home and just to see that tree in the lobby is a god sent to me,” Jackson told WSLS.

“Christmas is hard for me, it’s real hard for something that happened years ago,” she said.

“I don’t look at the tree as the birth of Christ, I don’t,” Jackson said. “I look at is as a tree being decorated with ornaments.”

The original email to employees banned Christmas trees because they “have been deemed to promote the Christian religion.”

While the tree is back, no change has been made to the limits placed on music and Christian speech.

The email stated that “employees are permitted to engage in private religious expression in their personal work areas that are not regularly open to the public.”

“If an employee’s supervisor has previously granted them permission to listen to music in their personal work area, they should be reminded that music travels and should be secular (non-religious) and appropriate to the work environment,” it added.

In other words no “Merry Christmas" in front of anyone who might be offended and no “Silent Night.”

The email sparking the outrage:

“At this time of year, it is appropriate to be reminded of the various regulations for holiday displays in federal facilities.

When the public (Veterans and beneficiaries) accesses the Federal workplace, their reasonable impression should be that the government is not sponsoring or endorsing on religion over another.

The Salem VAMC Executive Leadership Team wishes to extend our wishes for a happy holiday season in a manner that is welcoming to all. To that end, public areas may only be decorated in a manner that is celebratory of the winter season. Displays must not promote any religion. Please note that trees (regardless of the types of ornaments used) have been deemed to promote the Christian religion and will not be permitted in any public areas this year.

Employees are permitted to engage in private religious expression in their personal work areas that are not regularly open to the public. Religious expression will be permitted as long as it does not interfere with carrying out of official duties and responsibilities. Items must be displayed in a manner such that the viewing public would reasonably understand the religious expression to be that of the employee acting in their own personal capacity and not of the government itself. If an employee’s supervisor has previously granted them permission to listen to music in their personal work area, they should be reminded that music travels and should be secular (non-religious) and appropriate to the work environment.
The statement from the VA on the return of the Christmas tree obtained by WSLS read as follows.

In an effort to find an appropriate balance between compliance with Federal regulations which govern holiday displays in Federal facilities and the desire of our employees and Veterans to be able to decorate for the holidays, namely by placing a Christmas tree in the public lobby, the Salem Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) Director, Dr. Miguel LaPuz, invited all Salem VAMC employees to a lunchtime discussion group Friday to hear their opinions and views on how this balance could be achieved.

After a lengthy discussion, it was determined that Christmas trees could be displayed in public areas so long as they were accompanied by the respective symbols of the two other faiths that celebrate holidays during this holiday season – namely the Jewish Menorah, or Hanukkah Lamp, and the Kwanzaa Mkeka (decorative mat) or Kinara (candleholder).

VA Directive 0022, titled “Religious Symbols in Holiday Displays in VA Facilities”, clearly states that “Religious symbols may be included in a holiday display in a public area of a VA facility if the display does not favor one religion over another, and conveys a primarily secular message. By placing diverse holiday symbols together in the public places of its facilities, VA gives no preference to one holiday above another. Prominently displaying a sign or banner containing a secular message such as ‘Happy Holidays’ or ‘Seasons Greetings’ assists in achieving [that] primarily secular message.

This compromise allows for the Salem VAMC to be in full compliance with Federal mandates that prohibit U.S. Government facilities, including the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, from “favoring one religion over another” while providing the diversity and flexibility for employees and Veterans to celebrate the holidays according to their individual faith structure.

It should be noted that government funds are not appropriate for the purchase of holiday decorations. Salem VAMC will continue to rely on donations for any future displays.

Watch the WSLS report below.