



Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

30 September 2015

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

1.1 - The Huffington Post: [Senators Hammer VA's 'Intolerably Long' Delay In Addressing Toxic Exposures, "We know that the modern battlefield includes perils even for the veteran who hasn't been engaged in combat."](#) (29 September, Lynne Peeples, 33.7M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee heard testimony on Tuesday from senators and advocates who urged the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to remove roadblocks to care and compensation for veterans sickened by environmental toxicants, including contaminated drinking water at North Carolina's Camp Lejeune. "Agents within the VA system have expended more effort, time and money devising methods to deny Camp Lejeune victims their rightful benefits rather than providing them," Retired Master Sgt. Jerry Ensminger...

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1.2 - The Denver Post: [Congress balks at deal to fund VA hospital in Aurora, Measure to cut into VA bonuses continues to imperil process](#) (29 September, Mark K. Matthews, 4.7M online visitors/mo; Denver, CO)

With only days left to act, federal lawmakers failed Tuesday to reach a deal on how to finish construction of a VA hospital in Aurora that has made national headlines by busting its budget by more than \$1 billion. At issue is the final \$625 million the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs says it needs to complete the facility. The VA already has spent about \$1 billion on the \$1.675 billion project, but it needs permission from Congress to spend another \$625 million — and soon.

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1.3 - The Washington Times (AP): [Congress moving toward deal to finish Denver VA hospital](#) (29 September, Dan Elliot, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Congress could wrap up an agreement by Wednesday that finally clears the way to finish an over-budget medical center outside Denver after months of wrangling and recriminations. The deal that emerged Tuesday would allow the Veterans Affairs Department to transfer \$625 million to complete the hospital from other accounts within its budget. It would also put the Army Corps of Engineers in charge of future VA construction projects costing \$100 million or more...

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1.4 - The Washington Times (AP): [VA approves lease of Lake Charles clinic](#) (29 September, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has approved a lease for a permanent clinic in Lake Charles. The American Press reports the 20-year lease was signed Monday. The building at the former Lake Charles Toyota location has 24,088 usable square feet. VA officials said services provided at the permanent clinic will include primary care; imaging; women's health; physical therapy; prosthetics; general and specialty mental health; ophthalmology and optometry; dental and pharmacy services; rotating specialty clinics.

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1.5 - The Hill: [Senators press VA on Agent Orange benefits](#) (29 September, Rebecca Kheel, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

“This nation needs to understand with passion and urgency the importance of this issue,” said Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.). “It affects veterans of every era. There may be new toxic substances and chemicals on the battlefield, but the principal is the same that anybody in the vicinity of combat and many who may only be near it can be exposed to this type of insidious and pernicious chemical harm,” he added.

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1.6 - The Hill: [Holding bureaucrats accountable for Camp Lejeune failures](#) (29 September, Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC), 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

This week, when I testify along with retired Marine Master Sergeant Jerry Ensminger about the Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) response to the Camp Lejeune (N.C.) water contamination, I will once again tell the American people of the hardships these veterans and their families have suffered, not once, but twice – the first time when they were diagnosed with debilitating illnesses, often cancers, and the second time when the Department of Veterans Affairs denied their veterans benefits claims.

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1.7 - WSB-TV (ABC-2, Video): [Channel 2 Action News](#) (29 September, 1.7M online visitors/mo; Atlanta, GA)

This three-minute clip covers a Gwinnett county veteran died two months ago. Now his wife is having trouble getting his death certificate from the Veterans Administration. Richard Elliot is live outside of the VA hospital in DeKalb with what the VA is doing to try to track down the problem.

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1.8 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: [Nonprofits come to veterans’ aid to bolster health care in Pennsylvania](#) (30 September, Adam Smeltz, 1.1M online visitors/mo; Pittsburgh, PA)

Irwin Scott wants to flash a great smile — a big, toothy grin that shreds his self-consciousness. Yet that’s not so simple after two years without a dental appointment, said Mr. Scott, 64, of the Carrick area. A Marine Corps veteran who served in the Vietnam War era, he ranks among thousands of Pennsylvanians whose federal veteran benefits fall short of complete health insurance.

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1.9 - KTVK-TV (TV-3, Video): [New VA community center opens](#) (30 September, Tami Hoey, 953k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

The Phoenix VA Health Care System hosted a grand opening ceremony Tuesday for the new Community Resource & Referral Center. The CRRC is a one-stop resource for homeless veterans or those who are at risk for homelessness. It provides assistance in gaining permanent housing, jobs, and other VA benefits. It even has a walk-in healthcare clinic.

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1.10 - WHNT-TV (CBS-19): [New Huntsville VA Clinic to hold ribbon cutting ceremony](#) (29 September, Maxie Gardner, 870k online visitors/mo; Huntsville, AL)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced a ribbon cutting date for the new VA Clinic in Huntsville. The new building brings the Madison/Decatur and Huntsville outpatient clinics under one roof. The ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled for October 14 at 11:00 a.m. at the new facility located at 500 Markaview Road NW. It's between Clearview Cancer Institute and Butler High School.

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1.11 - DVIDS: [San Juan VA Medical Center Celebrates World Heart Day](#) (29 September, Joseph Rivera Rebolledo, 679k online visitors/mo; Atlanta, GA)

In an effort to maintain the Veteran's population informed of heart diseases, the Veterans Administration Caribbean Healthcare System (VACHS) celebrated the World Heart Day at the San Juan VA Medical Center, Sept. 29, with a patient centered educational fair. "According to statistics provided by the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in the United States for men and women.

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1.12 - KARE-TV (NBC-11, Video): [Teen volunteer is 'talk' of VA medical center](#) (29 September, Boyd Huppert, 538k online visitors/mo; Golden Valley, MN)

Picture an old-time jukebox - silent - just waiting. You put in a quarter and then hit play. That's kind of like asking Aidan Knaus a question. "We'll, I've-been-doing-this-for-more-than-a-month," blurts the 13-year-old from Sartell as he hustles down a hallway. "It's-just-awesome," he continues, gaining speed. Aidan walks almost as fast as he talks. He's a boy with a purpose. A veteran needs him.

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1.13 - KATV-TV (ABC-7, Video): [VA holds town hall meeting for Central Arkansas veterans](#) (29 September, Jordan Bontke, 396k online visitors/mo; Little Rock, AR)

Central Arkansas veterans aired out their healthcare grievances at a VA town hall Tuesday night. More than 50 veterans gathered at the William F. Laman Public Library in North Little Rock to voice their opinions on how the VA healthcare system can be improved. Many veterans shared their stories of where and when they served, the injuries they suffered during combat, and how the VA was involved in their recovery.

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1.14 - WFLA-TV (NBC-8, Video): [Senate testimony blisters VA over slow response to Camp Lejeune toxic water victims](#) (29 September, Mark Douglas, 288k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

The U.S. Senate Veterans Affairs Committee took aim today at the VA's slow response to health claims filed by former Camp Lejeune Marines and their families who have suffered greatly from drinking and bathing in toxic tap water at the base from the mid 1950's until 1985. "This 34 year event has been called the worst incident of environmental exposure in our nation's history," testified North Carolina Senator Richard Burr.

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1.15 - WNCT-TV (CBS-9, Video): [Sen. Burr updates VA committee on Camp Lejeune toxic tap water](#) (29 September, 205k online visitors/mo; Greenville, NC)

Camp Lejeune toxic tap water was discussed at Tuesday's Veterans Affairs committee meeting on Capitol Hill. State Senator Richard Burr updated the VA committee on toxic exposure on base for 30 years. Federal research links the contaminated water with several health issues like birth defects in children and cancer. "The studies show some of the highest level of recorded toxins in any U.S. water system.

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1.16 - WEAU-TV (NBC-13, Video): [Rep. Kind introduces bill to help recruit doctors to Wisconsin VA facilities](#) (29 September, 203k online visitors/mo; Eau Claire, WI)

U.S. Rep. Ron Kind (WI-03) introduced legislation to assist the Department of Veterans Affairs in recruiting talented doctors to Wisconsin VA facilities. In recent years a number of VA clinics, including ones in Wisconsin Rapids and Wausau, have been forced to turn away patients due to staffing shortages. The Tomah VA Medical Center has also been forced to cut back services due to problems recruiting physicians.

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1.17 - Time Warner Cable News (Video): [Senators Press VA on Camp Lejeune Benefits](#) (29 September, Geoff Bennett, Atlanta, GA)

The Department of Veterans Affairs is again in the crosshairs -- this time for its handling of benefits claims from veterans and their family members who got sick after drinking toxic tap water at Camp Lejeune. For over 30 years, toxic chemicals from industrial dumping on the base and contamination from a nearby dry cleaner tainted the base's drinking water.

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1.18 - WHIO-TV (CBS-7, Video): [Misplaced WWII headstone prompts VA investigation](#) (29 September, 185k online visitors/mo; Dayton, OH)

A Facebook post has touched off an investigation by a local Veterans Affairs office. The Warren County Department of Veterans Affairs is now looking into the Facebook post which reportedly shows the desecrated headstone of a WWII veteran in Clearcreek Twp. Our reporters spoke with the cemetery director today, who said the stone was temporarily moved to make room for work on another grave. It has been moved back now.

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1.19 - WHTM-TV (ABC-27, Video): [The PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to host two events](#) (29 September, Jason Dietz, 153k online visitors/mo; Harrisburg, PA)

The PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs are promoting are the Fort Indiantown Gap Morale Welfare and Recreation March for the Fallen and the Veterans Appreciation Symposium & Expo. Both will be held Oct. 10 at Fort Indiantown Gap. The March for the Fallen is an annual event held to honor those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation.

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1.20 - KMMS-AM (AM-1450): [Tester's Legislation Extends Benefits to Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange](#) (29 September, Chris Griffin, 27k online visitors/mo; Bozeman, MT)

Senator Jon Tester today questioned VA officials in a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing about two of his bills to extend benefits and increase research on the treatment of veterans and military families exposed to Agent Orange. Tester's Blue Water Navy Vietnam

Veterans Act would allow veterans who served in the waters offshore during the Vietnam War to also be eligible for service-connected disability benefits as a result of Agent Orange exposure.

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1.21 - FierceGovernment: [VA needs to better select grantees for its adaptive sports program](#) (29 September, Ryan McDermott, 21k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Veterans Affairs Department could improve how it selects organizations to take part in its adaptive sports program so more veterans participate, according to a Sept. 28 Government Accountability Office report. The VA's adaptive sports grant program distributes \$8 million annually to organizations that provide sports activities for veterans and service members with disabilities. Between fiscal 2010 and 2013, the U.S. Olympic Committee played an intermediary role in the grant process.

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2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

2.1 - The Arizona Republic: [Veteran resource center opened in Phoenix](#) (29 September, Natalie Tarangioli, 3.2M online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

A ribbon-cutting ceremony marked the opening of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Community Resource and Referral Center at 1500 E. Thomas Road, Suite 106. Phoenix is one of the 17 cities nationwide with a center offering housing-related services to veterans struggling with homelessness or who are at risk for homelessness. The VA resource center was previously located in a cramped shared space near 12th Avenue and Madison Street.

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2.2 - KNXV-TV (ABC-15): [VA opens 'one-stop resource' for homeless, at-risk homeless veterans in Phoenix](#) (29 September, 701k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

The Phoenix VA has opened a new facility focused on providing care to homeless veterans or those at risk of becoming homeless. The Community Resource and Referral Center is a "one-stop resource" for veterans needing help finding permanent housing, establishing skills for the workforce and healthcare. The CRRC was originally located on the Human Services campus, but now has its own stand-alone building at 1500 E. Thomas Road near 16th Street and Thomas Road in Phoenix.

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3. Ending the Claims Backlog

3.1 - The Washington Times (AP): [Audit finds improvement in Fort Harrison VA benefit claims](#) (29 September, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A recent audit by the Veterans Benefits Administration has found there have been improvements in the accuracy of how claims are reviewed at the Veterans Administration Regional Benefit Office at Fort Harrison. The Great Falls Tribune reports that the audit found the agency was accurately processing the three types of disability claims reviewed, but that about 3 percent of claims contained errors that prompted \$2,410 in improper benefit payments.

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4. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill

4.1 - Alexandria News: IBM And CASY Launch New Veterans Initiative Connecting VA Vets To High-skilled Tech Jobs

(29 September, 15k online visitors/mo; Alexandria, VA)
Leaders from IBM and Corporate America Supports You, a national non-profit dedicated to helping veterans find employment, Virginia's Veterans & Defense Affairs and local veterans today launched a new veterans' initiative at Northern Virginia Community College to help local veterans translate their military experience into high-skilled jobs. Virginia has the fastest growing veteran population in the nation, with approximately 800,000 veterans statewide.

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5. Women Veterans

5.1 - The Times Record: How Can We Help Female Veterans?

(29 September, Chick Cicotte, 81k online visitors/mo; Brunswick, ME)
A 2011 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 women veterans finds that at a nearly 25 percent rate, the convenience or location of VA Women's Health-Care services are poor. Only 42 percent of respondents rate the screening process for military sexual trauma as satisfactory: "To know us is to know that we come from across America and have had very different experiences.

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6. Other

6.1 - Star Tribune: Another self-inflicted black eye for Veterans Affairs, Two administrators, one local, allegedly put their interests above veterans'

(29 September, 9.5M online visitors/mo; Minneapolis, MN)
It's not easy to further tarnish the public image of bureaucrats, long derided for devotion to procedural minutiae over common sense. But this week, two senior Veterans Affairs officials, one of whom works in Minnesota, took the reputation of civil servants down another notch. Their alleged crass, self-serving behavior, documented in a new report from the VA inspector general, also undermines already ailing confidence in their scandal-plagued agency, under fire for delays in providing veterans' health care.

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6.2 - Star Tribune (AP): Veterans Affairs benefits official in St. Paul accused of financial impropriety

(29 September, 9.5M online visitors/mo; Minneapolis, MN)
Federal authorities have accused the head of the Veterans Affairs' benefits office in St. Paul of using her position inappropriately for personal and financial gain. A report from the Office of Inspector General says Kimberly Graves arranged to be transferred from a VA office on the East Coast to a position with less responsibility in St. Paul while keeping her higher rate of pay, and that she claimed nearly \$130,000 in moving expenses.

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6.3 - Military.com: [American Legion Renews Call for VA's Hickey to Step Down](#) (29

September, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

The American Legion has renewed its call for Under Secretary of Veterans Benefits Allison Hickey to resign or be fired. The Legion, which first sought her removal along with other department officials in connection with a wait-times scandal in 2014, said Hickey now should go because of her connection to officials who used coercion to assume the directorships of regional offices in Philadelphia and St. Paul, Minnesota.

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6.4 - Military.com: [IAVA Chief Criticizes Sanders as 'Apologist' for Scandal-Riddled VA](#)

(29 September, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

The head of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said presidential hopeful Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, should explain why he didn't early and aggressively investigate the Veterans Affairs Department scandal involving manipulated wait times and the deaths of veterans. "If you want to be commander-in-chief, let's ask some hard questions of Bernie Sanders on why he didn't do more, why he didn't hold more oversight hearings," Paul Rieckhoff said during a panel discussion on Tuesday in Washington, D.C.

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6.5 - Washington Examiner (Video): [Veterans Affairs officials game system, wrote selves bonus checks](#)

(29 September, Sarah Westwood, 3.9M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Executives with the Department of Veterans Affairs together netted nearly \$2 million in taxpayer money by exploiting a benefits program that pays to relocate top officials at the VA. A pair of officials created and then accepted jobs for themselves in other cities, allowing them to pocket thousands of dollars after the VA bought their houses at inflated values and paid their moving expenses, according to a report made public Monday by the agency's inspector general.

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6.6 - Washington Examiner (Video): [Watch: Whistleblower cites rampant nepotism at VA](#)

(30 September, Pete Kasperowicz, 3.9M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Shea Wilkes, a Department of Veterans Affairs clinical worker in Louisiana, confirmed to the Washington Examiner that the VA is rife with nepotism and cronyism, a claim other disgruntled VA workers have made over the last year. Wilkes said all he ever wanted to do was serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, and help veterans. But he said soon after he started working at the VA in 2007, he noticed the agency's corrupt hiring practices.

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6.7 - Washington Free Beacon: [Top VA Execs Pocketed \\$2 Million Using Relocation Program](#)

(29 September, Joe Schoffstall, 2.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Executives at the Department of Veterans Affairs pulled in a combined \$2 million in taxpayer money by taking advantage of a relocation program, an inspector general found. Top agency officials used a program offered by the department that involves the purchase of their homes at prices that exceed market value, ultimately allowing them to keep the excess money from the sale.

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6.8 - The Hill: [Overnight Defense: Negotiators reach deal on Pentagon spending](#) (29 September, Rebecca Kheel, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)
Senators pressed the Department of Veterans Affairs on Tuesday to expand benefits for Vietnam veterans and conduct more research on the effects of Agent Orange. At issue are so-called "blue water" Vietnam veterans, who served on Navy ships during the conflict. Because they were offshore, many of those veterans are not eligible for some benefits, despite claims that they were exposed to toxins like Agent Orange, which are linked to a number of illnesses, including cancer.

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6.9 - MinnPost: [Minnesota VA official accused of improper dealings in move to St. Paul](#) (29 September, 766k online visitors/mo; Minneapolis, MN)
How far would you go to move to St. Paul? Allegedly, the director of the VA's St. Paul benefits office was willing to go pretty far, according to Mark Brunswick in the Star Tribune: "The VA inspector general's office said it has referred the case of Kimberly Graves and another VA official to the U.S. attorney for possible criminal prosecution.

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6.10 - The Fiscal Times: [Latest Outrage at the VA: Execs Profiting on Moving Expenses](#) (29 September, Eric Pianin, 514k online visitors/mo; New York, NY)
More than a year after a major VA scandal broke revealing that nearly 40 military veterans had died while waiting for treatment at a VA hospital center, the department has suffered a seemingly endless series of controversies, large and small, that have frustrated director Robert A. McDonald's efforts to reform the reputation of his beleaguered agency.

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6.11 - KSTP-TV (ABC-5, Video): [St. Paul VA Official Faces Possible Criminal Charges](#) (29 September, Tom Hauser, 392k online visitors/mo; Saint Paul, MN)
When Kimberly Graves took over as director of the St. Paul Veterans Affairs Regional Office last October it was a homecoming of sorts. She once worked in the office back in 1997 and 1998. Now, according to a Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report, it appears Graves inappropriately engineered her latest transfer to St. Paul for "personal and financial benefit."

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6.12 - WXOW-TV (ABC-19, Video): ["VA is Lying, Vets Are Dying" billboard displayed in Tomah](#) (29 September, Caroline Heckler, 370k online visitors/mo; La Crescent, MN)
Drivers on I-94 passing by Tomah will now see a billboard that says "VA is Lying, Vets Are Dying," as part of a national campaign to bring awareness to alleged issues within the VA system. The group behind the billboards is called "VA is Lying," and multiple billboards, like the one in Tomah, have been displayed in places like Tampa and Minneapolis. Candace Baer-Delis lost her father at the Tomah VA in January and is a member of the group.

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6.13 - WTMJ-AM (AM-620): [Tomah VA: People Have a Right to Their Opinion](#) (29 September, 146k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

A representative of the Tomah VA Medical Center says he can't get angry about billboards which claim the Veteran's Administration is lying and veterans are dying. Matthew Gowan says that's because he's a veteran. "I'm a 22 year Navy combat veteran, and like all of our other nation's veterans, we serve to protect our rights. To this, the Department of Veteran's Affairs respects this and any other organization's or individual's right to express their opinion."

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6.14 - KTVM-TV (NBC-6): [Montana VA warns of phone scams, Lewis And Clark County](#) (29 September, Josh Kristianto, 89k online visitors/mo; Missoula, MT)

The Montana Veterans Affairs office is warning the public of a phone scam that asks people to donate money to help veterans. A Helena resident received a phone call by someone who claimed to be from the VA office. The caller tried to get credit card information and money from the resident, who then got suspicious and called the Montana VA.

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6.15 - iHealthBeat: [VA Sees Drop in Health Data Breaches; Other Orgs Report Breaches](#) (29 September, 85k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Last month, the Department of Veterans Affairs experienced a 72.8% decline in veterans whose protected health information was affected by a health data breach, according to VA's August report to Congress, Health IT Security reports. According to the report, 431 veterans were affected by a health data breach incident in August, including 237 who had their protected health information compromised. That figure is down from the 872 veterans who were affected by protected health information-related breaches in July.

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6.16 - Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service: [VA therapist retires, leaving life-changing legacy for veterans](#) (29 September, Peggy Schulz, 38k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

When Nancy Wilke retired from the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center earlier this month, her title was occupational therapist and lifestyle coach. But in the minds of many of the thousands of veterans she met over the course of her 38-year career at the VA, it easily could have been "life changer," or even, "life saver." Wilke's recent retirement party was an opportunity for coworkers, administrators and clients to express their thanks and appreciation.

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6.17 - WSAU-AM (AM-550): [New billboard near Tomah VA aims to raise awareness, spark action](#) (29 September, Larry Lee, 29k online visitors/mo; Wausau, WI)

A Marshfield woman has joined a national group that's trying to raise awareness concerning problems within the U-S Department of Veterans Affairs. Candace Baer-Delis was on hand on Monday, when a billboard went up near the Tomah V-A that reads "The V-A is lying, Veterans are dying". The group is putting up the billboards all across the country, displayed prominently near VA medical centers.

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6.18 - FierceGovernment: [VBA senior execs manipulated relocation program for financial gain, finds IG](#) (29 September, Molly Bernhart Walker, 21k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC) Senior executives at the Veterans Benefits Administration inappropriately used their influence and the relocation expense program to obtain positions with less responsibility but the same pay level while also pocketing questionable reimbursements for their moves, finds an internal audit. In one instance, Diana Rubens used her position as deputy under secretary for field operations to create a vacancy and then volunteered for the vacancy, allowing her to become director of Philadelphia and Wilmington VA regional offices...

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6.19 - Rapid News Network: [Veterans Affairs benefits official in St. Paul accused of financial impropriety](#) (29 September, Jake Carter, 4.7k online visitors/mo; Staten Island, NY) A Veterans Affairs official in St. Paul has been accused of benefiting inappropriately because she engineered her own transfer to a directorship in St. Paul. Top VA officials in Washington said Ms. Rubens was moving to Philadelphia to clean up the VA's beleaguered regional office, which had been rocked by scandals including falsifying dates on veterans' benefits claims, retaliating against whistleblowers, and a manager compelling subordinates to pay a medium at a party to communicate with the dead.

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1. Access to Benefits/Care

1.1 - The Huffington Post: [Senators Hammer VA's 'Intolerably Long' Delay In Addressing Toxic Exposures, "We know that the modern battlefield includes perils even for the veteran who hasn't been engaged in combat."](#) (29 September, Lynne Peeples, 33.7M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee heard testimony on Tuesday from senators and advocates who urged the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to remove roadblocks to care and compensation for veterans sickened by environmental toxicants, including contaminated drinking water at North Carolina's Camp Lejeune.

"Agents within the VA system have expended more effort, time and money devising methods to deny Camp Lejeune victims their rightful benefits rather than providing them," Retired Master Sgt. Jerry Ensminger, who has devoted nearly 18 years to research and advocacy on the issue, said in his testimony before the Senate. His daughter Janey, who was born on the base, died on Sept. 24, 1985, at the age of 9 from a rare form of leukemia.

"The 30th anniversary of her death was just five short, painful days ago," added Ensminger. "Janey is but one example of the multitude of tragedies suffered by former Camp Lejeune families who were exposed by this negligence."

As The Huffington Post has previously reported, Ensminger is among critics who have accused the VA of dragging its feet with regard to veterans exposed to toxicants -- allegedly denying and delaying help, often through the deceitful and faulty use of cherry-picked and outdated science. Hundreds of thousands of former and current military personnel have likely encountered a number of toxicants, from burn-pit smoke in the Middle East to plumes of radiation off the coast of Fukushima to lingering Agent Orange herbicide, which is now believed to have also affected so-called Blue Water Navy and C-123 veterans who never set foot in Vietnam.

Any of these exposures, experts say, may take years or even decades to manifest as a medical problem like cancer or respiratory disease. Research even suggests the effects could haunt future generations -- with an exposed veteran's unexposed grandchildren and other future descendants also potentially facing elevated health risks.

"We know that the modern battlefield includes perils even for the veteran who hasn't been engaged in combat," Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) said during the hearing. "When a veteran signs up for duty, he or she has not signed up their children or grandchildren -- risking their own lives doesn't mean volunteering the next generation for a neurological condition, cancer or other life-threatening conditions."

The VA responded to the escalating Camp Lejeune concerns in August, announcing it intends to revise how it grants disability benefits for veterans who lived at the base between the mid-1950s and the 1980s, when toxic chemicals tainted the base's drinking water. Medical care for 15 different illnesses, including kidney cancer and leukemia, is already mandated by a 2012 federal bill named after Janey Ensminger. The VA's move to establish "presumptive status" for these exposed veterans -- that is, to presume that specific illnesses diagnosed in certain vets are a result of their military service -- would eventually make it easier for vets to win disability benefits as well.

But critics remain frustrated and impatient with what they see as continued foot-dragging.

"We got that announcement, but then nothing happened," said Mike Partain, who was born at Camp Lejeune and developed breast cancer at the age of 39. He attended Tuesday's hearing but did not testify.

The VA is currently conducting a separate series of meetings, planned through mid-October, to determine which health conditions should be included in the presumption, noted agency representatives at the hearing. Once that determination is finalized, veterans who meet the eligibility requirements would receive benefits for those conditions.

"I appreciate the urgency to get this settled," Dr. Ralph Erickson, chief consultant for post-deployment health with the agency, told Tuesday's panel.

The VA has so far focused on three conditions that will likely make the list: acute myeloid leukemia, kidney cancer and liver cancer. But the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, or ATSDR, has identified at least six conditions for which it says there is sufficient evidence of a link to Camp Lejeune's poisoned water.

In his testimony, Sen. Thom Tillis (R-N.C.) said he'd heard from veterans who continue to be denied benefits even though their health conditions were among the top three under consideration. HuffPost has also been in touch with the widow of one veteran, Pfc. Donald Burpee, who died from kidney cancer on July 7. He lived on the Marine Corps base for four months of 1975. Brenda Burpee told HuffPost in an email that she remains unsuccessful in securing VA compensation for her late husband.

"What I'd like is an assurance that for at least the six [conditions] for which we have sufficient evidence of causation that there will not be another denial," said Tillis. "If there is -- I know I've ratcheted up my temperature in this meeting -- it won't compare to the next one if that happens. Because we owe it to these veterans."

Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.), too, couldn't conceal his emotion as he testified on Tuesday.

"Our government rewarded the sacrifices of these patriotic men and women by negligently poisoning them and their families by engaging in a decades-long cover up," said Burr, calling the Camp Lejeune contamination the "worst incident of environmental exposure in our nation's history."

"The resistance inside the VA to the scientific data" with regard to Camp Lejeune, he added, "demonstrates how the VA has dealt with the scientific facts of toxic exposure overall."

Specifically, he highlighted the actions of subject matter experts hired by the VA to review veterans' claims. As HuffPost reported in August, benefit claim approvals plummeted after the program began in 2013. Some of the experts have been scrutinized for alleged disregard of the scientific consensus, as well as their potential conflicts of interest.

Other government leaders are now under fire over what appear to be similar obfuscations.

On Sept. 14 at a forum in Cleveland, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus said that while there have been "allegations that there is a higher incidence of illness with people who had gone through

as Marines," studies conducted by the ATSDR "can find no correlation." Advocates referenced the inaccurate statement at Tuesday's hearing.

Within days of Mabus' remark, the ATSDR published a study on male breast cancer -- their fifth over the last few years to show a link between exposures at Camp Lejeune and various debilitating diseases and death. Last week, the agency provided the VA with a nearly 70-page report outlining the full body of evidence, which they also summarized in a new statement added to their website:

It is ATSDR's position that past exposures from the 1950s through February 1985 to trichloroethylene (TCE), tetrachloroethylene (PCE), vinyl chloride, and other contaminants in the drinking water at the Camp Lejeune likely increased the risk of cancers (kidney, multiple myeloma, leukemias, and others), adverse birth outcomes, and other adverse health effects of residents (including infants and children), civilian workers, Marines and Naval personnel at Camp Lejeune.

"The ugly truth is out," said Partain. "We are just trying to get the vets something that is 30 years overdue."

Partain and Ensminger further criticized an environmental exposure iPhone app created by the VA, which was highlighted during the hearing by Erickson. Partain downloaded and explored the app, concluding in an email to HuffPost that "it seems to be way behind the times." The information concerning exposures at Camp Lejeune do not reflect the weight of the research, nor statements made by the ATSDR and other agencies concerning links between the exposures and health risks.

Tuesday's hearing also included debate over proposed bills, including one that seeks to enhance research efforts and extend presumptive status to Blue Water Navy veterans exposed to Agent Orange while serving offshore of Vietnam during the war. A similar policy change was granted to vets who served aboard contaminated C-123 airplanes — the craft used to deploy Agent Orange in Vietnam — in the U.S. after the Vietnam War had ended. That move came many years after scientific research began supporting a link.

"Potential exposure to toxic chemicals during military service raises serious and complicated questions," added Blumenthal. "While the impact is undeniable, establishing and qualifying a clear link between the exposures and health effects has become an intolerably long and complex process."

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1.2 - The Denver Post: [Congress balks at deal to fund VA hospital in Aurora, Measure to cut into VA bonuses continues to imperil process](#) (29 September, Mark K. Matthews, 4.7M online visitors/mo; Denver, CO)

With only days left to act, federal lawmakers failed Tuesday to reach a deal on how to finish construction of a VA hospital in Aurora that has made national headlines by busting its budget by more than \$1 billion.

At issue is the final \$625 million the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs says it needs to complete the facility. The VA already has spent about \$1 billion on the \$1.675 billion project, but it needs permission from Congress to spend another \$625 million — and soon.

If Congress doesn't grant that permission by early October, VA officials have warned the project will run out of money and construction would grind to a halt.

As recently as last week, it appeared as if Congress would give the VA the money it needed without incident.

The U.S. Senate on Friday voted unanimously to allow the VA to spend \$625 million more on the project and Colorado lawmakers were optimistic that a months-long battle over funding was nearly complete.

But that illusion was shattered when U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller, the chair of the House veterans committee, introduced his own bill that would require the VA to pay \$200 million of the extra \$625 million out of a VA fund that's used to pay employee bonuses.

Miller, a Florida Republican, has said previously that the VA needs to help pay for the mistakes at the mismanaged Aurora hospital and the \$200 million would be a step in that direction.

His approach, however, could run into opposition in the Senate because some of the money from that fund is used to compensate employees who work long hours, such as doctors.

Headed into Tuesday, it was unclear which approach would have the upper hand in the House.

A vote was scheduled late Tuesday for the Senate bill, but that plan was scrapped at the last minute as lawmakers continued to fight behind the scenes.

"The stumbling block is \$200 million of the \$625 million and VA has yet to come up with offsets that would be acceptable," said Miller, who added that he doesn't want the VA to shift money away from programs such as medical services.

Asked what he expected to happen next, Miller said one possibility was that the House could take up the Senate bill and vote to amend it, a time-consuming tactic that could edge the project even closer to the funding deadline.

"All options remain on the table," Miller said.

The uncertainty has caused no end of frustration for some Colorado lawmakers.

"This thing has had trouble on its own, we don't have to keep adding to it," said U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter, D-Arvada.

One potential solution that emerged Tuesday is that Congress could approve only part of the funding needed to complete the hospital — to the tune of \$425 million.

That would keep the project going and give Congress the time it needs to come to an agreement on the remaining \$200 million.

But U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, who helped guide the Senate bill through the upper chamber, said he was skeptical of that idea.

Though the stopgap measure would stop a shutdown, it would delay a final deal between Kiewit Turner, the project's prime contractor, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has been asked to manage the Aurora project to its completion.

"We have a put a path forward and I hope this is the path forward that ultimately will be enacted," said Gardner, a Colorado Republican. "We need to fund the entire project and authorize the entire project. I'm concerned the uncertainty will start to drive up costs even more."

Caught in the middle of the funding debate are U.S. Reps. Doug Lamborn and Mike Coffman, two Colorado Republicans who sit on the House veterans committee with Miller. Both said they want to avoid a construction shutdown, but they said they could see value in Miller's approach.

"There is a lot of desire to fund it and it put it behind us," Lamborn said. "But I agree with chairman Miller that it has to be done in a fiscally responsible way."

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1.3 - The Washington Times (AP): [Congress moving toward deal to finish Denver VA hospital](#) (29 September, Dan Elliot, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Congress could wrap up an agreement by Wednesday that finally clears the way to finish an over-budget medical center outside Denver after months of wrangling and recriminations.

The deal that emerged Tuesday would allow the Veterans Affairs Department to transfer \$625 million to complete the hospital from other accounts within its budget.

It would also put the Army Corps of Engineers in charge of future VA construction projects costing \$100 million or more in hopes of avoiding another blunder of this magnitude.

"It effectively keeps them (the VA) out of the hospital construction business," said Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Colo.

The deal probably won't require the VA to take \$200 million of the money from its employee bonus budget, as House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller proposed, Coffman said.

"I like the proposal by Chairman Miller," but the Senate was unlikely to go along, Coffman said.

Coffman said it was a relief to have an agreement within reach. He and other members of Colorado's congressional delegation have been trying for months to engineer a deal to finish the hospital, which is now expected to cost nearly \$1.7 billion - almost triple the estimate of a year ago.

A Corps of Engineers investigation into what went wrong said the VA repeatedly changed the design and square footage of the hospital. The corps also said the VA also used a complicated

contract process that department officials didn't understand, and that they adopted it too late in the process, leading to disputes and conflicting cost estimates.

Construction has been creeping along under a series of temporary funding measures while Congress struggled to come up with a deal.

The agreement now taking shape requires the House and Senate to take two votes each: One to raise the spending cap and another to allow the VA to transfer the \$625 million. Language approving the transfers is part of a stop-gap measure to keep the government running past Wednesday.

The Senate approved the higher spending cap Friday and could vote on the stop-gap spending bill Wednesday. The House could vote on both the spending cap and the stop-gap funding bill Wednesday.

The VA would also be required to get permission from the House and Senate veterans committees on specifics of the transfers.

The House and Senate panels have held hearings on the overruns, and lawmakers have demanded the VA fire those responsible. The VA is investigating and says one senior executive on the project retired a day after he was questioned under oath. Others have been transferred or demoted.

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1.4 - The Washington Times (AP): [VA approves lease of Lake Charles clinic](#) (29 September, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has approved a lease for a permanent clinic in Lake Charles.

The American Press reports (<http://bit.ly/1eOXZNb>) the 20-year lease was signed Monday. The building at the former Lake Charles Toyota location has 24,088 usable square feet.

VA officials said services provided at the permanent clinic will include primary care; imaging; women's health; physical therapy; prosthetics; general and specialty mental health; ophthalmology and optometry; dental and pharmacy services; rotating specialty clinics.

The VA says construction of the permanent clinic should wrap up by November 2016, and the first patients will be seen approximately two months after construction is complete.

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1.5 - The Hill: [Senators press VA on Agent Orange benefits](#) (29 September, Rebecca Kheel, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Senators pressed the Department of Veterans Affairs on Tuesday to expand benefits for Vietnam veterans and conduct more research on the effects of Agent Orange.

"This nation needs to understand with passion and urgency the importance of this issue," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.). "It affects veterans of every era.

"There may be new toxic substances and chemicals on the battlefield, but the principal is the same that anybody in the vicinity of combat and many who may only be near it can be exposed to this type of insidious and pernicious chemical harm," he added.

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee held a hearing Tuesday on veterans exposed to toxic chemicals and the VA's response.

At issue are so-called "blue water" Vietnam veterans, who served on Navy ships during the conflict. Because they were offshore, many of those veterans are not eligible for some benefits, despite claims that they were exposed to toxins like Agent Orange, which are linked to a number of illnesses, including cancer. The U.S. used Agent Orange, a herbicide, during the war. Senators want benefits extended to blue-water veterans. But VA officials pushed back, saying that allowing them to receive benefits for illnesses presumed to be caused by Agent Orange exposure would increase the backlog already plaguing the VA.

Currently, only veterans who served on the ground in Vietnam or about 12 miles offshore are eligible for benefits for illnesses tied to Agent Orange. A bill sitting in the Senate would extend benefits to blue water Navy veterans.

In the twenty years of the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Veterans and Agent Orange, only one epidemiological study has been done that specifically reported on blue water veterans, said Kenneth Ramos, chair of the institute's committee. The study found a higher instance of non-Hodgkin lymphoma in blue water veterans, but doesn't address whether that's a result of exposure.

Because environmental testing wasn't done at the time of the Vietnam War, Ramos said he doesn't anticipate any new research finding definitive links to Agent Orange and diseases found in blue water veterans.

"Whether or not the claims of blue water Navy veterans are to be processed like those of other Vietnam veterans is ultimately a policy decision and not one that can be answered on the basis of science," Ramos said.

The VA estimates about 80,000 blue water veterans are still alive, said David McLenachen, acting deputy under secretary for disability assistance at the VA. Of that, about 40,000 have been found eligible for benefits, while about 20,000 have been denied benefits.

The VA's current backlog was partly caused by adding three illnesses presumed to be caused by Agent Orange, McLenachen said. Changing the policy to include blue water veterans would increase the VA's workload, and the department would need more resources, McLenachen said.

"It generally increases the workload significantly," he said.

Sen. Thom Tillis (R-N.C.) said he'd support adding more people to the VA to get the work done.

“If we have to serve more veterans, we have to serve more veterans,” he said. “If you start putting processes in place where we’re serving more veterans it requires more people, I’ll be one of the first ones to do whatever I have to do to provide you with the resources to do it.”

Senators also asked the VA to conduct more research and supported their colleague Blumenthal’s bill that would mandate the VA to look into Agent Orange’s effect on the offspring of veterans.

VA officials said they aren’t equipped to do the multigenerational research called for in Blumenthal’s bill and asked for another agency to be responsible for the work.

Sen. Jerry Moran (R-Kan.) said the VA should want to do the research, but senators should find an agency eager to conduct the study.

“The VA believes, as I understand, there’s insufficient evidence to tie the conditions that we find in children or grandchildren of veterans to the exposure of their mothers, fathers, grandmothers or grandfathers,” Moran said. “And so, if that’s a true statement and the VA can’t find the evidence, the scientific connection, then it seems to me that the VA ought to be terribly interested in making that determination.”

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1.6 - The Hill: [Holding bureaucrats accountable for Camp Lejeune failures](#) (29 September, Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC), 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

This week, when I testify along with retired Marine Master Sergeant Jerry Ensminger about the Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) response to the Camp Lejeune (N.C.) water contamination, I will once again tell the American people of the hardships these veterans and their families have suffered, not once, but twice – the first time when they were diagnosed with debilitating illnesses, often cancers, and the second time when the Department of Veterans Affairs denied their veterans benefits claims. We’ve made significant gains in how our government treats these victims of toxic exposure, but along the way, the VA has obstructed and evaded granting benefits to these individuals. Until I am convinced VA is truly putting promises and the law into action, I will continue to hold the VA leadership accountable for their failings.

Since the crisis last summer with waiting lists for VA medical care garnered so much media attention, the VA bureaucracy has continued to disappoint thousands of Marine veterans and their families on Secretary McDonald’s watch. Where the Camp Lejeune veterans are concerned, McDonald should stop touring VA facilities and refocus on making serious decisions within his agency, or he may face the same fate as his predecessor. Sadly, his statements to Congress and veterans increasingly sound like the positions of the bureaucracy he was appointed to change and are predicated on one simple request: send more money or else the system will implode.

The problem of Camp Lejeune has not been about VA’s spending authorities or its budget. In the face of relentless Congressional pressure over successive years, VA has continued to

ignore and deny credible science and resisted helping Camp Lejeune veterans' calls for help until it was caught red-handed.

In the case of Norman Mcilhenny, a Marine veteran who served at Camp Lejeune and who is suffering from kidney cancer, a VA clinician stated in the denial that there was no evidence the chemicals in Lejeune's water, primarily TCE, cause kidney cancer. That evaluation was patently false. In fact, the EPA and the International Agency for Research on Cancer classify TCE as a carcinogen known to cause kidney cancer in humans. The VA clinician did agree that Mcilhenny should be granted one hundred percent disability for his hypertension, a condition that has better long term outcomes than a near fatal diagnosis like kidney cancer. Unbelievably, when VA was later shown evidence that TCE causes kidney cancer, VA removed the citation in the denial notice, then reissued it, and denied the veteran again for kidney cancer as a service connected condition. Like TCE, many of the other contaminants of Camp Lejeune's water that veterans and families drank, washed in, and played in from 1953 to 1987 have proven to be cancer causing.

During that thirty-four year span, the Department of Defense rewarded these brave men and women by negligently poisoning them and later engaging in a massive cover-up of what we now know is one of the worst incidents of environmental exposure in our nation's history. Since 1989, the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, ATSDR, has been investigating the water contamination at Camp Lejeune and working to produce scientifically sound studies on its effects. Last week, ATSDR provided the VA with a consolidated review of these chemicals, demonstrating that at least six human health conditions are linked to Lejeune's poisoned water system. The science in that document is the same science Congress has urged VA to consider time and again when reviewing Lejeune veterans' disability claims. Still, the denial rate has remained above 90 percent.

In 2012, Congress successfully passed the Janey Ensminger Act to at least ensure Camp Lejeune veterans and their families who had fallen sick from a number of cancers could receive medical care from VA for their illnesses. Now that VA is facing ATSDR's latest conclusive report, VA has announced it will extend what are called "presumptive" benefits for certain cancers known to be caused by the toxins found in Lejeune's water. Regrettably, while VA deliberates anew, Lejeune veterans' claims continue to come in and those veterans are frustrated, exhausted, and debilitated by their illnesses and a bureaucracy that only now is waking from its slumber. Hopefully, VA is finally out of reasons for delays and will finally do the right thing for Lejeune veterans. Rest assured, I won't quit until Lejeune veterans know their government won't leave them behind.

Burr is North Carolina's senior senator, serving since 2005. He is chairman of the Intelligence Committee and also sits on the Finance and the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committees. He introduced the Janey Ensminger Act which was signed into law in 2012.

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1.7 - Time Warner Cable News (Video): [Senators Press VA on Camp Lejeune Benefits](#) (29 September, Geoff Bennett, Atlanta, GA)

For decades, tens of thousands Camp Lejeune residents were exposed to toxic, cancer-causing chemicals – many becoming sick and some dying from their diseases.

Victims' advocates have been pushing to make it easier for veterans and their families to collect medical benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Our Geoff Bennett was on Capitol Hill today, as lawmakers joined with victims at a Senate committee hearing to push for change. He filed this report:

The Department of Veterans Affairs is again in the crosshairs -- this time for its handling of benefits claims from veterans and their family members who got sick after drinking toxic tap water at Camp Lejeune. For over 30 years, toxic chemicals from industrial dumping on the base and contamination from a nearby dry cleaner tainted the base's drinking water.

"Hundreds of thousands of service members, their families and civilian workers drank and bathed in water that had been exposed to a mix of cancer causing chemicals that, in one case, took the life of a 9-year-old girl, Janey Ensminger," said Sen. Richard Burr during a hearing before the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

Janey Ensminger's father -- retired Marine Master Sergeant Jerry Ensminger -- has become a leading advocate for poisoned military families. He also testified at Tuesday's hearing. Ensminger and other witnesses criticized the VA for changing the way it evaluates Camp Lejeune benefits claims. The agency introduced so-called "subject matter experts," who review and offer opinions on veterans' cases.

"They went out of their way to find and devise methods to deny Camp Lejeune victims their claims rather than just going ahead and providing them," Ensminger said of VA officials. "It was deliberate."

Both of North Carolina's senators say the VA has been slow at best and negligent at worst on the issue.

"To this day, I remain appalled at how the United States government has treated the service members and their families," said Sen. Burr during the hearing.

Said Sen. Thom Tillis: "This bureaucracy is broken, and this is a classic example."

Ensminger told lawmakers Camp Lejeune victims and their families shouldn't wait any longer for the help they deserve.

"We were all at Camp Lejeune to serve and protect our nation," he said. "None of us ever expected to be poisoned -- especially here on our own shores."

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1.8 - WHIO-TV (CBS-7, Video): [Misplaced WWII headstone prompts VA investigation](#) (29 September, 185k online visitors/mo; Dayton, OH)

A Facebook post has touched off an investigation by a local Veterans Affairs office.

The Warren County Department of Veterans Affairs is now looking into the Facebook post which reportedly shows the desecrated headstone of a WWII veteran in Clearcreek Twp.

Our reporters spoke with the cemetery director today, who said the stone was temporarily moved to make room for work on another grave. It has been moved back now.

The family had not been notified of the temporary move, though the cemetery says perhaps they should have been.

The original Facebook post was shared hundreds of times in just two hours.

The VA's investigation is not over, however they said the headstone did not appear to be damaged.

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1.9 - WSB-TV (ABC-2, Video): [Channel 2 Action News](#) (29 September, 1.7M online visitors/mo; Atlanta, GA)

This three-minute clip covers a Gwinnett county veteran died two months ago. Now his wife is having trouble getting his death certificate from the Veterans Administration. Richard Elliot is live outside of the VA hospital in DeKalb with what the VA is doing to try to track down the problem.

[Video Clip](#)

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1.10 - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: [Nonprofits come to veterans' aid to bolster health care in Pennsylvania](#) (30 September, Adam Smeltz, 1.1M online visitors/mo; Pittsburgh, PA)

Irwin Scott wants to flash a great smile — a big, toothy grin that shreds his self-consciousness.

Yet that's not so simple after two years without a dental appointment, said Mr. Scott, 64, of the Carrick area. A Marine Corps veteran who served in the Vietnam War era, he ranks among thousands of Pennsylvanians whose federal veteran benefits fall short of complete health insurance.

Now nonprofits are using the state Medicaid expansion to help plug that and similar gaps, pushing to enroll around 20,000 uninsured Pennsylvania veterans and many others who lack comprehensive federal coverage. Gov. Tom Wolf expanded the assistance program in April, when he granted eligibility to as many as 600,000 additional residents under the federal Affordable Care Act.

"The VA is good. But they don't serve all of my needs for me," Mr. Scott said about the Department of Veterans Affairs, which cares for more than 8.7 million veterans a year nationwide. "I have a pet peeve about teeth. I like to keep my appearance up."

He braved a rainstorm Tuesday morning to explore what Medicaid might hold for him, arriving early at an enrollment session at Veterans Place of Washington Boulevard. The national Enroll America group has co-hosted at least five gatherings since June at the Larimer center, an assistance hub for homeless and troubled veterans.

Between there and the Consumer Health Coalition on the North Side, Enroll America has helped sign up more than 50 veterans and relatives for medical assistance in the last three months, organizer Robin Schmidt said. She estimated most were newly eligible under the Medicaid expansion and counted as homeless, although some had transitional or other temporary housing.

“It gives the homeless population access to mental health facilities. It gives them access to instant health care,” Ms. Schmidt said.

She said federal grants should help nonprofits encourage sign-ups for at least three more years.

Expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act allows medical assistance for people ages 19 to 64 with incomes up to 138 percent of the poverty level, an offering that could approach \$1 trillion nationwide by 2022, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C. Of the 8,126 veterans statewide in the Medicaid program, 2,453 have gained access because of the expansion, the state Department of Human Services said.

Earlier guidelines in Pennsylvania had limited the help largely to those with disabilities, chronic illnesses or incomes around 40 percent of the poverty level. About 2.2 million children and adults in the state had been enrolled before the expansion.

“Health care should be basic. Everyone should have health care,” said Marlon Ferguson, executive director at Veterans Place.

He said the broadened policy should help alleviate poverty, mental illness, medical debts and related burdens on veterans. Homeless veterans in the Pittsburgh area topped 800 last summer, according to estimates shared by his organization.

Most veterans who enlisted or entered active military duty since the early 1980s need to log at least 24 continuous months of service or complete an active-duty period in order to qualify for VA health benefits. A variety of exceptions applies, according to the federal government.

Many retired service members may receive covered VA care for a portion, though not all, of their medical needs.

“I think there’s a common misperception that just because you’ve served, you’re eligible” for thorough VA benefits, Mr. Ferguson said.

Without federal coverage, about 1.3 million veterans had no health insurance in 2010, the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute found. It estimated around 45,500 of those lived in Pennsylvania, about 19,100 of whom would qualify for help under expanded Medicaid.

The figures do not include about 4,800 uninsured spouses of Pennsylvania veterans who would now be Medicaid-eligible, according to the 2010 analysis.

Back at Veterans Place, Mr. Ferguson said clients are thankful to know there’s help.

“How can you better your lot in life if your basic needs aren’t being met?” he said.

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1.11 - KTVK-TV (TV-3, Video): [New VA community center opens](#) (30 September, Tami Hoey, 953k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

The Phoenix VA Health Care System hosted a grand opening ceremony Tuesday for the new Community Resource & Referral Center.

The CRRC is a one-stop resource for homeless veterans or those who are at risk for homelessness. It provides assistance in gaining permanent housing, jobs, and other VA benefits. It even has a walk-in healthcare clinic.

"They help out with different problems that you might or that I went through and did not know how to recover from. Coming here they fill any possible necessity for me," says veteran Anthony Wilson.

The new center is a partnership with local community-based homeless providers, as well as other federal and state agencies that help vets and their families.

In 2014, about 2,500 veterans received assistance from the CRRC when it was located on the Human Services campus.

The new CRRC is located at 1500 E. Thomas Road, Suite 106, in Phoenix.

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1.12 - WHNT-TV (CBS-19): [New Huntsville VA Clinic to hold ribbon cutting ceremony](#) (29 September, Maxie Gardner, 870k online visitors/mo; Huntsville, AL)

The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced a ribbon cutting date for the new VA Clinic in Huntsville. The new building brings the Madison/Decatur and Huntsville outpatient clinics under one roof.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled for October 14 at 11:00 a.m. at the new facility located at 500 Markaview Road NW. It's between Clearview Cancer Institute and Butler High School.

The ceremony is open to the public and tours of the new clinic will be provided following the program. All veterans are encouraged to attend.

The new 47,800-square-foot facility will provide primary care, mental health, women's health, audiology, optometry, radiology and will have an onsite pharmacy.

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1.13 - DVIDS: [San Juan VA Medical Center Celebrates World Heart Day](#) (29 September, Joseph Rivera Rebolledo, 679k online visitors/mo; Atlanta, GA)

In an effort to maintain the Veteran's population informed of heart diseases, the Veterans Administration Caribbean Healthcare System (VACHS) celebrated the World Heart Day at the San Juan VA Medical Center, Sept. 29, with a patient centered educational fair.

“According to statistics provided by the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in the United States for men and women.

About 610,000 people die of heart disease in the United States every year—that’s one in every four deaths. Coronary heart disease is the most common type of heart disease, killing over 370,000 people annually,” said VACHS Chief of Staff, Dr. Antonio Sanchez.

According to Sanchez, the good news is that you can take control and prevent heart disease for you as well as your loved ones by following a healthy lifestyle and motivating others to do the same. Most cardiovascular diseases can be prevented by addressing risk factors, such as tobacco use, an unhealthy diet, and the lack of physical activity.

“Our objective to showcase VA Cardiology and to promote heart disease awareness among our veterans and employees was a clear success,” said Director, Cardiac Catheterization Laboratories and Associate Chief, Medical Service at the VA Caribbean Healthcare System, Dr. Orlando Rodriguez Vila.

“This event was a good opportunity to pause to recognize the history and trajectory of VA Cardiology, to reaffirm our commitment to excellence in cardiovascular care, and to show both veterans and staff the high value and meaning in what we do in our day to day,” said Rodriguez Vila.

“Here at VA Caribbean, we are proud to offer the whole spectrum of cardiovascular care to include general consultative cardiology in the San Juan VAMC and in Ponce. In addition, we can reach you from a distance and improve patient access with our Tele-Cardiology program,” said Sanchez.

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1.14 - KARE-TV (NBC-11, Video): [Teen volunteer is 'talk' of VA medical center](#) (29 September, Boyd Huppert, 538k online visitors/mo; Golden Valley, MN)

Picture an old-time jukebox - silent - just waiting. You put in a quarter and then hit play.

That's kind of like asking Aidan Knaus a question.

"We'll, I've-been-doing-this-for-more-than-a-month," blurts the 13-year-old from Sartell as he hustles down a hallway. "It's-just-awesome," he continues, gaining speed.

Aidan walks almost as fast as he talks. He's a boy with a purpose.

A veteran needs him.

Starting in June, the Sartell Middle School 8th grader has garnered some talk of his own, as a volunteer patient escort at the St. Cloud VA Medical Center.

"In all the years - and I've been here at the VA for ten years plus - I've never come across a student like you that's so interactive," Mary Klosowski tells Aidan.

The navy veteran and VA housekeeper has been noticing Aidan scurrying between assignments.

"Everybody, they want Aidan," she laughs, "but Aidan's never available because everybody wants him."

The minimum age for VA volunteer is 13. Aidan celebrated his 13th birthday the day before he started.

During his first summer with the VA, Aidan volunteered more than 160 hours, pushing veterans in their wheelchairs back and forth to therapy, the canteen and the chapel.

"I don't want to push 'em and just be quiet," he explains. "I just love to talk."

As Aidan pushes George Nistler, who served in Japan after WWII, veteran and teen talk about life on the farm where George grew up.

"Same thing with my grandma and grandpa," Aidan tells the vet. "That's what they did too. They had to work on a farm too."

Aidan has also learned some stories are just too painful to share.

Donald Zitur's voice cracks when Aidan asks him what he did during WWII. "I was a machine gunner," the veteran says, holding back his emotions. "You don't want to remember that stuff."

For Aidan, each encounter is a breakthrough.

"I didn't know that he could thrive in something like this," says Tanya Hundebly, Aidan's mother.

"School's been hard for him," she adds.

Earlier this year Aidan was diagnosed with memory lapses, ADHD and high functioning autism.

But problems were evident much earlier.

"I couldn't really talk when I was little," Aidan explains. "I couldn't talk till I was 3 years old."

Like any mother, Tanya worried. She began teaching Aidan sign language, unsure if her youngest child would ever talk.

Today, Aidan's chattiness is not only a surprise, but a victory. "Because he can talk," his mom says, "he loves meeting new people and having conversations, learning about people's lives."

Navy Veteran Jay LaCrosse made fast friends with Aidan during a 16-day rehab stay for a hip he broke falling in the shower.

"He's very special to me," says Jay, who wrote a letter to President Obama seeking recognition for the young volunteer.

The Vietnam era veteran remembers one day in particular. Aidan had slowed down his usual speedy pace while pushing Jay in his wheelchair. Jay asked Aidan if he'd been in a "fender bender."

"No, no," Aidan assured Jay, then added, "I just realized that if I went slower that you and I would have more time to talk,"

Jay held his hand to his heart recounting the story. "And that was the first time, you know, it hit me so hard how special this kid was."

And as for the mom who once worried about Aidan, there's no concern anymore.

"He's perfect just the way he is," says Tanya. "Very proud of him."

We've all been told that talk is cheap. But for those who served their country, Aidan Knaus delivers.

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1.15 - KATV-TV (ABC-7, Video): [VA holds town hall meeting for Central Arkansas veterans](#) (29 September, Jordan Bontke, 396k online visitors/mo; Little Rock, AR)

Central Arkansas veterans aired out their healthcare grievances at a VA town hall Tuesday night.

More than 50 veterans gathered at the William F. Laman Public Library in North Little Rock to voice their opinions on how the VA healthcare system can be improved.

Many veterans shared their stories of where and when they served, the injuries they suffered during combat, and how the VA was involved in their recovery.

"You don't have to be in war to be hurt," said one veteran sharing his story.

Corporal Mike Ross was the first of many to speak out during the meeting. He said hearing acting Medical Director Karen Scott say the VA was able to work 16,000 claims in the past year resonated with him.

"Did they tell you how many [claims] were denied? No. Now they going over to the appeals process, and that could take three to five years," said Corporal Ross.

Most veterans who voiced their own concerns were asked to stay after the meeting for instruction on how to solve their problem.

Medical Director Scott listened to each grievance and said afterward she plans to take what she heard and turn those frustrations into change to better the veterans' healthcare system.

"I feel [the meeting] went well, even though there were tense moments and there were veterans who were obviously passionate about their situation, they experienced some things I'll never know because I'm not a veteran. I think it was important to hear that," said Scott.

Before the forum began, Scott touted that 99% of all claims are now electronically filed. An information sheet was handed out with links for veterans seeking more information on benefits and claims.

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1.16 - WFLA-TV (NBC-8, Video): [Senate testimony blisters VA over slow response to Camp Lejeune toxic water victims](#) (29 September, Mark Douglas, 288k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

The U.S. Senate Veterans Affairs Committee took aim today at the VA's slow response to health claims filed by former Camp Lejeune Marines and their families who have suffered greatly from drinking and bathing in toxic tap water at the base from the mid 1950's until 1985.

"This 34 year event has been called the worst incident of environmental exposure in our nation's history," testified North Carolina Senator Richard Burr. "I remain appalled at how the US Government has treated these service members and their families."

Lake Wales resident Tracey Byrd, age 40, was born at Camp Lejeune. Her twin brother was stillborn, and she's suffered a lifetime of sickness including a life-threatening battle with breast cancer last year.

"It's not fair," Byrd told Eight on Your Side. "They did this to so many people. Dying didn't scare me, what scared me most is my kids not having a mother."

Byrd is one of the 20,000 Floridians on a VA registry of former Camp Lejeune residents potentially impacted by the cancer-causing chemicals that once permeated the Base's tap water.

"Our government rewarded the sacrifices of these patriotic men and women by negligently poisoning them and their families and by engaging in a decades long cover-up," said Burr.

At the Senate hearing Tuesday, VA administrators came under fire for changing the rules for former Marines and their family members who are trying to make health claims under a federal law passed in 2012 in response to the toxic water debacle.

Jerry Ensminger, a former Marine Sergeant stationed at Camp Lejeune lost his nine year old daughter to leukemia 30 years ago and has become a relentless advocate on behalf of former

base residents. He testified that the VA keeps changing rules for filing claims for healthcare related to the toxic water.

“Agents within the VA system have expended more effort, time and money devising methods to deny Camp Lejeune victims their rightful benefits rather than providing them,” Ensminger testified. “They shouldn’t need to wait any longer for the help they deserve.”

VA administrators insist they are working diligently to process claims and to come up with policies that will enable victims with an expanding number of “presumptive” illnesses to receive financial help with their healthcare claims.

“The diseases that are currently being reviewed for potential presumptive service connection including kidney cancer, angiosarcoma of the liver, and acute myelogenous leukemia, which are known to be related to long-term exposure to the chemicals that were in the water at Lejeune from the 1950’s through 1987,” testified David McLenachen, the VA’s Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Disability Assistance.

McLenachen also testified the VA already provides healthcare for 15 other conditions, under a federal law passed in 2012.

One of those conditions is the breast cancer suffered by Tracey Byrd. She almost lost her home due to overwhelming medical bills and only learned by chance last year that her cancer was related to toxic chemical exposure at Camp Lejeune. She filed a claim but waited months for the VA to finally start making good on its promise to pay.

“I thought OK this pretty much explains my wife,” Byrd said. “Because before, I just thought I’m just really sick.”

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1.17 - WNCT-TV (CBS-9, Video): [Sen. Burr updates VA committee on Camp Lejeune toxic tap water](#) (29 September, 205k online visitors/mo; Greenville, NC)

Camp Lejeune toxic tap water was discussed at Tuesday’s Veterans Affairs committee meeting on Capitol Hill.

State Senator Richard Burr updated the VA committee on toxic exposure on base for 30 years. Federal research links the contaminated water with several health issues like birth defects in children and cancer.

“The studies show some of the highest level of recorded toxins in any U.S. water system. And it reached the taps and houses and barracks and offices,” said Senator Richard Burr, (R) North Carolina. “ATSDR found Camp Lejeune residences experienced higher rates of mortality at a younger age than those at an unaffected Marine Corp base.”

Senator Burr said the situation at Camp Lejeune demonstrated how poorly the VA handled toxic exposure.

This summer, the VA department expanded the number of diseases that would be covered for Camp Lejeune Marines and their families.

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1.18 - WEAU-TV (NBC-13, Video): [Rep. Kind introduces bill to help recruit doctors to Wisconsin VA facilities](#) (29 September, 203k online visitors/mo; Eau Claire, WI)

U.S. Rep. Ron Kind (WI-03) introduced legislation to assist the Department of Veterans Affairs in recruiting talented doctors to Wisconsin VA facilities. In recent years a number of VA clinics, including ones in Wisconsin Rapids and Wausau, have been forced to turn away patients due to staffing shortages. The Tomah VA Medical Center has also been forced to cut back services due to problems recruiting physicians. This legislation would help fix these problems.

“In Wisconsin’s third district we have seen a number of VA facilities turn our veterans away and stop offering vital services due to a shortage of physicians. That is unacceptable. This is a matter of fairness to our veterans – they served our country, and they deserve proper health care. Through more recruiting tools to bring good doctors to Wisconsin, we can better fulfill our promise to our veterans of quality health care,” Rep. Kind stated.

This bill was co-sponsored by Rep. Reid Ribble (WI-08). It designates the Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). By making this designation, it allows these sites to compete for National Health Service Corps fellows, which is a program that pays student loan repayment or gives scholarships to doctors, dentists, mental health professionals, nurses, or medical students who pledge to practice in a HPSA for at least two years.

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1.19 - WHTM-TV (ABC-27, Video): [The PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to host two events](#) (29 September, Jason Dietz, 153k online visitors/mo; Harrisburg, PA)

The PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs are promoting are the Fort Indiantown Gap Morale Welfare and Recreation March for the Fallen and the Veterans Appreciation Symposium & Expo. Both will be held Oct. 10 at Fort Indiantown Gap.

The March for the Fallen is an annual event held to honor those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation. They hold a 28-mile, 14-mile, 5K and a free 1K along with a free noontime ceremony. The fee for the 28-mile, 14-mile, and 5K is \$35, the noontime ceremony and the 1K are free. Visit www.gapmwr.com to sign up, online registration closes Oct. 4.

The Veterans Appreciation Symposium & Expo is to assist veterans and their families with navigating benefits, and is free to attend. The Veterans Appreciation Day begins at 8 a.m.

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1.20 - KMMS-AM (AM-1450): [Tester's Legislation Extends Benefits to Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange](#) (29 September, Chris Griffin, 27k online visitors/mo; Bozeman, MT)

Senator Jon Tester today questioned VA officials in a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing about two of his bills to extend benefits and increase research on the treatment of veterans and military families exposed to Agent Orange.

Tester's Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act would allow veterans who served in the waters offshore during the Vietnam War to also be eligible for service-connected disability benefits as a result of Agent Orange exposure.

"For far too long, the veterans of the Vietnam War never received the benefits or the recognition they deserved, but now we're trying to right that terrible wrong," said Tester, a senior member of the committee. "We need to finally provide proper care and benefits for veterans and families suffering from Agent Orange exposure, and we must make sure that today's military members and future generations don't suffer the same mistreatment."

The committee also heard testimony on Tester's Toxic Exposure Research Act that increases research into health conditions of descendants of veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange and other toxins during their military service.

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1.21 - FierceGovernment: [VA needs to better select grantees for its adaptive sports program](#) (29 September, Ryan McDermott, 21k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Veterans Affairs Department could improve how it selects organizations to take part in its adaptive sports program so more veterans participate, according to a Sept. 28 Government Accountability Office report.

The VA's adaptive sports grant program distributes \$8 million annually to organizations that provide sports activities for veterans and service members with disabilities.

Between fiscal 2010 and 2013, the U.S. Olympic Committee played an intermediary role in the grant process. USOC received funds from VA and subgranted them to selected grantees. But starting in 2013, VA became solely responsible for selecting grantees and program administration.

Since VA has taken over selecting grantees for the program, there has been a significant number of no-shows at events which are funded by the grants, the report says.

One recent event was not well-attended, as there were only three participants. This was partially due to schedule conflicts between the event supported by the adaptive sports grant and other organizations' adaptive sports events.

At another event, the grantee collected insufficient information on which participants were veterans. In that instance the grantee should have better tracked the actual participation in its activities and collected information on veteran participants in its event registration system.

"VA officials confirmed that no-shows are a problem, and stated that they had shared information with some grantees about ways to reduce no-shows," the report says.

However, VA has not systematically gathered and disseminated such techniques to all grantees, which could promote higher attendance rates and maximum benefit of federal dollars, GAO says.

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2. Ending Veterans' Homelessness

2.1 - The Arizona Republic: [Veteran resource center opened in Phoenix](#) (29 September, Natalie Tarangioli, 3.2M online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

Homeless veterans can find assistance at a new resource center in central Phoenix that opened Tuesday.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony marked the opening of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Community Resource and Referral Center at 1500 E. Thomas Road, Suite 106.

Phoenix is one of the 17 cities nationwide with a center offering housing-related services to veterans struggling with homelessness or who are at risk for homelessness.

The VA resource center was previously located in a cramped shared space near 12th Avenue and Madison Street. The new location is at least four times the size of the old facility, according to Dennis Reinhardt, a team leader for Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team.

In addition to helping veterans find housing, the Community Resource and Referral Center offers onsite treatment and lab rooms where it is able to directly provide medical care.

At Tuesday's opening, Anthony Wilson, an Air Force veteran, spoke about how he had struggled with substance abuse and mental illness since 2001.

He was encouraged to enroll in a recovery center, and the CRRC team gave him the foundation to gain control of his life, Wilson said.

"Utilizing the resource center tools gave me a sense of normalcy and empowerment," Wilson said.

Anthony Moore said he was forced to resign from the Air Force Academy in Colorado after receiving a DUI while on base. Moore was diagnosed with depression and struggled with alcoholism and homelessness after the deaths of both of his parents as well as being released from the academy.

On Tuesday, he spoke of a friend who had helped him go to the resource center's previous location and later being able to move into his own place.

"I never again have to worry about homelessness," Moore said.

Sean Price, a senior adviser to the chief of operations for Gov. Doug Ducey, is a longtime advocate for homeless veterans. He said he considers the new resource center to be a big accomplishment for not only Phoenix but the entire state.

Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton was also in attendance and invited veterans to "come on over" to the center.

"No matter your current circumstances, whether you happen to be employed right now or soon to be employed, whether you happen to be living on the streets and experiencing homelessness or soon to be housed, no matter your medical circumstances, whatever you're experiencing now, your service to the country is honored and respected and we appreciate you as veterans," Stanton said.

The center is open Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. They can be reached at (602) 248-6040.

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2.2 - KNXV-TV (ABC-15): [VA opens 'one-stop resource' for homeless, at-risk homeless veterans in Phoenix](#) (29 September, 701k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

The Phoenix VA has opened a new facility focused on providing care to homeless veterans or those at risk of becoming homeless.

The Community Resource and Referral Center is a "one-stop resource" for veterans needing help finding permanent housing, establishing skills for the workforce and healthcare.

The CRRC was originally located on the Human Services campus, but now has its own stand-alone building at 1500 E. Thomas Road near 16th Street and Thomas Road in Phoenix.

Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton was at the grand opening ceremony and said, "This is a good day for the City of Phoenix to be able to open this VA Community Resource & Referral Center, we are doing it for our Veterans."

He added, "The work that's going to go inside the CRRC is going to change lives."

The center is one of 29 facilities nationwide.

The VA has partnered with Arizona homeless organizations and other federal and state agencies to help provide programs and resources to veterans. It also has a walk-in health clinic.

Last year, about 2,5000 veterans in Phoenix were helped via the program, according to a VA media release.

The VA can be contacted by phone at 800-554-7174 or online at Phoenix.va.gov .

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3. Ending the Claims Backlog

3.1 - The Washington Times (AP): [Audit finds improvement in Fort Harrison VA benefit claims](#) (29 September, 3.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A recent audit by the Veterans Benefits Administration has found there have been improvements in the accuracy of how claims are reviewed at the Veterans Administration Regional Benefit Office at Fort Harrison.

The Great Falls Tribune reports (<http://gftrib.com/1FEooza>) that the audit found the agency was accurately processing the three types of disability claims reviewed, but that about 3 percent of claims contained errors that prompted \$2,410 in improper benefit payments.

The Sept. 9 audit by the VA's Office of the Inspector General found significant improvement from a 2011 inspection when 10 of 30 cases had errors.

As of April, the Fort Harrison has 71 full-time employees and 58 percent of the more than 2,700 veterans rating claims pending had been for greater than 125 days.

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4. Veteran Opportunities for Education/GI Bill

4.1 - Alexandria News: [IBM And CASY Launch New Veterans Initiative Connecting VA Vets To High-skilled Tech Jobs](#) (29 September, 15k online visitors/mo; Alexandria, VA)

Leaders from IBM and Corporate America Supports You, a national non-profit dedicated to helping veterans find employment, Virginia's Veterans & Defense Affairs and local veterans today launched a new veterans' initiative at Northern Virginia Community College to help local veterans translate their military experience into high-skilled jobs. Virginia has the fastest growing veteran population in the nation, with approximately 800,000 veterans statewide. Between April 2015 and January 2017, Defense Manpower Data Center estimates 24,500 service members will transition out of service in Virginia. The new Veteran Employment Accelerator Grant program, spearheaded by IBM and CASY, will provide local returning service members with hands-on training, certification, and job placement assistance in the fast-growing tech sector.

Led by an IBM expert, more than a dozen veterans participated in a week-long training and certification course at NOVA on data analytics software called i2 Analyst's Notebook. IBM and CASY, along with a network of companies, will help them transition to civilian careers, connecting them to job opportunities. Hundreds of veterans around the nation will participate in this program.

"Our veterans who fought bravely for our country are highly skilled, but need help translating their military skills to civilian careers," said Diane Melley, IBM Vice President of Global Citizenship Initiatives. "This new program will equip our courageous men and women with the training, credentials, and job assistance they need to succeed in the 21st century workforce."

"IBM's commitment to helping veterans transition to civilian life will help combat unemployment in the military community," said Erin Voirol, Chief Operating Officer of CASY and the Military Spouse Corporate Career Network. "Veterans receive training directly linked to in-demand, skilled jobs. This program supports CASY's mission, in partnership with NOVA and the Virginia Veterans Affairs Office, to ensure our returning soldiers are career ready."

"Our National Guard members and veterans have much to offer employers," CPT Mike Riley, Chief, Transition Services & Employment Outreach for the Army National Guard.

said. "These individuals have trained to lead. They know how to work as part of a team. They have an excellent understanding of and appreciation for the importance of authority and understand their contribution to the success of the team. The Army National Guard is proud to have established ongoing relationships with leading organizations and employers, including IBM and CASY, who are seeking the mission-minded and reliable employees they find when hiring a service member. It is these invaluable efforts that are bridging gaps and creating meaningful opportunities for our service members. By providing access to forwarding thinking programs, we are ensuring the enduring resilience and readiness of our National Guard members and their families."

By 2018, the U.S. could face a shortage of as many as 190,000 people with the required analytics experience as cyberattacks and fraudulent activities continue to ripple across many industries. Data analytics, used in credit card and retail industries and law enforcement, help predict and prevent criminal, terrorist and fraudulent activities.

The veterans program is part of IBM's philanthropic Impact Grants that arm non-profits, government and education institutions with effective tools, skills, and expertise to strengthen their infrastructure, build leadership, and better serve their communities.

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5. Women Veterans

5.1 - The Times Record: [How Can We Help Female Veterans?](#) (29 September, Chick Cicotte, 81k online visitors/mo; Brunswick, ME)

A 2011 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 women veterans finds that at a nearly 25 percent rate, the convenience or location of VA Women's Health-Care services are poor. Only 42 percent of respondents rate the screening process for military sexual trauma as satisfactory: "To know us is to know that we come from across America and have had very different experiences. We have served in all branches of the military (37 percent of us have served in the Army, 23 percent in the Navy, 23 percent in the Air Force, 14 percent in the Marines and 3 percent in the Coast Guard) and represent the face of America (77 percent of us are white, 15 percent are African American, 12 percent are Hispanic, and 3 percent are Asian American). What may surprise many people is that 17 percent of us are women, a historically large number, and many of whom saw combat in Iraq and Afghanistan."

The female veterans I've talked to have a mixed bag about V.A. services in Maine. Many don't know about the Women's Clinic at Togus. What about female veterans in our rural areas? How

about more women counselors who understand women issues? Can we expect V.A. to transition from a male dominant system to an easier access for our female veterans? The V.A. has been late to respond to female veterans who came home from the service looking for V.A. Health Care relevant to their needs. Signature conditions of the wars included Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), military sexual trauma, debilitating back, knee, and hip injuries, female prosthesis, etc., etc. All of which have been treated with heavy emphasis on pharmaceuticals for pain, depression, anxiety, and discomfort. The Mid-Coast Veterans Resource Center, with Director Read Rich and VSO Paul Loveless along with myself and others are putting together a Women's Seminar type gathering to discuss problems facing our female veterans. Hopefully this will take place at the end of October. Stay tuned.

Beyond basics

Once again we want to remind veterans, their families and survivors about V.A. benefits beyond the basic program:

- **Aid and Attendance:** Through the Aid and Attendance program, veterans may be eligible to receive money to cover the cost of nursing homes, assisted living programs and other long term care options. Couples may receive up to \$25,000 and surviving spouses up to \$13,560 a year to cover their long term care coverage.
- **Burial Benefits:** A U.S. flag may be requested to drape over a veteran's casket and families may request a Presidential Memorial Certificate to honor the deceased loved one's service. V.A. also provides headstone or grave marker.
- **G.I. Bill:** The G.I. Bill offers up to \$2,000 to help cover the cost of certification courses or other vocational training programs.
- **Life Insurance:** Veterans may receive up to \$400,000 in life insurance through Veteran's Group Life Insurance Group Life program, which offers competitive premium rates.
- **Housing Assistance:** Veterans having trouble making their mortgage payments are eligible for repayment assistance through the V.A.. Additional benefits are available for homeless veterans.

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6. Other

6.1 - Star Tribune: [Another self-inflicted black eye for Veterans Affairs, Two administrators, one local, allegedly put their interests above veterans'](#) (29 September, 9.5M online visitors/mo; Minneapolis, MN)

It's not easy to further tarnish the public image of bureaucrats, long derided for devotion to procedural minutiae over common sense. But this week, two senior Veterans Affairs officials, one of whom works in Minnesota, took the reputation of civil servants down another notch.

Their alleged crass, self-serving behavior, documented in a new report from the VA inspector general, also undermines already ailing confidence in their scandal-plagued agency, under fire for delays in providing veterans' health care.

The two administrators work for the Veterans Benefits Administration, a part of the Department of Veterans Affairs that was the subject of a 2012 congressional hearing scrutinizing its massive backlog in claims processing. On Monday, the inspector general released the results of an investigation triggered by a whistleblower's call about nearly \$300,000 in moving benefits paid out to administrator Diana Rubens when she transferred from Washington, D.C., to a regional office in Philadelphia.

The other administrator the report focuses on is Kimberly Graves, who volunteered in 2014 to move to Minnesota to head up the regional benefits office in St. Paul. Graves' moving expenses were \$129,467. The inspector general is referring its findings on the two to the U.S. attorney's office for possible criminal prosecution.

Surprisingly, the investigators generally did not take issue with the -eyebrow-raising moving expenses. Rubens and Graves qualified for a VA program that assists transferred officials when their houses can't be sold quickly. That's what yielded the large sums and the report concluded that policies were followed. The sums, however, stand in stark contrast to the average employer relocation package — \$21,033 — documented by a 2012 survey.

Instead, investigators concluded that "two [other] directors appear to have been inappropriately coerced to leave positions" to "create vacancies for Ms. Rubens and Ms. Graves." Rubens and Graves "inappropriately used their positions of authority for personal and financial benefit," the report stated.

Referring these actions to the U.S. attorney's office is proper and commendable. Swift action to hold these administrators accountable will be a strong deterrent to others.

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6.2 - Star Tribune (AP): [Veterans Affairs benefits official in St. Paul accused of financial impropriety](#) (29 September, 9.5M online visitors/mo; Minneapolis, MN)

Federal authorities have accused the head of the Veterans Affairs' benefits office in St. Paul of using her position inappropriately for personal and financial gain.

A report from the Office of Inspector General says Kimberly Graves arranged to be transferred from a VA office on the East Coast to a position with less responsibility in St. Paul while keeping her higher rate of pay, and that she claimed nearly \$130,000 in moving expenses.

The VA inspector general's office said it has referred Graves and another VA official to the U.S. attorney for possible criminal prosecution and a decision on whether Graves should return \$129,000 in moving expenses.

"We determined Ms. Graves inappropriately used her position of authority for personal and financial benefit when she participated personally and substantially in creating an opportunity for

her own transfer to the St. Paul (Veterans Affairs Regional Office)," according to the report released Monday.

Investigators say the other VA official, Diana Rubens, used the same tactics to get herself reassigned to the Philadelphia regional office from Washington.

Graves did not return a call for comment.

The VA said it would review all incentive and relocation procedures in the department.

"In addition, VA will consider all the evidence presented by the IG, collect any additional evidence necessary, and take appropriate accountability actions. VA will fully cooperate with other federal agencies as required as we continue our daily effort to improve the timeliness and quality of care and services delivered to our Nation's Veterans," the agency said in a statement.

An employee transferring in the interest of the government from one agency to another that's at least 50 miles away is eligible for relocation expense allowances, according to federal regulations.

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6.3 - Military.com: [American Legion Renews Call for VA's Hickey to Step Down](#) (29 September, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

The American Legion has renewed its call for Under Secretary of Veterans Benefits Allison Hickey to resign or be fired.

The Legion, which first sought her removal along with other department officials in connection with a wait-times scandal in 2014, said Hickey now should go because of her connection to officials who used coercion to assume the directorships of regional offices in Philadelphia and St. Paul, Minnesota.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington, D.C., is now weighing criminal charges against the two directors, Diana Rubens and Kimberly Graves. Meanwhile, the VA's Inspector General's office has recommended that Hickey be disciplined for reportedly assisting one of the women in the job move.

"It's disturbing to read terms like 'criminal referrals' and 'coerced' in an official report about an agency that was created to serve veterans," American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett said on Tuesday. "It is time for Under Secretary Hickey to finally do the right thing and resign."

VA officials did not respond to Military.com's request for comment on the Legion's demand.

Following release of the IG's report, the department issued a statement saying it agreed with a number of recommendations the office made in connection with the latest scandal.

"As a result of their findings, VA leadership will conduct a 30-day review of all incentive and relocation procedures in the department," it stated. "In addition, VA will consider all the evidence

presented by the IG, collect any additional evidence necessary, and take appropriate accountability actions."

The department will also fully cooperate with other federal agencies as required, the statement said.

Hickey refused to resign back in 2014, when she, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki and Veterans Health Administration Under Secretary Dr. Robert Petzel all came under fire from veterans and lawmakers amid the wait-time scandal that IG officials said contributed to the deaths of some veterans.

Hickey told Military.com in August that it never entered her mind to leave the job last year, notwithstanding the pressure that also was coming from Congress.

"You know why? Because I came here for this mission," she said. "I came here for the people this mission serves. I gave up a very lucrative job in industry. I was happy where I was but this was a calling for me."

"Unless it was someone "not of this world [who] told me I was done, I would keep going until I was done," she said. "My faith brought me here and my faith kept me here."

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6.4 - Military.com: [IAVA Chief Criticizes Sanders as 'Apologist' for Scandal-Riddled VA](#)
(29 September, Bryant Jordan, 6.6M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

The head of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said presidential hopeful Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vermont, should explain why he didn't early and aggressively investigate the Veterans Affairs Department scandal involving manipulated wait times and the deaths of veterans.

"If you want to be commander-in-chief, let's ask some hard questions of Bernie Sanders on why he didn't do more, why he didn't hold more oversight hearings," Paul Rieckhoff said during a panel discussion on Tuesday in Washington, D.C. "We and others called him out for basically being an apologist for the VA as the scandal erupted around him."

Sanders, an Independent lawmaker who caucuses with the Democrat Party, chaired the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee until last year's midterm elections, when the Republicans regained control of the Senate.

His campaign office didn't immediately respond to an email request for comment.

Most of the pressure put on the VA last year came from the House Veterans Affairs Committee, which is now chaired by Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Florida.

Rieckhoff made his comments during a discussion of news coverage of the VA, and began by pointing out that none of the questions prepared by CNN during a recent debate among GOP presidential hopefuls dealt with veterans. Only after the widow of a fallen service member raised the issue with the moderator was a veterans-related question asked, he said.

Kevin Baron, executive editor of conference co-sponsor DefenseOne, said Sanders "protected the VA ... because going after it, really rooting out what was wrong with it, would be admitting that government-run health care doesn't work. And Bernie Sanders supports government-run health care."

The two also raised the matter of GOP Presidential hopeful Donald Trump's backing by a bogus veterans group, as well as the lobbying efforts of Concerned Veterans for America, which has been linked financially to the Koch brothers.

"They are a very conservative, politically involved organization that tries to sell itself as a veteran's organization, but they're a political organization," Baron said. "They get people elected who have very conservative values, very hawkish military values ... I think there is an undertone of that."

Rieckhoff said questioning the candidates on these kinds of issues "transcend beyond the veterans community and cut to the core of leadership."

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6.5 - Washington Examiner (Video): [Veterans Affairs officials game system, wrote selves bonus checks](#) (29 September, Sarah Westwood, 3.9M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Executives with the Department of Veterans Affairs together netted nearly \$2 million in taxpayer money by exploiting a benefits program that pays to relocate top officials at the VA.

A pair of officials created and then accepted jobs for themselves in other cities, allowing them to pocket thousands of dollars after the VA bought their houses at inflated values and paid their moving expenses, according to a report made public Monday by the agency's inspector general.

Both officials stepped into jobs that entailed fewer duties, but both maintained their six-figure salaries nonetheless, the watchdog found.

What's more, the Veterans Benefit Administration used the relocation program — intended to ease the transition for officials who had to move because of work — to lavish higher pay on top executives.

Twenty-one of 23 reassignment cases reviewed by the inspector general involved a salary hike.

For example, one executive, Diane Rubens, improperly earned more than \$288,000 in taxpayer money to relocate for Philadelphia. Her benefits included a generous payment for alcoholic drinks, which the agency watchdog questioned.

In Rubens' case, the VA reportedly tapped a relocation firm to purchase Rubens' Alexandria, Va. home above market value and sell it at a loss.

Several other VA officials were improperly paid "incentives" totaling \$140,000 to fill job vacancies that had never even been announced despite the fact that such payments are supposed to be reserved for positions that the agency finds difficult to fill.

The inspector general concluded the Veterans Benefit Administration had used the relocation program "inappropriately," lining the pockets of executives instead of simply moving employees.

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6.6 - Washington Examiner (Video): [Watch: Whistleblower cites rampant nepotism at VA](#) (30 September, Pete Kasperowicz, 3.9M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Shea Wilkes, a Department of Veterans Affairs clinical worker in Louisiana, confirmed to the Washington Examiner that the VA is rife with nepotism and cronyism, a claim other disgruntled VA workers have made over the last year.

Wilkes said all he ever wanted to do was serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, and help veterans. But he said soon after he started working at the VA in 2007, he noticed the agency's corrupt hiring practices.

"I started noticing the hiring practices were kind of ... I was like, I don't think they did this right," he said.

"It was just a shame," he said. "Weren't giving veterans preference, they know how to manipulate those masterfully."

"That's why there's such a big thing of cronyism, which is basically one of the major problems in the VA," he added. "You have poor leadership from top to bottom, and those leaders have taught those under them the wrong way to do things."

He said his local VA office is filled with connected "good ol' boys."

"To be honest, they're incompetent," he said. "A lot of the reasons there's problems is they're incompetent."

In the same interview, VA employee Brandon Coleman recounted several acts of retaliation against him for blowing the whistle on poor treatment of suicidal veterans.

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6.7 - Washington Free Beacon: [Top VA Execs Pocketed \\$2 Million Using Relocation Program](#) (29 September, Joe Schoffstall, 2.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Executives at the Department of Veterans Affairs pulled in a combined \$2 million in taxpayer money by taking advantage of a relocation program, an inspector general found.

Top agency officials used a program offered by the department that involves the purchase of their homes at prices that exceed market value, ultimately allowing them to keep the excess money from the sale. The relocation program additionally pays for moving expenses for their new jobs within the department.

Two such executives were found to create jobs for themselves that came with fewer responsibilities while maintaining six-figure salaries.

The IG concluded that 21 of the 23 of the reviewed reassignment cases were found to involve a salary hike, Sarah Westwood of the Washington Examiner reports.

The Examiner further writes on the VA officials:

For example, one executive, Diane Rubens, improperly earned more than \$288,000 in taxpayer money to relocate for Philadelphia. Her benefits included a generous payment for alcoholic drinks, which the agency watchdog questioned.

In Rubens' case, the VA reportedly tapped a relocation firm to purchase Rubens' Alexandria, Va. home above market value and sell it at a loss.

Several other VA officials were improperly paid "incentives" totaling \$140,000 to fill job vacancies that had never even been announced despite the fact that such payments are supposed to be reserved for positions that the agency finds difficult to fill.

The inspector general concluded the Veterans Benefit Administration had used the relocation program "inappropriately," lining the pockets of executives instead of simply moving employees.

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6.8 - The Hill: [Overnight Defense: Negotiators reach deal on Pentagon spending](#) (29 September, Rebecca Kheel, 1.8M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

THE TOPLINE: The Senate and House Armed Services committees have reconciled their versions of the National Defense Authorization Act, clearing the way for the full House to consider Pentagon spending later this week.

The top members of both committees -- GOP chairmen Sen. John McCain (Ariz.) and Rep. Mac Thornberry (Texas) and ranking Democrats Rep. Adam Smith (Wash.) and Sen. Jack Reed (R.I.) -- announced the agreement Tuesday, ending months of meetings. But the ranking members said they still oppose the way certain funds are to be allocated.

The bill, which covers everything from Guantanamo Bay to prescription co-pays, is scheduled to move to the House floor Thursday.

The defense policy bill authorizes Pentagon activities and programs, and has passed for 53 years in a row.

This year, the White House urged Republicans to lift 2011 federal budget caps for the Pentagon and non-defense spending.

The Republican-proposed budget would leave those caps in place for non-defense spending but boost defense spending through a war fund not subject to those limits.

The defense policy bill would authorize \$612 billion in funding for the Pentagon. That's the amount the administration is asking for, but \$38 billion of that would be in the war fund instead of the base budget as the administration wants.

Asked about the president's veto threat, a senior staffer on the House Armed Service Committee said, "We'll see what happens and move from there."

For Guantanamo, the conference version of the bill would keep the ban on bringing detainees to the United States for another year. That's because, McCain said, the Obama administration did not deliver a plan on where to house the detainees.

The conference bill also would continue a ban on transfers to Yemen and add bans on transfers to Syria, Libya and Somalia. It would also require the secretary of Defense to certify that transfers out of the facility are in the interest of national security.

Other provisions include allowing the United States to provide arms to Ukraine; providing for coordination between the Defense Department and Veterans Affairs on mental health issues; allowing troops on bases in the United States to carry arms in accordance with state laws; and banning torture by any U.S. agency.

ADMINISTRATION: SYRIAN REBEL PROGRAM NOT SUSPENDED: The White House said Tuesday that the U.S. program to train and equip Syrian rebels to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has not been suspended, contrary to some reports.

"We have clearly faced challenges with the Train & Equip program, and we are currently reviewing our efforts to determine how we can do better," said Emily Horne, National Security Council spokesperson.

The Pentagon also said the program is currently active, but is undergoing an internal review to determine what areas can be improved.

The Department of Defense "is committed to supporting the New Syrian Forces," said Pentagon spokeswoman Navy Cmdr. Elissa Smith.

Reports that the program had been suspended come after U.S. Central Command acknowledged Friday that some rebels involved with the program handed over a quarter of their U.S.-provided equipment to the al-Nusra Front, al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria.

The administration announced the creation of the program last year. It seeks to create a ground force to take on ISIS and supersede the need to send in U.S. forces. Congress authorized the program last September and provided \$500 million for the program in December.

The initial goal was to train 5,400 by year's end, but military commanders say that goal will not be attainable. The administration has requested \$600 million for the program in 2016.

US CONDUCTS AIRSTRIKE IN FALLEN CITY OF KUNDUZ: The U.S. military carried out an airstrike Tuesday morning on the Afghan city of Kunduz as government forces attempt to take back the city a day after it was overrun by Taliban fighters.

Pentagon and White House officials condemned the Taliban attacks and confirmed the U.S. airstrike.

Afghan forces have begun to retake some government buildings, officials said.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest told reporters it was too early to know if the fall of Kunduz would affect U.S. plans to continue withdrawing troops.

"At this point, I don't have any sort of immediate indication this will change the long-term strategy in that is in place in Afghanistan," he said.

On Monday, the northern Afghan provincial capital fell to the Taliban after a long stalemate.

GOP lawmakers were swift in their response to the news, criticizing President Obama for drawing down U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Both Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services committees, compared the fall of Kunduz to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

SENATORS PRESS VA ON AGENT ORANGE BENEFITS: Senators pressed the Department of Veterans Affairs on Tuesday to expand benefits for Vietnam veterans and conduct more research on the effects of Agent Orange.

At issue are so-called "blue water" Vietnam veterans, who served on Navy ships during the conflict. Because they were offshore, many of those veterans are not eligible for some benefits, despite claims that they were exposed to toxins like Agent Orange, which are linked to a number of illnesses, including cancer.

Senators want benefits extended to blue-water veterans. But VA officials pushed back, saying that allowing them to receive benefits for illnesses presumed to be caused by Agent Orange exposure would increase the backlog already plaguing the VA.

Currently, only veterans who served on the ground in Vietnam or about 12 miles offshore are eligible for benefits for illnesses tied to Agent Orange. A bill sitting in the Senate would extend benefits to blue water Navy veterans.

The VA's current backlog was partly caused by adding three illnesses presumed to be caused by Agent Orange, said David McLenachen, acting deputy under secretary for disability assistance at the VA. Changing the policy to include blue water veterans would increase the VA's workload, and the department would need more resources, McLenachen said.

Sen. Thom Tillis (R-N.C.) said he'd support adding more people to the VA to get the work done.

Senators also asked the VA to conduct more research and supported their colleague Sen. Richard Blumenthal's (D-Conn.) bill that would mandate the VA to look into Agent Orange's effect on the offspring of veterans.

VA officials said they aren't equipped to do the multigenerational research called for in Blumenthal's bill and asked for another agency to be responsible for the work.

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6.9 - MinnPost: [Minnesota VA official accused of improper dealings in move to St. Paul](#)
(29 September, 766k online visitors/mo; Minneapolis, MN)

How far would you go to move to St. Paul? Allegedly, the director of the VA's St. Paul benefits office was willing to go pretty far, according to Mark Brunswick in the Star Tribune: "The VA inspector general's office said it has referred the case of Kimberly Graves and another VA official to the U.S. attorney for possible criminal prosecution. It also recommends that actions be taken to decide whether Graves, who remains head of the VA's St. Paul office of the Veterans Benefits Administration, should return \$129,000 in moving expenses. ... 'We determined Ms. Graves inappropriately used her position of authority for personal and financial benefit when she participated personally and substantially in creating an opportunity for her own transfer to the St. Paul [Veterans Affairs Regional Office],' said the report released Monday."

Normally, in a bike vs. train situation, you don't expect the bike to win. This time might be different, as Randy Furst reports, also in the Star Tribune: "Robert Cattnach is used to mixing with the big boys. Cattnach is a partner at the prestigious Dorsey & Whitney law firm and a nationally recognized expert on cyber security. He is a former counsel to the Secretary of the Navy, and he represented the FBI and CIA as a Justice Department attorney. He is also chairman of the board of the Ordway Theater. ... So Cattnach didn't hesitate to sue BNSF, one of the nation's largest railroad companies, over a bike accident — his own — after the company refused to pay a few thousand dollars in medical bills. For a while Cattnach even represented himself."

Stanley Hubbard's advice to Scott Walker: Don't talk about abortion or social issues. That's the local takeaway from Ashley Parker's story in the New York Times about how big donors to political campaigns expect candidates to listen to their views: " ... 'Donors are demanding a lot these days, man, and they want answers and they want results, and a lot of them hit the panic button a lot,' said Theresa Kostrzewa, a Republican lobbyist and donor based in North Carolina, who is supporting former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida. 'This is a new day. Donors consider a contribution like, 'Well, wait, I just invested in you. Now I need to have my say; you need to answer to me.' ... Stanley S. Hubbard, the media mogul based in Minnesota, who supported Mr. Walker, said he had offered a piece of advice after an interview in which Mr. Walker discussed his views about abortion and gay marriage. 'I suggested to him that he stay out of social issues,' Mr. Hubbard said. 'I told him nothing is going to happen, whether you like abortion or not — that's your own belief, but don't talk about that.' "

Success magazine tells the inspiring turnaround story of Minnesota's own Andrew Zimmern: "On the afternoon of Jan. 28, 1992, Andrew Zimmern walked into a coffee shop on Manhattan's Lower West Side. He could have come from anywhere—from the building he'd been squatting in for most of the past year, from any of the subway stations where he lurked to lift purses and tourists' jewelry, from any of the urban caves he went to dry out or come down. ... What the then-30-year-old stepped into was a roomful of friends—"20 of my nearest and dearest," he says now—who ushered him in, told him again how much they loved him, put a one-way ticket in his hand and sent him 1,200 miles west to Minnesota."

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6.10 - The Fiscal Times: [Latest Outrage at the VA: Execs Profiting on Moving Expenses](#)
(29 September, Eric Pianin, 514k online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

Hillary Clinton complained over the weekend about the “drip, drip, drip” of revelations regarding her mishandling of email while she was Secretary of State that has seriously undercut public confidence in her, but she has nothing on the Department of Veterans Affairs.

More than a year after a major VA scandal broke revealing that nearly 40 military veterans had died while waiting for treatment at a VA hospital center, the department has suffered a seemingly endless series of controversies, large and small, that have frustrated director Robert A. McDonald’s efforts to reform the reputation of his beleaguered agency.

The latest, revealed on Monday in a report by the VA’s Inspector General, addresses the alleged chiseling of hundreds of thousands of dollars by two senior officials of the VA Benefits Administration who orchestrated new job openings for themselves and then collected sizable reimbursements for relocating to new cities.

The alleged scams were so elaborate and costly that the IG has referred the two cases to a federal prosecutor for possible criminal action, while top department officials are conferring on whether to try to force the two women involved to repay the relocation costs.

As part of the alleged scheme, Diana Rubens arranged to be reassigned from her post as Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations in Washington, D.C. to that of Director of the Philadelphia and Wilmington VA regional offices in June 2014. She billed the VA \$274,019 for the move to Philadelphia and arranging for new housing.

Kimberly Graves, working in concert with Rubens, left her position as the Director of Veterans Benefits Administration Eastern Area Office in Philadelphia last October to become director of the St. Paul, Minn., VA regional office. She was reimbursed \$129,467 for her moving expenses.

Rubens’ and Graves’ relocation expenses were generally allowable under federal and VA policy, even though more than a quarter million dollars for Rubens may seem excessive to some. But in both cases, the inspector general said his office found that the women “inappropriately” used their positions of authority “for personal and financial benefit” by first taking action to create the vacancies and then aggressively seeking the new openings.

According to investigators, Rubens used her previous position to create the vacancy by quietly working closely with Graves to arrange to transfer the then-Philadelphia director to fill a vacant position in Los Angeles. Rubens then relinquished her senior post in Washington to move to the Philadelphia office.

The IG said that Rubens admitted that she arranged to move to Philadelphia because she had family in the area. Graves, the former Veterans Benefits Administration Eastern Area director, similarly worked behind the scenes to force out the then-director of the St. Paul VA regional office so that she could claim his office.

“Our analysis of available evidence indicated two directors appear to have been inappropriately coerced to leave positions they were not interested in leaving to create vacancies for Ms. Rubens and Ms. Graves,” the IG report said. “Ms. Rubens and Ms. Graves were in positions that allowed them to effect these transfers and, therefore, misused their positions of authority for their own personal benefit.”

There's another twist to the case. Rubens and Graves arranged for transfers to jobs with far less responsibilities than their old ones, yet they were allowed to retain their annual salaries of \$181,497 and \$173,949, respectively. Under federal regulations, the VA could not reduce their annual salaries upon reassignment, even with a significant reduction in the scope of their responsibilities, unless they subsequently received unfavorable job reviews.

"We made criminal referrals to the U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Columbia, regarding official actions orchestrated by Ms. Rubens and Ms. Graves," the report states. "Formal decisions regarding prosecutorial merit are pending."

There has long been a long-standing controversy over the federal government's relocation benefits policies and other income incentives that are typically used to recruit and keep top-flight employees. In this case, according to the IG, two veteran VA officials figured out a way to game the system to win transfers to other cities and claim large relocation benefits and related expenses.

The report said that the VA's chief of staff concurs in the IG's findings, although statements from Rubens and Graves were not included. Rubens testified at an April 22 House committee hearing on the matter and said that she didn't know whether she would have moved to Philadelphia without the incentive pay, according to the Daily Caller.

The Veterans Benefits Administration spent about \$1.8 million for the 23 reassignments that the IG reviewed between fiscal 2013 and 2015 – and that includes salary increases, incentives to relocate to other cities, and moving expenses. While many of these expenses are allowable under federal and VA rules, the inspector general said that "We determined that [the Veterans Benefits Administration] used moves of senior managers as a means to justify annual salary increases and used VA's [Permanent Change of Station] program to pay moving expenses for these employees."

Annual salary increases totaled about \$321,000, while PCS relocation expenses cost about \$1.3 million. "Additionally, VBA paid \$140,000 in unjustified relocation incentives," according to the report.

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6.11 - KSTP-TV (ABC-5, Video): [St. Paul VA Official Faces Possible Criminal Charges](#) (29 September, Tom Hauser, 392k online visitors/mo; Saint Paul, MN)

When Kimberly Graves took over as director of the St. Paul Veterans Affairs Regional Office last October it was a homecoming of sorts.

She once worked in the office back in 1997 and 1998. Now, according to a Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report, it appears Graves inappropriately engineered her latest transfer to St. Paul for "personal and financial benefit."

The report said she influenced the transfer of the former director of the St. Paul office to the Baltimore office so she could volunteer to take the St. Paul job. The report said she did so, in part, to be "closer to her mother."

"We determined that Ms. Graves also inappropriately used her position of authority for personal and financial benefit when she participated personally and substantially in creating the St. Paul VARO Veterans Affairs Regional Office) vacancy and then volunteering for the vacancy," the report stated.

Even though the position in St. Paul had less responsibility than her former job on the East Coast, she retained her salary of \$173,949. She was also paid \$129,467 in "relocation expenses."

"This is outrageous and it appears it was manipulated," Minnesota Congressman Tim Walz, (D) 1st District, said. "Creating positions that weren't really true to try to justify getting around a ban we put on bonuses."

When contacted at her Twin Cities home, Graves declined to comment, telling 5 EYEWITNESS NEWS "the office of public affairs can respond to you."

Walz said the Graves case was discovered after a whistleblower tipped off investigators about another VA official in a similar situation. Diana Rubens moved from Washington, DC, to Philadelphia for a job with fewer responsibilities. She retained her \$181,000 salary and was paid \$274,000 in relocation expenses for a 140-mile move.

Walz says he's outraged by what he views as misuse of taxpayer funds.

"Is this taking away services for veterans by this type of thing happening?," Walz said, himself a military veteran. "Are we spending taxpayer money on things that aren't providing quality care for veterans?"

A spokesman for the VA said they're cooperating with the inspector general and will re-examine "relocation and incentive procedures."

The Graves and Rubens cases will be considered for criminal prosecution.

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6.12 - WXOW-TV (ABC-19, Video): ["VA is Lying, Vets Are Dying" billboard displayed in Tomah](#) (29 September, Caroline Heckler, 370k online visitors/mo; La Crescent, MN)

Drivers on I-94 passing by Tomah will now see a billboard that says "VA is Lying, Vets Are Dying," as part of a national campaign to bring awareness to alleged issues within the VA system.

The group behind the billboards is called "VA is Lying," and multiple billboards, like the one in Tomah, have been displayed in places like Tampa and Minneapolis.

Candace Baer-Delis lost her father at the Tomah VA in January and is a member of the group.

Baer-Delis is from Marshfield and took part in the unveiling of the billboard on Monday.

"It's a project that was started to try to make the public aware of what's going on within the VA," she said. They are basically going up where the worst problems are at least at this point."

The Tomah VA Medical Center said it respects the group's right to express their opinion.

"The Tomah VA respects the rights of groups like this to express their opinion," Public Affairs Officer Matt Gowan, said. "The VA works diligently everyday to create a collaborative problem-solving environment conducive to the need of our patients."

"I hope also people understand we're not attacking anyone," Baer-Delis said. "This isn't about the nurses and doctors that give good care. It's about the nurses and doctors that are corrupt and unethical and the administration that's corrupt and unethical. Really, it's about the people that don't care about the veterans and are just in it for the paycheck."

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6.13 - WTMJ-AM (AM-620): [Tomah VA: People Have a Right to Their Opinion](#) (29 September, 146k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

A representative of the Tomah VA Medical Center says he can't get angry about billboards which claim the Veteran's Administration is lying and veterans are dying. Matthew Gowan says that's because he's a veteran.

"I'm a 22 year Navy combat veteran, and like all of our other nation's veterans, we serve to protect our rights. To this, the Department of Veteran's Affairs respects this and any other organization's or individual's right to express their opinion."

Gowan says, though, anyone with specific accusations against the VA should contact them.

"We here at Tomah work diligently to create a collaborative, problem solving environment that we hope creates an environment that is conducive to the needs of our veterans. We encourage anyone with a specific concern to contact our patient advocate specialists who work as liaisons for the director's office here."

He also says there are resources outside the VA, like the American Legion and the VFW.

The Tomah VA Medical Center has been under scrutiny for over prescribing painkillers.

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6.14 - KTVM-TV (NBC-6): [Montana VA warns of phone scams, Lewis And Clark County](#) (29 September, Josh Kristianto, 89k online visitors/mo; Missoula, MT)

The Montana Veterans Affairs office is warning the public of a phone scam that asks people to donate money to help veterans.

A Helena resident received a phone call by someone who claimed to be from the VA office. The caller tried to get credit card information and money from the resident, who then got suspicious and called the Montana VA.

The VA says it does not solicit funds from veterans, their families or the public for any reason.

"It's the first one that I've heard of, but I don't know for sure if it's happened before. I am certain that it won't be the last time that we hear this. The folks that are involved in this are pretty motivated to try to fraudulently get people's money and they'll do whatever works," said Mike Garcia, a public affairs officer for the Montana VA.

The VA strongly discourages providing any personal or financial information by phone. Anyone who receives a suspicious call should call their local VA clinic or contact the Montana Office of Consumer Protection at (406) 444-4500.

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6.15 - iHealthBeat: [VA Sees Drop in Health Data Breaches; Other Orgs Report Breaches](#)
(29 September, 85k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Last month, the Department of Veterans Affairs experienced a 72.8% decline in veterans whose protected health information was affected by a health data breach, according to VA's August report to Congress, Health IT Security reports.

According to the report, 431 veterans were affected by a health data breach incident in August, including 237 who had their protected health information compromised. That figure is down from the 872 veterans who were affected by protected health information-related breaches in July.

Of the 431 veterans affected by a data breach in August:

- 148 involved incorrectly mailed documents;
- 117 involved lost or stolen Personal Identity Verification cards;
- 84 involved "mishandled incidents;"
- 47 involved lost or stolen devices; and
- One involved items incorrectly mailed by a pharmacy (Heath, Health IT Security, 9/25).

Other Recent Health Data Breaches

Meanwhile, several other U.S. health care organizations recently disclosed data breaches, potentially affecting thousands of individuals.

Molina Healthcare Data Breach

California-based Molina Healthcare is alerting more than 54,000 patients to a breach of their protected health information after a CVS employee copied records from company computers to a personal computer, Clinical Innovation & Technology reports (Walsh, Clinical Innovation & Technology, 9/23).

CVS, which manages Molina Healthcare's over-the-counter benefits, notified the managed care company of the breach, which occurred in late March, on July 20 (Jayanthi, Becker's Health IT & CIO Review, 9/22). The breach affects the personal information of both current and former members of Molina Healthcare's Medicare Options Plus HMO plan in 10 states:

- California;
- Florida;
- Illinois;
- Michigan;
- New Mexico;
- Ohio;
- Texas;
- Utah;
- Washington state; and
- Wisconsin (Clinical Innovation & Technology, 9/23).

Stolen information included:

- CVS IDs and ExtraCare Health Card numbers;
- Full names;
- Member IDs;
- Prescription plan numbers and states; and
- Start and end dates (Becker's Health IT & CIO Review, 9/22).

Surgical and Medical Group Data Breach

Last month, the California-based Silverberg Surgical and Medical Group discovered a two-year-old security lapse that exposed patient health records on the Internet, Health IT Security reports. The medical group reported the incident, which began on Sept. 10, 2013, to the California Office of Attorney General.

According to a notification letter, a document scanning device "inadvertently exposed some patient health records to the Internet." Potentially exposed information includes patients':

- Addresses;
- Beneficiary numbers;
- Dates of admission;
- Dates of Birth;
- Email addresses;
- Health plan data;
- Medical information;
- Medical record numbers;
- Names; and
- Telephone and fax numbers.
- In some cases the exposed information included:
 - Full face photographic images;
 - Social Security numbers; and
 - State License numbers.

Silverberg did not disclose how many patients were affected, but it noted that it took down the information immediately, launched an investigation and is providing one year of identity monitoring to those affected (Snell, Health IT Security, 9/28).

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6.16 - Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service: [VA therapist retires, leaving life-changing legacy for veterans](#) (29 September, Peggy Schulz, 38k online visitors/mo; Milwaukee, WI)

When Nancy Wilke retired from the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center earlier this month, her title was occupational therapist and lifestyle coach. But in the minds of many of the thousands of veterans she met over the course of her 38-year career at the VA, it easily could have been “life changer,” or even, “life saver.”

Wilke’s recent retirement party was an opportunity for coworkers, administrators and clients to express their thanks and appreciation. Mayor Tom Barrett proclaimed her last day of work “Nancy Wilke Day.” And Congresswoman Gwen Moore sent a note of recognition for Wilke’s service at the VA.

But, it was an honor Wilke received in 2014, awarded by the Secretary of the Veterans Administration to just a few individuals nationwide, that perhaps best sums up the indelible impression Wilke made during her tenure at the VA, which began in 1977 when she was an intern in the Occupational Therapy department in 1977. In early 1978, she was hired to work full time in the new model cardiac rehab program.

The Hands and Heart Award is given each year to recognize the outstanding service of VA employees who “consistently do the most to provide emotional support, help and guidance to patients, above and beyond the call of duty,” according to the Department of Veterans Affairs Handbook.

Pat Kostka, a registered dietician at the VA, nominated Wilke for the award. “From the beginning, Nancy embraced the opportunities and challenges of developing and expanding the role of what Occupational Therapy (OT) could offer veterans,” Kostka wrote. “For over 35 years, Nancy’s guiding focus has always been, ‘How is what I’m doing meaningful to this veteran’s life?’”

Kostka also talked about some of Wilke’s accomplishments in what is now known as the Lifestyle Coaching Clinic, but was formerly simply the OT department.

“Nancy broadened the role that the OT could provide as a ‘change agent’ for these veterans,” Kostka said. “Gradually, the weight management feature of the cardiac rehab program evolved into the OT Lifestyle Program, and continues to guide veterans to improve not only their physical health, but their overall life, as well.”

Wilke did not simply demonstrate exercises, or suggest lifestyle changes to the veterans. Rather, her heart always was at play, as well. She listened to whatever one of her clients had to say, helped them understand their own medical conditions and, above all, showed that she cared for them.

In addition to the pilot cardiac rehab program that Wilke helped move forward, she also was instrumental in developing WAMM. “Walk A Mile or More” began as a basic concept: the veterans sporting bright red WAMM T-shirts would set a one-mile or more daily walking goal for themselves.

“WAMM demonstrates the benefits of support and accountability in a continuing group over time, versus a limited, 12-week program,” Wilke said.

Jim Jennings, a Vietnam veteran, appreciates the long-term value of a program such as WAMM. He started in the Lifestyle Coaching Clinic on the exercise machines, took four classes in the national VA “MOVE” program, and then completed the 12-week OT program, tailored specifically for his needs.

“People graduate out after 12 weeks,” Jennings said, “and then they can move on to WAMM forever.”

“WAMM really got me,” he noted. “You can say, ‘I should do this, I should do that.’ That’s easy.” But, with WAMM, “you get to the point where you actually want to do it. Once you start walking,” Jennings said, “it’s easy to keep going.”

Mark Lahti is another Vietnam-era veteran who was grateful for Wilke’s comprehensive approach.

Lahti came to the VA with some serious medical issues, including recent surgery on his right arm that limited his ability to use traditional exercise machines.

“Nancy recommended ‘MOVE OUT’ to me,” Lahti said, referring to the local VA’s expansion of the MOVE program from the VA hospital into the community.

MOVE OUT is a weight management program in which professionals and trained volunteers lead veterans in a variety of activities at community sites across southeastern Wisconsin.

“Every single person that came into that situation, she knew their name, she took an interest in their life, she inspired and motivated them, and me,” Lahti said. He attributes his 60-pound weight loss and dramatic drop in blood sugar levels directly to Wilke.

“That woman saved my life,” Lahti said.

Wilke was given a book of memories and photographs at her retirement reception. On the cover was a quote sometimes attributed to Teddy Roosevelt: “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” The book’s creator added: “Thank you for ALWAYS caring!”

Wilke’s retirement was motivated, in part, by the upcoming birth of twin grandchildren, for whom she and her husband will be part-time caregivers. She said she’ll miss the strong sense of satisfaction she got every day on the job at the VA.

“It’s so rewarding to see people believe in themselves. They hold the key to their health.”

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6.17 - WSAU-AM (AM-550): [New billboard near Tomah VA aims to raise awareness, spark action](#) (29 September, Larry Lee, 29k online visitors/mo; Wausau, WI)

A Marshfield woman has joined a national group that's trying to raise awareness concerning problems within the U-S Department of Veterans Affairs.

Candace Baer-Delis was on hand on Monday, when a billboard went up near the Tomah V-A that reads "The V-A is lying, Veterans are dying". The group is putting up the billboards all across the country, displayed prominently near VA medical centers. Baer and others say it'll put pressure on officials and Congress to clean up corruption and oversight within the veterans administration. "What the group is trying to do is shame the VA into doing the right thing, because by trying to go about it through normal channels, it's not getting done."

Baer's problems with the veterans group began in January, when her father Thomas Baer of Marshfield went to the Tomah V-A for medical attention, and he died while waiting for hours at Tomah's urgent care clinic without help. He then suffered from a stroke, but staff members told Candace that his vital signs were completely normal. "My dad's vitals were copied and pasted through the entire report from his very first set of vitals. He spiked a fever after his second stroke, and the vitals don't reflect that at all."

Although Candace wanted to confirm that her father suffered a stroke, hospital staff informed her that the CT scan machine was broken. They also refused to give Thomas drugs to prevent future strokes. Baer suffered a second stroke and died while waiting to be sent over to another hospital. Candace is convinced that the VA is responsible.

She also contends many of those within the Tomah V-A don't hold licenses to practice in Wisconsin. "Dr. James Patterson, the Urgent Care physician that treated my father, had his license to practice in the State of Wisconsin revoked in 2013, but according to the VA website that was updated in 2014, he still has a license in Wisconsin. Twenty-five percent of the doctors and nurse practitioners at the Tomah VA are not licensed to practice in the State of Wisconsin. They're licensed in other states."

Baer and her family members have a lawsuit pending against the V-A, and they are preparing to file a formal complaint shortly, probably this week. Candace says they might also seek to re-open a full congressional investigation into the Veterans Administration.

The U-S Senate's Governmental Affairs Committee, chaired by Wisconsin Republican Ron Johnson, heard from a group of employees last week that the V-A still has a cultural problem of punishing whistle-blowers who report problems within the V-A health care system. They also said the agency still fails to hold its leaders accountable, a year after we first learned officials covered up evidence of long delays for veterans seeking care.

A media investigation launched in January of this year blew the lid off reports of excessive pain killers being given to patients--which the V-A later confirmed. Deficiencies in care led to the death of Stevens Point marine Jason Simcakoski last summer, which was linked to toxicity due to a dangerous mix of drugs.

Tomah social worker Chris Kirkpatrick shot himself after he reported problems once he was fired for trying to expose problems within the V-A. And the head of the Tomah V-A, Mario DeSanctis, was fired a few weeks ago in the wake of over-prescriptions to patients.

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6.18 - FierceGovernment: [VBA senior execs manipulated relocation program for financial gain, finds IG](#) (29 September, Molly Bernhart Walker, 21k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Senior executives at the Veterans Benefits Administration inappropriately used their influence and the relocation expense program to obtain positions with less responsibility but the same pay level while also pocketing questionable reimbursements for their moves, finds an internal audit.

In one instance, Diana Rubens used her position as deputy under secretary for field operations to create a vacancy and then volunteered for the vacancy, allowing her to become director of Philadelphia and Wilmington VA regional offices, finds a Sept. 28 VA Inspector General report.

While auditors found the more than \$274,000 in relocation expenses were generally allowable, the new position had significantly less responsibility but Rubens retained her annual salary of \$181,497. The IG did call into question a 17-day extension for temporary quarters subsistence expense allowance, as well as reimbursement for \$76.50 in alcoholic beverages and \$47 meal expenses not supported by receipts.

In a similar case, Kimberly Graves used her position to create a vacancy that she could move into and raked in more than \$129,000 in relocation reimbursements in the process. Graves was reassigned from VBA's eastern area office to director of the St. Paul VARO, where she enjoyed less job responsibility but kept her \$173,949 annual salary.

Report authors noted that federal regulations prohibit VA from reducing annual salaries upon reassignment despite a decrease in the scope of responsibilities. Poor performance reports or disciplinary action could support a salary decrease for a senior executive, however, said the report.

The IG found Rubens' and Graves' stories to be part of a bigger problem at VBA. The watchdog reviewed the reassignment of seven General Schedule 15 employees promoted to SES positions and 15 SES employees who moved to new SES positions over the past three years.

"VBA management used moves of senior executives as a method to justify annual salary increases and used VA's PCS program to pay moving expenses for these employees," wrote report authors.

As a result, the agency spent a total of \$1.8 million on the reassignments. Of that it paid out \$321,000 in annual salary increases, \$1.3 million for legitimate relocation expenses and \$140,000 in unjustified relocation incentives.

While the IG acknowledges reassignment is often necessary, it concluded that "VBA inappropriately utilized VA's PCS program for the benefit of its SES workforce."

Specifically, the report highlighted the involvement of VA's Undersecretary of Benefits Allison Hickey in Rubens' move to Philadelphia VARO director. An email exchange between the two indicates that not only did Hickey want to help Rubens move to the position, she likely knew Rubens was somehow involved in creating the vacancy.

"I will be all in to help and make it happen" said Hickey in an email to Rubens.

In an email a day later, Hickey asked, "When can I expect to see Philly open?"

In an emailed statement to FierceGovernment, VA Press Secretary Victoria Dillon said the department concurs with the IG's report and "appreciates the work of the Office of Inspector General."

"As a result of their findings, VA leadership will conduct a 30-day review of all incentive and relocation procedures in the department. In addition, VA will consider all the evidence presented by the IG, collect any additional evidence necessary, and take appropriate accountability actions. VA will fully cooperate with other federal agencies as required as we continue our daily effort to improve the timeliness and quality of care and services delivered to our nation's Veterans," said the statement.

Meanwhile, Rep. Jeff Miller (R-Fla.), the chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said the report "proves that VA's corrosive culture extends to the highest levels of VBA leadership and must be immediately rooted out once and for all."

In a statement emailed to reporters Sept. 28, Miller added that the department should take criminal action against those involved and his staff will examine "whether VA officials misled the Committee at the hearing on April 22, 2015, regarding Ms. Rubens' relocation."

Rubens was among the panelists at that April 22 hearing.

Update - Sept. 29, 2015 1:15 pm: This article has been updated to incorporate a statement emailed by VA Press Secretary Victoria Dillon in response to the inspector general's report.

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6.19 - Rapid News Network: [Veterans Affairs benefits official in St. Paul accused of financial impropriety](#) (29 September, Jake Carter, 4.7k online visitors/mo; Staten Island, NY)

A Veterans Affairs official in St. Paul has been accused of benefiting inappropriately because she engineered her own transfer to a directorship in St. Paul.

Top VA officials in Washington said Ms. Rubens was moving to Philadelphia to clean up the VA's beleaguered regional office, which had been rocked by scandals including falsifying dates on veterans' benefits claims, retaliating against whistleblowers, and a manager compelling subordinates to pay a medium at a party to communicate with the dead.

The report stops short of recommending any punishment for specific individuals but does recommend that the VA General Counsel review whether administrative action is warranted against numerous individuals involved with the programs and whether any of the ill-gotten funds can be recouped.

McKenrick told the inspector general's office he had not applied for the job in LA, would have preferred to have stayed in Philadelphia and was disappointed about the reassignment.

Investigators determined that Rubens used her previous position to create the vacancy by working with Ms. Graves to help transfer the then Philadelphia director to fill a vacancy in Los Angeles.

The investigation was launched last spring after reports surfaced that Philadelphia VA Regional Office Director Diana Rubens received more than \$288,000 in moving expenses compensation to switch from a job in nearby Washington, D.C. Graves also was paid more than \$129,000 in expenses related to her move.

The VA inspector general's office said it has referred the case of Kimberly Graves and another VA official to the USA attorney for possible criminal prosecution. Rubens and Graves arranged for transfers to jobs with far less responsibilities than their old ones, yet they were allowed to retain their annual salaries of \$181,497 and \$173,949, respectively.

The latest, revealed on Monday in a report by the VA's Inspector General, addresses the alleged chiseling of hundreds of thousands of dollars by two senior officials of the VA Benefits Administration who orchestrated new job openings for themselves and then collected sizable reimbursements for relocating to new cities. Poor performance reports or disciplinary action could support a salary decrease for a senior executive, however, said the report.

In other cases, senior executives used relocation incentives and moving expenses to get around moratoriums on pay raises, shifting between equal or lesser jobs and racking up questionable costs for the department.

The report found the relocation charges in-line with VA policy.

Speaking to a Stars and Stripes reporter at the Philadelphia VA in June, Hickey said of Rubens, "I do see her as part of the solutions".

"The IG's report proves that VA's corrosive culture extends to the highest levels of (Veterans Benefits Administration) leadership and must be immediately rooted out once and for all", Miller said in the statement.

VA officials did not respond to questions about the current employment status of employees singled out in the report or a request to interview Hickey.

While the IG acknowledges reassignment is often necessary, it concluded that "VBA inappropriately utilized VA's PCS program for the benefit of its SES workforce".

A woman who answered the phone in Rubens' office Monday said she was not at work, and Rubens did not respond to an email asking for comment.

The report said that the VA's chief of staff concurs in the IG's findings, although statements from Rubens and Graves were not included.

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