



# Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

13 January 2016

## [1. Top Stories](#)

**1.1 - The Washington Post (AP): [Senate panel backs lawyer Missal as VA watchdog](#)** (12 January, Matthew Daly, 23.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee has approved the nomination of Washington lawyer Michael Missal to be the new chief watchdog at the troubled Department of Veterans Affairs. President Barack Obama nominated Missal to be the VA's inspector general in October. Lawmakers from both parties have long sought a permanent inspector general for the VA as the agency struggles to meet veterans' health care needs and provide timely decisions on benefits.

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**1.2 - Military.com: [VA Secretary to Visit Boston Hospital to Tout Research into PTSD, TBI](#)** (12 January, Bryant Jordan, 6.1M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald plans to travel to Boston on Friday as part of a White House post-State of the Union messaging effort to promote administration accomplishments over the past seven years and discuss challenges still ahead. In addition to McDonald, the White House will be sending other Cabinet secretaries and senior administration officials on the road for what it calls the "State of the Union Cabinet in Your Community Tour."

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**1.3 - Stars and Stripes: [VA to request more money for \\$1.3-billion electronic benefits management system](#)** (12 January, Travis J. Tritten, 1.2M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs was hit again Tuesday with concerns over the mismanagement and ballooning costs of its new paperless system for processing disability claims. Department officials told the House Committee on Veterans Affairs that it expects to request more money from Congress for its \$1.3-billion electronic benefits management system, which has helped decrease a backlog of paper disability claims but also increased in cost by 122 percent since it was set up in 2009.

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**1.4 - Military Times: [Report: VA San Diego failed to monitor, treat veteran](#)** (12 January, Patricia Kime, 482k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

A new Veterans Affairs Inspector General report faults the Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System for failing to care for a patient with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder before he took his own life on a California gun range in October 2014. According to a VA Office of Inspector General report released Jan. 5, the VA doctors treating former Marine Sgt. Jeremy Sears did not follow department guidelines...

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**1.5 - Military Times: [VA failed to spend \\$1.9 billion designated for health care, report finds](#)** (12 January, Patricia Kime, 482k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

An audit of the Veterans Health Administration's private health care program books finds the department failed to spend \$1.9 billion – or 40 percent – of the \$4.8 billion designated for non-VA care in fiscal 2013. Also, from Oct. 1, 2013, through March 31, 2015, medical center

administrators overestimated the funds they needed to pay for outside care for veterans by \$543 million, leaving that amount unavailable for patient care...

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

### **2.1 - Alaska Dispatch News: [New Alaska workers tasked with helping veterans with health care](#)** (12 January, Tegan Hanlon, 1.4M online visitors/mo; Anchorage, AK)

An Arizona-based company that manages health benefits for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs said Tuesday it's bringing six new employees to Alaska to help get veterans' medical appointments scheduled and doctors' bills paid. "By having this staff based in Alaska we will demonstrate our commitment to Alaskan providers and gain their trust," said Hal Blair, deputy program manager of the Arizona company, TriWest Healthcare Alliance.

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### **2.2 - The Kansas City Star: [Diversion program to assist U.S. veterans](#)** (12 January, Roxie Hammill, 901k online visitors/mo; Kansas City, MO)

Veterans whose struggles with civilian life land them in the criminal court system will have a new alternative to jail time in Johnson County. Beginning today, they can come to a special Veterans Treatment Court and get support and supervision from a team of court staff and mentors who will help them through a diversion program. The special court, the first of its kind in Kansas, is scheduled to begin with an opening ceremony today at the Johnson County Courthouse.

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### **2.3 - Florida Today: [Cape Canaveral VA cemetery holds first burials](#)** (12 January, R. Norman Moody, 561k online visitors/mo; Melbourne, FL)

A caisson carrying the cremated remains of 12 veterans and drawn by two mules ushered in the first burial ceremony at the new Cape Canaveral National Cemetery. The remains were from members of all five branches of the U.S. military, including the Coast Guard. The service featured full military honors. Among the veterans buried was Air Force Tech. Sgt. John Garvey, who served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and was 89 when he died in April.

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### **2.4 - Florida Today: [Proposed Veteran Administration and pension rules](#)** (12 January, Stephen Lacey, 561k online visitors/mo; Melbourne, FL)

In November, we alerted readers to proposed changes to the eligibility rules regarding Aid & Attendance Pension benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Previous reports indicated that these changes would take effect in early 2016, probably February or March. To review, the proposed changes include the following: Net Worth: For the first time, a definitive limit on the countable net worth an applicant can have and still qualify for benefits.

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### **2.5 - Tulsa World: [Sen. Lankford speaks to local veterans about VA healthcare](#)** (12 January, Dave Spiva, 470k online visitors/mo; Tulsa, OK)

During his visit in Wagoner on Thursday, U.S. Sen. James Lankford spoke to a group of local veterans about some of the issues regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' healthcare system. During the forum with local veterans, Lankford said his team is working on a proposal which will let veterans use their much deserved VA benefits at other non-VA hospitals, regardless of where the nearest VA hospital or clinic is located.

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**2.6 - WSAV-TV (NBC-3, Video): [Military Brain Injury Victims Urged to Seek Help](#)** (12 January, Martin Staunton, 239k online visitors/mo; Savannah, GA)

A new campaign is underway to get service members and veterans with brain injuries to seek help. The new initiative is being launched by the Department of Defense and is being led by the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Centers. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a significant health issue which affects service members and veterans during times of both peace and war.

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**2.7 - Federal Computer Week: [Hill watchdogs warn on shortcomings in VA's claims system](#)** (12 January, Chase Gunter, 150k online visitors/mo; Vienna, VA)

The Department of Veterans Affairs is scaling up an IT system to help benefits administrators reduce a backlog of veteran claims. But the VA's top watchdog in the House of Representatives is worried that the system is over budget, behind schedule and not working as advertised. The Veterans Benefits Management System was developed to overcome the massive backlog of disability claims by digitizing claims forms and expediting claims decisions.

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**2.8 - The Daily Courier: [Prescott-area leaders seek to provide outreach to prevent suicide](#)** (12 January, Nanci Hutson, 138k online visitors/mo; Prescott, AZ)

Suicide in Yavapai County is a painful reality; statistics indicate youths, seniors and veterans here take their lives at alarming rates that are higher than many other counties in the state and across the nation. Why? Community and agency leaders wrestle with that question every day. And they have stepped up efforts to reach out to vulnerable populations so they do not succumb to their despair and isolation.

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

**3.1 - The Huffington Post (The Blog): [Ending Veteran Homelessness Strengthens the Union](#)** (12 January, Deborah De Santis, 35.8M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

I was moved to see Cynthia Dias, a formerly homeless veteran from Las Vegas, sitting in First Lady Michelle Obama visitors' box during tonight's State of the Union Address. To be given such a place of honor speaks to the bipartisan efforts on Capitol Hill to end veteran homelessness in our country, and the power of providing our veterans who need it with the housing and support services that help them regain their lives.

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**3.2 - The Washington Times (AP): [Arizona, New Mexico tribes share in veterans housing funds](#)** (12 January, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Tribes in Arizona and New Mexico are sharing in more than \$1.1 million in federal funding to help address homelessness among veterans. The grant money comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The agencies awarded a total of nearly \$6 million to 26 tribes and tribal entities. The agencies say recent statutory changes allow for American Indian veterans to use housing vouchers.

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**3.3 - ThinkProgress: [The Story Behind A Formerly Homeless Veteran's Invitation To The State Of The Union](#)** (12 January, Bryce Covert, 3.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Cynthia Dias is one of the lucky few Americans selected to get a seat at President Obama's State of the Union address on Tuesday night. Dias is a veteran, having served as a nurse during the Vietnam War. She also experienced homelessness after her service, which she attributes to her struggles with PTSD. But for the last year, she's been living in a supportive housing complex in Las Vegas, Nevada called Veterans Village...

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**3.4 - The Sun: [Loma Linda apartment complex OK'd for homeless, low-income veterans](#)** (12 January, Joe Nelson, 102k online visitors/mo; San Bernardino, CA)

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday unanimously approved an 88-unit apartment complex in Loma Linda for low income and homeless veterans, which will be built near the Jerry L. Pettis Memorial VA Medical Center. Loma Linda Vets will offer 40 1-bedroom, 30 2-bedroom, and 18 3-bedroom apartments to veterans and their families, plus one 2-bedroom manager's unit.

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## **[4. Ending the Claims Backlog](#)**

**4.1 - WUSF-FM (NPR-89.7, Audio): [Congress Wants Accountability For VA Backlog](#)** (12 January, Bobbie O'Brien, 3.3M online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

Brandishing a photograph of 1,600 boxes, stacked haphazardly in a storage room, Florida U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller of Pensacola opened a congressional hearing Tuesday into the backlog of veterans benefits claims. The photo Miller referenced came from an Inspector General report that found more than 41,000 packages of veterans' records from the St. Petersburg Regional VA Benefits Office waiting to be scanned at a contractor's facility in Georgia.

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**4.2 - Washington Examiner: [Veterans Affairs manipulated data to hide its growing backlog](#)** (12 January, Sarah Westwood, 3.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Department of Veterans Affairs officials have poured more than \$1 billion into a system meant to speed up the processing of veterans' benefits claims, only to see the backlog of such claims climb significantly higher. But VA officials have attempted to downplay the problem by manipulating data in the agency's benefits office, creating the perception that the backlog is lower than it actually is.

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**4.3 - The Tampa Tribune: [House committee demands to see messy boxes of VA claims](#)** (12 January, Howard Altman, 790k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

The chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee is demanding that the Department of Veterans Affairs turn over boxes containing benefits materials from St. Petersburg that were found in disarray in a Georgia scanning center. U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller, a Pensacola Republican, made the demand during a committee hearing Tuesday examining problems with the VA's claims processing computer system.

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**4.4 - Modern Healthcare: [VA's backlog reduction questioned](#)** (12 January, Shannon Muchmore, 495k online visitors/mo; Chicago, IL)

An investigator who oversees the Veterans Affairs Department said during a hearing Tuesday that he doesn't fully trust the agency's recent assertion that it has substantially reduced the backlog of benefit claims. Brent Arronte, the VA's deputy assistant inspector general for audits and evaluations, also said he suspects there may be a systemic problem of data integrity at VA field offices across the country.

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**4.5 - WFED-AM (AM-1500): [Lawmakers pan VA disability system, despite cuts in claims backlog](#)** (12 January, Scott Maucione, 441k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Congress and the Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General are skeptical of the Veterans Benefits Management System, despite substantial reductions in backlogged disability claims. The VBMS price tag has ballooned from about \$580 million to \$1.3 billion, and combined with a lack of tangible goals, some lawmakers are questioning the value of the endeavor.

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

**5.1 - The Times & Democrat: [Veteran taking advantage of GI Bill needs advice](#)** (12 January, 86k online visitors/mo; Orangeburg, SC)

DEAR HARRIETTE: I am a military veteran, and I was able to go back to college at the age of 40 because of the GI Bill. I just finished my undergrad program a few weeks ago, and I will start my first month of grad school in February. I have not told my parents that I am starting my graduate program. They are expecting me to find a job and move out of the house shortly thereafter.

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**5.2 - KAMC-TV (ABC-28, Video): [Texas Tech Military and Veterans Affairs Programs Recognized, 5th Time Tech Honored by Military Advanced Education & Transition's Magazine](#)** (12 January, Wes Rapaport, 78k online visitors/mo; Lubbock, TX)

The military programs and veterans affairs department at Texas Tech University was honored as a top college for military personnel and veterans in 2016. According to a statement released by Tech officials, "Military Advanced Education & Transition's (MAE&T) magazine, Texas Tech

University was recognized as a top school in the 2016 Guide to Colleges and Universities for its efforts in providing active military...

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

### **7. Other**

**7.1 - The Washington Post (Federal Eye): [House panel moves to cut workplace rights for top civil servants, Federal Diary](#)** (12 January, Joe Davidson, 23.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

In the name of protecting veterans, Democrats on Capitol Hill and in the White House joined Republicans in attacking the due-process rights of top civil servants in the Department of Veterans Affairs almost 18 months ago. Democrats, who might normally oppose such a measure, told themselves undermining the workplace protections of VA Senior Executive Service (SES) members was necessary to help reform a department that had disgraced itself with a scandal over the cover-up of long wait times.

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**7.2 - FOX News Channel (Video): [Suspended Veterans Affairs bosses return to agency jobs](#)** (12 January, 23M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

This three-minute clip reports on the decision, to return to work, two VA executives who were suspended during a wait list scandal. The two executives were on paid leave for 19-months. This clip includes an interview with Concerned Veterans for America's Dan Caldwell.

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**7.3 - Houston Chronicle: [VA to Texas veterans: No open carry here](#)** (12 January, Lauren McGaughy, 5.7M online visitors/mo; Houston, TX)

Open carry is now the law of the land in the Lone Star State, but the federal government is reminding Texan veterans that guns still are not allowed on VA property. In a reminder posted to the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System website, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs made clear that firearms will remain prohibited at all of the federal agency's sites.

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**7.4 - Washington Examiner: [Chaffetz moves to stop abuse of paid federal leave](#)** (12 January, Pete Kasperowicz, 3.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Rep. Jason Chaffetz on Monday introduced legislation that would stop federal workers from receiving paid leave for months and sometimes even years after being removed from their jobs for disciplinary reasons. The Utah Republican chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, and on Tuesday morning, his committee considered his new Administrative Leave Reform Act. The committee didn't approve it then...

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**7.5 - The Washington Free Beacon: [Obama Touts Care for Veterans As Success Story for His Administration](#)** (12 January, David Rutz, 1.6M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

President Obama cited "more care" for U.S. veterans as an example of progress made under his administration during the State of the Union address, a curious statement in the wake of the Veterans Affairs scandal of delayed care and secret waiting lists at numerous facilities that came to light in 2014. The deaths of American veterans waiting for healthcare disgusted the country and led to the resignation of VA secretary Eric Shinseki.

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**7.6 - WISC-TV (CBS-3): [New director sworn in at Madison VA hospital](#)** (12 January, 1.1M online visitors/mo; Madison, WI)

A new director was formally sworn in at the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital in Madison on Monday. John Rohrer replaces Judy McKee, who retired as the hospital director in Madison last June, hospital spokesman Tim Donovan said in a news release Tuesday afternoon. Rohrer had been acting director of the Madison VA Hospital since Oct. 18 up until the time he was sworn in.

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**7.7 - The Tennessean: [Veteran spends 104th birthday at Nashville VA hospital](#)** (12 January, Jen Todd, 940k online visitors/mo; Nashville, TN)

On his 104th birthday, Bennie Woolam still remembered the first insurance he ever sold, all four of his teachers and the day he enrolled at Nashville's Veterans Affairs hospital. He also recalled telling his first wife that he wouldn't live past 85. "All my Christian friends are up in heaven," he said. "They think I didn't make it." The hospital invited his friends, nurses who had cared for him, and other veterans Tuesday to celebrate his birthday.

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**7.8 - KNXV-TV (ABC-15, Video): [Veterans' affairs left out of State of the Union; Phoenix VA whistleblower disappointed in speech](#)** (12 January, Nohelani Graf, 737k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

One topic missing in the President's State of the Union speech Tuesday night was veterans' affairs and Phoenix VA whistleblower Dr. Katherine Mitchell took note. Dr. Mitchell came forward nearly two years ago alerting federal investigators of a cover up by administrators to hide wait times at the Phoenix VA Hospital. She says since then, changes have happened, the wait time still exists but is drastically shorter.

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**7.9 - The Clarion-Ledger: [Gulf Coast lawmakers oppose VA transfer to the region](#)** (12 January, Deborah Barfield Berry, 510k online visitors/mo; Jackson, MS)

Despite a pitch from Veterans Affairs' Secretary Robert McDonald Tuesday, Mississippi lawmakers still oppose a plan to name Skye McDougall head of the South Central VA Health Care Network, which includes Louisiana and Mississippi. Mississippi lawmakers met Tuesday morning with McDonald and McDougall in the office of Republican Sen. Thad Cochran, the dean of the delegation. Members of the delegation wrote McDonald in December opposing her transfer.

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**7.10 - WFED-AM (AM-1500): [House considers expanding VA-like SES firing authorities governmentwide](#)** (12 January, Nicole Ogrysko, 441k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)  
Members of the Senior Executive Service accused of misconduct and poor performance could face some of the same firing procedures that senior officials in the Veterans Affairs Department now come under. The provisions are part of a new bill the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee is considering. The committee is marking up the Senior Executive Service Accountability Act, the Official Personnel File Enhancement Act and one amendment to the U.S. Code...

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**7.11 - WFED-AM (AM-1500): [VA IG, OSC nominees pledge accountability, transparency, whistleblower protection](#)** (12 January, Meredith Somers, 441k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)  
Protecting whistleblowers while ensuring transparency and responsiveness are what lawmakers said they are looking for in the candidates to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, and the Office of Special Counsel. On Tuesday Michael Missal, President Barack Obama's nominee as VA IG, and Carolyn Lerner, who was nominated for a second term as special counsel for the OSC, appeared before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs...

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**7.12 - WZTV-TV (FOX-17, Video): [104-Year-Old Veteran Visits Vets at VA](#)** (12 January, Eric Alvarez, 289k online visitors/mo; Nashville, TN)  
For retired Army veteran Bennie Woolam, age is just a number. "I was born January 12th, 1912," Bennie said. "Three months before the Titanic sunk." On Tuesday friends and staff members at the VA Medical Center celebrated his birthday. The cake didn't have candles, because friends weren't sure if they could find or fit 104 of them.

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**7.13 - Hattiesburg American: [Miss. lawmakers oppose VA appointee](#)** (12 January, Deborah Barfield Berry, 267k online visitors/mo; Hattiesburg, MS)  
Despite a pitch from Veterans Affairs' Secretary Robert McDonald on Tuesday, Mississippi lawmakers still oppose a plan to name Skye McDougall head of the South Central VA Health Care Network, which includes Louisiana and Mississippi. Mississippi lawmakers met Tuesday morning with McDonald and McDougall in the office of Republican Sen. Thad Cochran, the dean of the delegation. Members of the delegation wrote McDonald in December opposing her transfer.

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**7.14 - iHealthBeat: [Gun Control Rule's HIPAA Modification Draws Mixed Reactions](#)** (12 January, 102k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)  
A veterans group has expressed concern that a new gun control rule modifying the HIPAA privacy law could discourage veterans from seeking help, while other groups say more is needed to improve the sharing of mental health data, Modern Healthcare reports (Conn, Modern Healthcare, 1/8). Last week, HHS finalized a rule allowing certain health care providers to

disclose -- without consent -- the names of patients with mental health illnesses to the FBI's firearms background check database.

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**7.15 - The Indiana Lawyer:** [Donnelly champions federal support of veterans courts](#) (12 January, Marilyn Odendahl, 27k online visitors/mo; Indianapolis, IN)

In advance of the State of the Union address tonight, Sen. Joe Donnelly highlighted the need to help military veterans and praised the work being done in Indiana's veterans courts. The Hoosier Democrat said the federal government can bolster veterans courts by providing funding and promoting the expansion of the specialty court in all 92 Indiana counties.

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**7.16 - KMMS-AM (AM-1450):** [Tester Leads Efforts to Strengthen Accountability and Oversight at the VA](#) (12 January, Chris Griffin, 27k online visitors/mo; Bozeman, MT)

Senator Jon Tester introduced VA Inspector General nominee Michael J. Missal this morning during a Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee hearing. Following Tester's introduction, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee confirmed Missal's nomination where it will now go to the Senate floor for a final vote. The VA has been without a permanent Inspector General for over two years.

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**7.17 - Wisconsin State Journal:** [New Madison VA Hospital director named](#) (12 January, David Wahlberg, 17k online visitors/mo; Madison, WI)

John Rohrer, interim director of Madison's Veterans Hospital since October, became director this week, the hospital announced Tuesday. He replaces Judy McKee, who retired in June. Rohrer was acting director of the Tomah VA Medical Center from March to October 2015 and associate director of the Madison VA Hospital beginning in 2012. Rohrer began his 26-year career in the Department of Veterans Affairs as an administrative intern at the Madison VA Hospital in 1986.

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## 1. Top Stories

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The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee has approved the nomination of Washington lawyer Michael Missal to be the new chief watchdog at the troubled Department of Veterans Affairs.

President Barack Obama nominated Missal to be the VA's inspector general in October. Lawmakers from both parties have long sought a permanent inspector general for the VA as the agency struggles to meet veterans' health care needs and provide timely decisions on benefits. The IG's office has not had a permanent leader since December 2013.

The chairman of the Senate veterans panel, Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson of Georgia, says the top priority of the inspector general must be to "hold bad actors at the VA accountable" for chronic delays for veterans seeking medical care and other problems at the agency.

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**1.2 - Military.com: [VA Secretary to Visit Boston Hospital to Tout Research into PTSD, TBI](#)** (12 January, Bryant Jordan, 6.1M online visitors/mo; San Francisco, CA)

Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald plans to travel to Boston on Friday as part of a White House post-State of the Union messaging effort to promote administration accomplishments over the past seven years and discuss challenges still ahead.

In addition to McDonald, the White House will be sending other Cabinet secretaries and senior administration officials on the road for what it calls the "State of the Union Cabinet in Your Community Tour."

"The tour is an opportunity for local residents to interact with, and to hear from, members of the President's Cabinet about the issues that matter most -- from climate change to the health and safety of their communities to educational and economic opportunity," presidential assistant and cabinet secretary Broderick Johnson wrote in a lengthy White House blog posting on Sunday.

On Wednesday, Secretary of State John Kerry will speak at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C., on 2016 foreign policy priorities, and then visit a refugee resettlement center to meet with refugees and hear from the center's staff about their work in helping refugees integrate into American life.

That same day, Defense Secretary Ash Carter will head to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to speak to soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division that are slated to deploy to Iraq to train, advise and assist Iraqi security forces fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, also known as ISIL. Afterward, he'll head to Florida to meet with U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command leaders about the campaign against ISIL.

In the case of McDonald, he plans to visit the VA Regional Medical Center in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood to highlight the agency's mental health, post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury research, VA spokeswoman Victoria Dillon said on Monday.

The high numbers of troops who suffered head injuries -- often from blasts from improvised explosive devices, or IEDs -- have prompted the VA to pour more resources into PTSD and TBI research. At the same time, suicides among veterans have increased dramatically over the past decade, with an average of 22 vets taking their lives each day, according to department figures.

More than three quarters of wounded veterans are dealing with PTSD, according to an annual survey released in November and sponsored by the Wounded Warrior Project.

Steve Nardizzi, chief executive officer for the group, said more than 23,000 registered WWP members completed the survey, making it the largest collection of data on the post-9/11 generation of wounded vets yet collected.

"Our annual survey shows that this generation of injured veterans continues to struggle with the invisible wounds of war, including PTSD and TBI, and the challenges are not getting better with time," Nardizzi said in November.

The VA Medical Center in Boston is one of four National Centers for Excellence for PTSD.

While in Boston, McDonald will present the John Blair Barnwell award to Terence M. Keane, director of the Behavioral Science Division of the National Center for PTSD, recognizing him as a world leader in the field of traumatic stress, Dillon said.

Keane is also a professor of psychiatry and psychology and the assistant dean for research at Boston University School of Medicine. The award is named for educator and physician-scientist Dr. John Blair Barnwell, who was director of Research and Education at the VA 1940s.

Dillon said McDonald also will meet with TBI expert Dr. Ann McKee, director of the neuropathology service for Veterans Integrated Network System 1 and the Brain Banks for the Boston University Alzheimer's Disease Center, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center, Framingham Heart Study, and Centenarian Study -- all based at the VA Medical Center in Bedford, Massachusetts. She is also the chief neuropathologist for the National VA ALS Brain Bank.

"Research conducted at the VA Brain Bank in Boston is enormously important to the future mental health of many veterans and civilians," Dillon said. The VA also operates there a brain bank for research into Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE -- the progressive degenerative brain disease found among athletes and others -- such as service members who experienced brain trauma repeatedly.

"The VA CTE Brain Bank ... is primarily focused on furthering our understanding of mild traumatic brain injury," she said.

Dillon said that McDonald also will take the opportunity while in Boston to speak with mental health medical students, nurses and social workers, to encourage them to work at the VA.

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**1.3 - Stars and Stripes: [VA to request more money for \\$1.3-billion electronic benefits management system](#)** (12 January, Travis J. Tritten, 1.2M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs was hit again Tuesday with concerns over the mismanagement and ballooning costs of its new paperless system for processing disability claims.

Department officials told the House Committee on Veterans Affairs that it expects to request more money from Congress for its \$1.3-billion electronic benefits management system, which has helped decrease a backlog of paper disability claims but also increased in cost by 122 percent since it was set up in 2009.

The cost overruns are due to poor VA oversight including numerous unplanned changes to the system and inefficient contracting, according to federal audits by the VA inspector general and the Government Accountability Office.

Congress made a substantial investment in the Veterans Benefits Management System that “is still not functionally operational after six years — I’m sure that can be argued — but there is certainly going to be more money needed,” said Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House panel.

Miller said some claims still cannot be fully processed through the electronic system, as auditors pointed out last year.

Dawn Bontempo, director of the VA’s Veterans Benefits Management System, said the electronic system was designed to be regularly updated and improved, which is the reason for the continuing costs.

“We will never stop looking for ways to improve service to our veterans,” Bontempo said. “We will be turning our attention to new innovations as part of the 2018 budget.”

The paperless filing system has helped to reduce the number of veterans waiting a long time to hear back on their disability claims.

The backlog reached a high point in 2013, when 611,000 were waiting more than 125 days for a VA decision. The department has dramatically reduced that number to slightly more than 75,000, though the number of veteran appeals to those decisions stands at about 433,000, the department reported.

The VA had a goal of eliminating the backlog by 2015 but was unable to reach it, and now says that some more complex veteran claims will always take longer.

“There are some things that are harder to do and we can’t do it within 125 days,” said Beth McCoy, VA deputy under secretary for field operations.

Despite the progress, the VA inspector general found in September “costs continue to spiral upward and final end-state costs remain unknown,” all while the department cannot guarantee an adequate return on the investment.

The VA recently weathered a scandal after its mismanagement led to the largest construction project failure in its history. A Denver hospital project ballooned from \$328 million to nearly \$1.7 billion.

Two House lawmakers raised the alarm this month over VA's plans to spend \$624 million to create a new electronic patient scheduling system for its clinics and hospitals, saying it is spending too much.

Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kan., told the VA it should have made it clear to Congress in 2009, when it began the new paperless disability processing system, that it would require more money in the future.

"You say you have a never-ending project with a never-ending price tag and never-ending goals," he said.

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**1.4 - Military Times: [Report: VA San Diego failed to monitor, treat veteran](#)** (12 January, Patricia Kime, 482k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

A new Veterans Affairs Inspector General report faults the Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System for failing to care for a patient with traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder before he took his own life on a California gun range in October 2014.

According to a VA Office of Inspector General report released Jan. 5, the VA doctors treating former Marine Sgt. Jeremy Sears did not follow department guidelines for prescribing opioid medications and ignored his request to discontinue using the painkillers.

The IG also found that VA concluded Sears' benefits ratings review prematurely and, when he was determined to have PTSD and TBI, did not follow up on care.

Sen. Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., requested the VA investigation after learning that Sears, a former sergeant and Iraq and Afghanistan veteran, died by suicide after waiting 16 months to hear from the VA about his disability claim.

When the disability claim response arrived in his mailbox, he learned he did not rate compensation.

"These tragedies are unacceptable," Feinstein said after Sears' death. "It is our moral duty to ensure that the men and women who bravely serve our country have access to the mental health care needed to address serious mental health conditions like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder."

The investigation found that while the San Diego VA benefits office decided the claim without having certain relevant treatment records, it did not find that the office's conclusion was incorrect.

The investigation also found that:

- Sears was prescribed hydrocodone but didn't see a doctor for nearly 22 months while he took the medication;
- His medication levels were not monitored by urine screening, as recommended in the Defense Department/Veterans Affairs Clinical Practice Guideline for Management of Opioid and Chronic Pain, and;
- He never received a follow-up plan for managing TBI and PTS after he was diagnosed during his disability exam.

The report comes after several others that found VA facilities negligent in caring for veterans or following up on patients under their care.

In August, the VA inspector general found that the staff at the VA medical center in Tomah, Wisconsin, failed to properly prescribe medications and blundered the medical response when the veteran was found unresponsive.

Officials at the San Diego Medical Center said they largely concurred with the IG's recommendations and have taken steps to improve outreach and care at the facility.

But in a written response to the report, Jeff Gering, director of the VA San Diego Healthcare System, called Sears' death a tragedy but said he had "significant concerns" with the report's methodology and conclusions.

He called the VA and DoD guidelines for opioid prescribing and pain management "guidance" and not "requirements" and noted that the patient rescheduled numerous appointments.

The investigation had found that Sears and his physicians corresponded by email and the veteran missed numerous appointments and did not follow through on recommended treatments, such as physical therapy for a knee injury.

Gering added that disability evaluations are not intended to diagnose new conditions and called it "inappropriate" to characterize the compensation and pension assessments as a "diagnosis of TBI."

House Veterans' Affairs Committee chairman Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., said the report demonstrates that VA continues to "fall short in its mission to provide the best quality care" for veterans.

"Sadly, this report documents a host of failures from medical inattention and inconsistent continuity of care to putting expediency before excellence," Miller said.

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### **1.5 - Military Times: VA failed to spend \$1.9 billion designated for health care, report finds** (12 January, Patricia Kime, 482k online visitors/mo; Springfield, VA)

An audit of the Veterans Health Administration's private health care program books finds the department failed to spend \$1.9 billion – or 40 percent – of the \$4.8 billion designated for non-VA care in fiscal 2013.

Also, from Oct. 1, 2013, through March 31, 2015, medical center administrators overestimated the funds they needed to pay for outside care for veterans by \$543 million, leaving that amount unavailable for patient care, according to a new Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General report.

The finding follows numerous reports that VA has mishandled disciplinary actions against administrators involved in scandals, a slow rollout of its \$10 billion to provide care in the private sector through the Veterans Choice program and a nationwide problem involving long waits for medical care.

The VA IG said the failure occurred because VA administrators have not provided medical directors with the tools they need to estimate costs and that medical center staff were not required to adjust estimated costs routinely to reflect actual costs.

"We recommended that the Under Secretary for Health improve cost estimation tools, update system software to ensure unused funds can be 'deobligated,' require facilities to adjust cost estimates ... and monitor VA medical facility obligation estimates," wrote Gary Abe, acting assistant general for audits and evaluations.

VA Secretary Robert McDonald asked Congress last year to allow the department to shift money from the Veterans Choice program to other VA programs, saying administrators needed flexibility in spending money on VA and private or community health care.

Congress agreed to allow VA to use about \$3.3 billion in Choice program funds to cover other account shortfalls.

Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee said the audit indicates that the department has a management problem, not a money problem.

"If VA's job was mismanaging money, it would have a near-perfect record of achievement," Miller said. "Yet despite this and other high-profile budgetary failures, all too often the department's knee-jerk response to challenges is to ask taxpayers for more money."

A veterans advocacy group that has been pressing for a complete overhaul of the VA health system, including partial privatization, said Tuesday that the IG audit "shows the department is not truly invested in giving veterans more options."

"This report makes clear that in addition to relying on faulty budget projections, the VA failed to provide oversight for the program, to the likely detriment of nearly 80,000 veterans," Concerned Veterans for America press secretary John Cooper said.

In a response to the audit, Under Secretary for Health Dr. David Shulkin said he concurred with the recommendations made by the auditors, and he attached a plan of action.

Veterans issues have been a focus of the administration -- transitions from military service, employment and homelessness.

On Wednesday, McDonald will travel to Boston to highlight several notable VA research efforts and collaboration on VA mental health.

McDonald will visit the Million Veteran Program, an initiative designed to study service-related conditions, the VA Brain Bank and the Jamaica Plain VA Medical Center, where he'll present an award to VA National Center for PTSD behavioral science director Terence Keane for his work in the field of traumatic stress.

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

### **2.1 - Alaska Dispatch News: [New Alaska workers tasked with helping veterans with health care](#) (12 January, Tegan Hanlon, 1.4M online visitors/mo; Anchorage, AK)**

An Arizona-based company that manages health benefits for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs said Tuesday it's bringing six new employees to Alaska to help get veterans' medical appointments scheduled and doctors' bills paid.

"By having this staff based in Alaska we will demonstrate our commitment to Alaskan providers and gain their trust," said Hal Blair, deputy program manager of the Arizona company, TriWest Healthcare Alliance.

At an Anchorage news conference, Blair said the new team will provide in-person and over-the-phone help for Alaska's veterans and health care providers who must navigate the federal Choice Program, which was partly modeled on an earlier system in Alaska. The national Choice Program is supposed to increase health care access for veterans across the country in the wake of a national scandal over backlogs and wait times.

When Congress passed the Choice Act in summer 2014, the Alaska VA was already doing much of what it mandated, like paying private health clinics for veterans' care or using the federally funded Native health care system when the VA didn't have the capacity to treat veterans.

At a U.S. Senate committee field hearing this summer, Alaska's veterans had harsh words for the Choice Program, saying it added another bureaucratic layer to health care access. Instead of booking an appointment through the VA, veterans had to call out-of-state TriWest employees who, they said, did not always understand the landscape of the state. They experienced long wait times and disconnected phone calls.

Sen. Dan Sullivan called the Choice Program an "unmitigated failure" at the summer hearing and said it "essentially blew up" the state's VA health care system. In October, Sullivan announced that TriWest would dedicate staff to work virtually with the Alaska VA and send seven of its staffers to Alaska by mid-November.

Dr. Linda Boyle, Alaska VA interim director, said that to bring up staff, the VA had to modify its contract with TriWest, which didn't happen until November. TriWest has a contract with the VA to establish the Choice Program in 28 states, including Alaska.

Five TriWest workers arrived in Alaska over the weekend and began work on Monday, said Samuel Hudson, Alaska VA spokesman. A sixth staff member, once hired, will work in Fairbanks assisting with claims, he said.

Boyle said two of the new six employees will be stationed at the Alaska VA in Anchorage to help veterans with claim problems. Two will travel and help health care providers with claims. Another will oversee the TriWest staff in Alaska.

"I think it will make a big difference," Boyle said.

Blair said the staff from TriWest will work closely with the staff from the VA to ensure veterans can get timely appointments. He said TriWest is paying for the salaries of the additional workers and the change in the contract will not require additional government funding.

TriWest has already set up a similar local hub in New Orleans, Blair said. After Anchorage, Dallas is next on the list. In other areas, TriWest has teams working across regions, he said.

Alaska's congressional delegation said in statements Tuesday that they are cautiously optimistic about the additional staff in the state, though noting that it's only one step toward fixing veterans' problems with health care.

Sullivan said in a statement that he hopes the additional staff in Alaska will help with veterans' scheduling issues, calling it an "encouraging, albeit small first step, and just the first of many reforms needed to ensure that our veterans get the care they deserve and have earned."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski called the Choice Program an "unmitigated disaster for Alaska's veterans," in a statement Tuesday. "The decision to place staff in Alaska is a step in the right direction but it's results that count and time will tell whether they are achieved," she said.

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**2.2 - The Kansas City Star: [Diversion program to assist U.S. veterans](#)** (12 January, Roxie Hammill, 901k online visitors/mo; Kansas City, MO)

Veterans whose struggles with civilian life land them in the criminal court system will have a new alternative to jail time in Johnson County. Beginning today, they can come to a special Veterans Treatment Court and get support and supervision from a team of court staff and mentors who will help them through a diversion program.

The special court, the first of its kind in Kansas, is scheduled to begin with an opening ceremony today at the Johnson County Courthouse. Once the flag ceremony and remarks from Kansas Chief Justice Lawton Nuss and Johnson County District Attorney Steve Howe are finished, the court will be open for its first docket of eight to 10 cases, said District Court Judge Timothy McCarthy.

McCarthy, who researched and organized the court, will hear veterans' cases every other Wednesday afternoon.

The court is being started with a dual purpose — getting treatment for veterans who need it and reducing the population of low-level offenders doing jail time, McCarthy said. The focus will be on veterans who have developed mental health or substance abuse problems as a result of their service.

“These guys are people who developed problems in service to our country. If anybody deserves a helping hand, it’s these guys,” he said.

Veterans treatment courts are not unlike special drug courts that have popped up recently as a way to get defendants help and treatment so they won’t become repeat offenders, McCarthy said. Accused offenders must participate in a 12- to 18-month program of frequent court appearances, drug and alcohol testing and whatever other type of treatment program their counselors deem appropriate.

The difference is that the participant is surrounded in the courtroom by other veterans who are either going through the same thing or have some knowledge of what it’s like to have served in the military, McCarthy said.

Even the support team is made up mostly of people who have military connections, he said. The team includes two prosecutors, two public defenders, a probation officer, two program coordinators, an additional judge and a representative of the Veterans Administration. There are also volunteer mentors. Of that team, five are veterans and most of the rest have a close relative who has served in the armed forces, McCarthy said.

The team, comprised of people already working in the courts, meets to discuss cases for an hour every two weeks, besides attending court hearings. Veterans in the program are accompanied before the bench by a veteran mentor.

That, plus the involvement of the VA for treatment options, should make for an atmosphere that veterans can relate to and should make the odds of success more likely, McCarthy said.

In fact, other jurisdictions that have tried the courts have had good success, he said. The first one, established in Buffalo, N.Y., in 2008, reports that around 90 percent of people who complete the program do not repeat offend in the next two years, McCarthy said.

There are now 250 courts in 40 states. The Kansas City area has three — one each in Jackson and Clay counties and another one in the Kansas City municipal court system. The Jackson County veterans court has been around since August 2012, too soon for an in-depth study of repeat offenders. But Drug Court Commissioner David Fry said the court program has had a good graduation rate and a positive impact on those who have completed it.

There are some restrictions on who can be in the program. Participants must live in Johnson County and be eligible for VA benefits or Johnson County Mental Health Center services. The types of cases the court will hear are misdemeanors or lower level felony charges, such as drug or alcohol-related or domestic violence cases, he said.

Veterans who graduate from the diversion program will have their charges dismissed. Those who have already been convicted can also enter the program to have probation supervised.

Not everyone will be accepted, McCarthy said. If an applicant had an extensive criminal history before entering the military, for example, his or her case might not be accepted. The lack of an addiction or mental health problem could also be grounds for denying, he said.

"The key is, is the criminal behavior the result of service," in the military, he said. "We're looking for people with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), traumatic brain injury and substance abuse issues. We want to ID those guys and get them in the program."

To that end, everyone brought in for booking at the county jail will be asked if they have served in the military.

McCarthy became interested in veterans courts more than a year ago while looking into the possibility of starting an adult drug court. At the time, he said, court officials doubted there would be enough cases, but found out differently after they counted 62 veterans in active criminal cases and 100 more on probation.

So far McCarthy said he's had a lot of email queries and questions from potential applicants in "greater numbers than anybody thought." He expects that to increase as the program becomes better known.

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**2.3 - Florida Today: [Cape Canaveral VA cemetery holds first burials](#)** (12 January, R. Norman Moody, 561k online visitors/mo; Melbourne, FL)

A caisson carrying the cremated remains of 12 veterans and drawn by two mules ushered in the first burial ceremony at the new Cape Canaveral National Cemetery.

The remains were from members of all five branches of the U.S. military, including the Coast Guard. The service featured full military honors.

Among the veterans buried was Air Force Tech. Sgt. John Garvey, who served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and was 89 when he died in April.

His sons, Tom Garvey, of Titusville, and Glenn Garvey, who lives in Brandon, said they waited to have their father buried at the Cape Canaveral National Cemetery so he would be nearby.

"Being here, we knew of this coming, so we waited to have him interred here," said Tom Garvey, who like his brother, is a Vietnam veteran. "It's an honor to have him as one of the first."

Military units from every branch, including the Florida National Guard, participated in the ceremony to render honors to the deceased veterans. They carried the remains from the caisson to the gravesite and fired a rifle volley. A soldier just away from the burial site played Taps.

One by one each of the deceased veterans' families were presented with a folded American flag by a military member from the branch in which the deceased served.

"We are here to honor 12 American heroes, warriors," said Chip Hanson, a Marine Corps veteran who served as chaplain for the ceremony. "Rather than say farewell to our heroes, let's leave it at 'Until we meet again.'"

For Bruce and Gloria Wagner it was very important to have her father buried at Cape Canaveral National Cemetery, not far from their Merritt Island Home.

Gloria father, U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Kenneth Howard, 90, died months ago but the family waited until the cemetery was ready for burial.

"We took care of him for the last years of his life," Bruce Wagner said. "We are fortunate to be one of the first. We know he would have loved it here."

"We expect to have a full schedule for the next two or three months," said Don Murphy, the cemetery director. "We're also expecting new interment requests." In addition to the first burials, 350 families have already gone through the eligibility process to have loved ones buried at Cape Canaveral National Cemetery.

The ceremony marked the opening the 134th national cemetery and the nation's newest.

"We will forever watch over their grave sites and maintain these grounds in a meticulous manner," Murphy said

Following the private service for families and friends of the 12 veterans this afternoon, the first phase of the 318-acre Cape Canaveral National Cemetery opens Wednesday for interments of casketed or cremated remains of eligible veterans, spouses or dependents.

The cemetery is expected to serve the burial needs of more than 163,000 veterans in Brevard and surrounding counties for the next 100 years.

The Department of Veterans Affairs bought the land for the cemetery, between Johns Road and Huntington Avenue, about 12 miles north of Titusville in July 2012 for \$2.1 million.

It's fantastic," Hanson said of the opening. "It's long overdue with the amount of veterans just between Brevard and Volusia."

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**2.4 - Florida Today: [Proposed Veteran Administration and pension rules](#)** (12 January, Stephen Lacey, 561k online visitors/mo; Melbourne, FL)

In November, we alerted readers to proposed changes to the eligibility rules regarding Aid & Attendance Pension benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Previous reports indicated that these changes would take effect in early 2016, probably February or March. To review, the proposed changes include the following:

Net Worth: For the first time, a definitive limit on the countable net worth an applicant can have and still qualify for benefits.

- The proposed limit is \$119,220 (equal to the current maximum community spouse resource allowance for Medicaid purposes);
- The net worth limitation would increase each year with the Social Security cost-of-living increase; and

- The net worth limitation will apply regardless of whether the applicant is single or married (or has other qualifying dependents), and without consideration of any excess care costs the applicant may have.
- Countable Assets for Net Worth Purposes: Assets are defined as “fair market value of all property that an individual owns, including all real and personal property, unless considered an excluded asset, less the amount of mortgages or other encumbrances specific to the mortgaged or encumbered property.”
- The primary residence (“Homestead”) of the applicant is still excluded from the asset calculation, whether the applicant resides there or not, as long as it remains a residence (e.g. sale or lease of the premises can be problematic); but the “reasonable lot area” that the residence sits on will now be limited to 2 acres (previously, there was no such limitation.)
- Income: Annual income will be considered an asset for net worth purposes. For example: if the applicant has Social Security of \$1,500 per month, this would correspond to \$18,000 in assets (which could result in the applicant being over the net worth limit described above).
- Transfers of Assets and Penalties: Assets that would otherwise be countable for eligibility purposes which are transferred within the “lookback period” will result in a period of ineligibility. Penalty periods may also be assessed for the purchase of an annuity or transfer of assets to a trust (revocable or irrevocable).
- The ineligibility period is limited to 10 years, regardless of the size of the transfer;
- In order to “cure” the transfer by returning the funds to the applicant, the return of funds must be done within 30 days of submission of the VA Pension application;
- The “lookback period” will be the 36 months immediately preceding the date of application for benefits; and
- The only exception to the presumption of a penalized transfer is evidence that the transfer was a result of “fraud, misrepresentation or other bad act in the marketing or sale of a financial product”.

The VA has not stated whether the new rules will apply retroactively, however, the potential application of the proposed regulations underscores the importance of consulting a qualified Elder Law attorney before submitting an application. Additionally, despite the promulgation of regulations that restrict the ability of many to receive VA Pension benefits, there are options available for restructuring of finances to allow qualification without first having to spend all of your hard-earned savings.

If you have questions, do not hesitate to contact a qualified Elder Law attorney. Do not let the newly restrictive regulations or the worries or opinions of others keep you from exploring your options. There may still be strategies available to achieve eligibility, and VA Pension benefits may allow you to receive care in your own home instead of a facility.

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**2.5 - Tulsa World: [Sen. Lankford speaks to local veterans about VA healthcare](#)** (12 January, Dave Spiva, 470k online visitors/mo; Tulsa, OK)

During his visit in Wagoner on Thursday, U.S. Sen. James Lankford spoke to a group of local veterans about some of the issues regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs' healthcare system.

During the forum with local veterans, Lankford said his team is working on a proposal which will let veterans use their much deserved VA benefits at other non-VA hospitals, regardless of where the nearest VA hospital or clinic is located.

"We have a lot of great hospitals in America, across the country," Lankford said during the forum. "Now, the question I hear the most is: 'Why can't I choose where I want to go?'"

"It's really not any more complicated than: Why is a veteran treated different than a senior adult? A senior adult with a Medicare card has open choice and is able to go to anyone, and a veteran is limited; that makes absolutely no sense to me," Lankford said, during an interview with the Wagoner Tribune.

In 2014, the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act was implemented. The act required the VA to let patients receive non-VA care to any veterans residing more than 40 miles from a VA medical facility, including community-based outpatient clinics.

Of course, the veterans in Wagoner County live within 40 miles of a VA facility, whether the facility is the Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center in Muskogee or the Ernest Childers VA Outpatient Clinic in Tulsa.

"That was suppose to be the first step in a multistep process," Lankford said, referring to the veterans' choice act. "What I have not seen come out of the veterans committee is the next step on that. I'm a little impatient on that.

"We did step one two years ago. It's time to keep moving this and allow that greater choice," Lankford added.

Lankford said he wants to allow veterans to have the same choices that any senior adult has in the Medicare system, allowing veterans to have a choice of doctors, labs and hospitals, instead of having to choose a VA facility.

Last month, the Omnibus spending bill, which was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, as well as signed by President Barack Obama, included measures which Lankford said improves the VA healthcare system.

"Those are baby steps, but they were important baby steps to take in the process," Lankford said. "Some of the things that can happen are increased funding, targeting facility construction, working on clinic construction — which I think is a good model for the (VA)."

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**2.6 - WSAV-TV (NBC-3, Video): [Military Brain Injury Victims Urged to Seek Help](#)** (12 January, Martin Staunton, 239k online visitors/mo; Savannah, GA)

A new campaign is underway to get service members and veterans with brain injuries to seek help. The new initiative is being launched by the Department of Defense and is being led by the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Centers. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a significant health issue which affects service members and veterans during times of both peace and war. The Defense Department reports more than 330,000 service members have been diagnosed with TBI since 2000, but they know there are some who still need treatment to deal with lasting impacts from their injury.

Colonel Sidney Hinds, Director of the DVVIC, says whether the TBI is mild or severe, the cause is clearly defined. "A traumatic brain injury is the result of any blow or jolt to the head that causes an alteration in consciousness or an impairment of memory," said Hinds. Colonel Hinds is a medical doctor, who is board certified in neurology and nuclear medicine. He says one of the biggest myths about TBI among service members is that they mostly occur in combat zones as the result of a blast. He says the truth is that motor vehicle collisions account for the majority of traumatic brain injuries in the military. "The vast majority of those head injuries are actually diagnosed, back in garrison, back in home environments...not in the deployed environments and they're caused by similar events that cause civilian traumatic brain injuries," Hinds said. Symptoms of a TBI can be physical, cognitive, and emotional.

For veterans and service members, like Randy Gross, reporting lasting effects of a TBI seems to be a low priority. Gross says there's a mentality that the individual can tough it out. "We're used to, if you fall off the bike, get back on and you'll be fine...ya know, when we grew up it was rub some dirt on it, you'll be fine. Maybe, take an aspirin to it if you're in football, but that's not, I mean, we can't expect people to do that." Gross said, adding that the message behind the new campaign to get more people like him to get help is needed. "The problem is that when individuals go so long without actually recognizing the symptoms, you know, the recovery is gonna be that much more difficult," said Gross. Colonel Hinds says symptoms vary with the severity of the TBI, but in general, lasting affects can be physical, cognitive, and even emotional.

The impacts of TBI are felt within each branch of the service and throughout both the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care systems. In the VA, TBI has become a major focus, second only to recognition of the need for increased resources to provide health care and vocational retraining for individuals with a diagnosis of TBI, as they transition to veteran status. Veterans may sustain TBIs throughout their lifespan, with the largest increase as the veterans enter into their 70s and 80s; these injuries are often caused by falls and result in high levels of disability. Active duty and reserve service members are at increased risk for sustaining a TBI compared to their civilian peers. This is a result of several factors, including the specific demographics of the military; in general, young men between the ages of 18 to 24 are at greatest risk for TBI. Many operational and training activities, which are routine in the military, are physically demanding and even potentially dangerous. Military service members are increasingly deployed to areas where they are at risk for experiencing blast exposures from improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombers, land mines, mortar rounds and rocket-propelled grenades. These and other combat related activities put our military service members at increased risk for sustaining a TBI.

Although recent attention has been intensively focused on combat-related TBI, it should be noted that TBI is not uncommon even in garrison and can occur during usual daily activities. Service members enjoy exciting leisure activities: They ride motorcycles, climb mountains and parachute from planes for recreation. In addition, physical training is an integral part of the

active duty service member's everyday life. These activities are expected for our service members and contribute to a positive quality of life; but these activities also can increase risk for TBI.

DVBIC was founded in 1992, largely in response to the first Persian Gulf War, under the name Defense and Veterans Head Injury Program. At that time, its goal was to integrate specialized TBI care, research and education across military and veteran medical care systems. Twenty years later we are a network of 16 centers, operating out of 11 military treatment facilities and five VA polytrauma hospitals. The specific activities vary at each site and include research, helping service members, veterans and their families find and use the right services for their needs, providing education in military and civilian settings, providing direct care to service members, and assessing TBI injury data.

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## **2.7 - Federal Computer Week: [Hill watchdogs warn on shortcomings in VA's claims system](#) (12 January, Chase Gunter, 150k online visitors/mo; Vienna, VA)**

The Department of Veterans Affairs is scaling up an IT system to help benefits administrators reduce a backlog of veteran claims. But the VA's top watchdog in the House of Representatives is worried that the system is over budget, behind schedule and not working as advertised.

The Veterans Benefits Management System was developed to overcome the massive backlog of disability claims by digitizing claims forms and expediting claims decisions. According to Rep. Jeff Miller (R-Fla.), chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, VBMS is making a dent in the claims backlog, but could be doing a lot better. The agency's own internal watchdog thinks that VA could be manipulating data to make their performance seem better on paper than it is in fact.

By the VA's accounting, VBMS has greatly reduced the backlog, although the agency did not meet its self-imposed goal of eliminating backlogged claims completely by the end of 2015.

According to Beth McCoy, the VA's deputy undersecretary for field operations, who testified at a Jan. 12 hearing of the House panel, backlogged claims (defined as claims older than 125 days) have dropped from a peak of over 611,000 in March 2013 to about 80,000 today. McCoy credited the reduction of nearly 90 percent in part to department's work on the electronic system.

However, Brent Arronte, the VA's deputy assistant inspector general for audits and investigations, questioned the integrity of the VA's numbers, saying the data had been "manipulated."

"We don't believe all the [backlog] numbers are reliable," Arronte said. "We want to see how they count their numbers." He added, "There may be a systemic issue across the nation, so we're going to test their data reliability,"

The exact impact of the VBMS has also attracted the attention of the Government Accountability Office. In a Sept. 2015 report, the GAO expressed concern that the system wasn't completed,

and that the agency hadn't put in place a way to collect user feedback to generate improvements.

Miller recognized the 'department's progress, but made clear that he felt not enough has been done.

"As of Jan. 1, 2016, there were over 360,000 disability claims pending, over 75,000 of which were [backlogged]," he said. "This is despite Congress devoting substantial taxpayer resources -- including significantly increasing VBA's workforce by approximately 7,300 full-time employees between 2007 and 2014." Miller said that "The projected cost of the program has jumped to \$1.3 billion, and there is no guarantee that VA will not need more money for VBMS in the future."

Legislators were visibly displeased by those vagaries. But the moment that most frustrated committee members was when they were presented a picture from a January GAO report of a VA storage facility with boxes containing about 41,000 un-scanned claims; all claims are supposed to be scanned and uploaded to the VBMS within five days of receipt.

"If veterans saw that [picture], they would be livid," said Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.). "That looks worse than my garage."

McCoy told lawmakers that she believed the claims backlog could be eliminated in fiscal year 2018.

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## **2.8 - The Daily Courier: [Prescott-area leaders seek to provide outreach to prevent suicide](#)** (12 January, Nanci Hutson, 138k online visitors/mo; Prescott, AZ)

Suicide in Yavapai County is a painful reality; statistics indicate youths, seniors and veterans here take their lives at alarming rates that are higher than many other counties in the state and across the nation.

Why?

Community and agency leaders wrestle with that question every day. And they have stepped up efforts to reach out to vulnerable populations so they do not succumb to their despair and isolation.

In 2015, Yavapai County Medical Examiner's Office documented 72 suicides. Of those, 44 were age 50 or older; eight were local VA patients. The year before, the county had 78 suicides, 49 of them were over 50.

The state Department of Health Services' 2013 statistics - the most current - indicate that Yavapai County has a history of suicide rates that are among the highest in the state.

In 2013, the suicide rate was 29.1 per 100,000 population, versus 17 statewide. For those 65 and older, the rate was 23.2 per 100,000 population; in 2009 that rate was even higher, 50.4 per 100,000.

For veterans, the Suicide Data report from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs in 2012 indicated some 22 veterans kill themselves every day.

On both a national and local level, VA officials have targeted suicide as a key mental health issue. Veteran advocates say one such death is too many.

"We're always looking for new ways to help each other," said Mary Dillinger, local VA public affairs officer.

At the local VA, Suicide Prevention Coordinator Jo Anne Carr oversees a three-member team: two licensed clinical social workers and a suicide prevention case manager.

Beyond tracking high-risk patients and individual counseling, the team offers a range of educational programs: Stand Down events for homeless veterans, weekly training and orientation for domiciliary patients; training for VA employees and local law enforcement; distribution of gun locks and veteran crisis hotline information.

Veterans and their families are invited to at any time contact the local VA Mental Health Clinic at 928-445-4860, ext. 7500 or ext. 6071, to request services, and the VA has a mental health crisis walk-in clinic from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays, with the VA emergency room open 24/7. The VA veteran crisis hotline is 800-273-8255.

The Western Yavapai County Suicide Prevention Coalition has emerged as a local force in fighting against rising suicide rates, including in their efforts the senior citizen demographic that has seen rising rates in recent years.

"We envision a state where suicide is a rare event, where people are nurtured and supported, and where individuals and families are aware of the risk factors for suicide and actively seek help from accessible, effective community resources," the coalition's mission statement reads.

In the coalition's materials, there are several crisis hotlines listed, including the clinic hotline at 928-445-5211; the state Department of Health Yavapai County Crisis hotline at 877-756-4090 and the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255).

In Prescott, there are also resources for those who have lost a loved one to suicide: Survivors of Suicide and the Path to Hope Circle. For more information on those groups, contact Terri Roza, manager of the Senior Peer Prevention program at the West Yavapai Guidance Clinic at 928-445-5211, ext. 2672.

"People don't think (suicide) touches anyone here, but it does touch a lot of people here, and in different age groups," Roza said.

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

**3.1 - The Huffington Post (The Blog): [Ending Veteran Homelessness Strengthens the Union](#)** (12 January, Deborah De Santis, 35.8M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

I was moved to see Cynthia Dias, a formerly homeless veteran from Las Vegas, sitting in First Lady Michelle Obama visitors' box during tonight's State of the Union Address. To be given such a place of honor speaks to the bipartisan efforts on Capitol Hill to end veteran homelessness in our country, and the power of providing our veterans who need it with the housing and support services that help them regain their lives.

Mrs. Obama deserves particular praise for her personal commitment on this issue. She and Dr. Jill Biden have spearheaded what is known as the Mayor's Challenge, harnessing the power of local elected officials and community organizations to give our veterans the attention and dignity they deserve. Mrs. Obama's tireless work has been complemented by what is known as Zero: 2016, a national campaign to realize the goal of ending chronic and veteran homelessness in communities throughout the country.

Ms. Dias is representative of many of our veterans who are now housed because the Mayor's Challenge and Zero: 2016 have assisted communities with resources as they strive to end homelessness among veterans. I am proud of dedicated members of CSH staff who, with our partners Community Solutions, AIR/HomeBase and ICF, have been lending expertise to City government and community groups in Las Vegas, which was recently designated by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the US Interagency Council on Homelessness as having effectively ended homelessness among veterans. This means the City has enough services and programs in place to house every homeless veteran.

But who Ms. Dias is today and what her story tells us about overcoming adversity is appropriately the focus of the attention this evening.

Ms. Dias served honorably as a nurse in the Vietnam War and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. She believes her condition contributed to her homelessness and she's probably right. But even at her lowest ebb, she did not give up. Like the good soldier she is, she kept fighting to restore her life and she's now winning the battle.

Ms. Dias left a homeless shelter about a year ago and moved into Veteran's Village, a former motel in downtown Las Vegas renovated to provide 120+ units of housing for veterans. In addition to a nice apartment, she has access to health care, job training and counseling.

The founder of Veteran's Village, Arnold Stalk, tells anyone who listens how important it is to get veterans off the street first and into a stable environment. Once that happens, he says, it's easier to provide the health care and other support they'll need to live in a home permanently.

This same credo is embodied in supportive housing, where affordable rental apartments are used as a platform, providing the stability so individuals and families can feel secure to then pursue the life-changing care (medical and mental health treatments) that places them squarely on a road to recovery.

With the help of Mr. Stalk and Veteran's Village, Cynthia Dias earned the recognition she received tonight. There are so many other veterans like her. The best thing we can do as a nation grateful for their sacrifices is honor each of them by ensuring they have the housing and services they need to avoid the despair and trauma of homelessness.

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**3.2 - The Washington Times (AP): [Arizona, New Mexico tribes share in veterans housing funds](#)** (12 January, 3.5M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Tribes in Arizona and New Mexico are sharing in more than \$1.1 million in federal funding to help address homelessness among veterans.

The grant money comes from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The agencies awarded a total of nearly \$6 million to 26 tribes and tribal entities.

The agencies say recent statutory changes allow for American Indian veterans to use housing vouchers.

Some 80 veterans in Arizona and New Mexico are expected to receive housing assistance and support services, thanks to the grants.

Housing authorities on the Navajo and Hopi reservations, and the San Carlos Apache and Tohono O'odham tribes in Arizona successfully applied for the funding. Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico also benefits.

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**3.3 - ThinkProgress: [The Story Behind A Formerly Homeless Veteran's Invitation To The State Of The Union](#)** (12 January, Bryce Covert, 3.4M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Cynthia Dias is one of the lucky few Americans selected to get a seat at President Obama's State of the Union address on Tuesday night.

Dias is a veteran, having served as a nurse during the Vietnam War. She also experienced homelessness after her service, which she attributes to her struggles with PTSD. But for the last year, she's been living in a supportive housing complex in Las Vegas, Nevada called Veterans Village, where formerly homeless veterans can find a place to live as well as services such as physical and mental health care and job referral and training.

Dias's invitation highlights one of the administration's efforts: a challenge to mayors across the country to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015 and to end it for other groups in the following years. Las Vegas was one of the cities to meet that goal, as were 18 others and the state of Virginia. And the invite likely signals that Obama will highlight the challenge, and the achievements it's reached, in his address.

That might help ensure that this issue makes it into the presidential campaign and gets on the agenda for whoever next occupies the White House, according to Richard Cho, senior policy director at the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness. "I'm hoping the fact that the president is highlighting this issue, and the first lady is highlighting this issue, will be a way to signal that this is a place where federal leadership can really make a difference," he said. "Particularly around the veterans goal, it demonstrated that when the federal government provides leadership what a difference that can make."

Over Obama's tenure, homelessness among the country's veterans has declined by 35 percent, or 25,642 fewer people without homes. Beyond the places to meet the full goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of last year, others ended chronic homelessness among their veteran populations. That can be easier than housing all homeless vets, a larger number that requires enough affordable housing units to be able to place them, which many larger cities are struggling with.

But the whole initiative has proven at least one thing: ending homelessness is achievable. "We're no longer talking about whether it's possible to achieve an end to veteran homelessness. We know it's possible now," Cho said. "We can choose to do this, or not choose to do this."

And there should be even more success stories in 2016. He said the agency is getting a "continuous stream" of communities seeking to have it certify them as having ended veteran homelessness, about half of which are confirmable. "I'm feeling very personally optimistic that we'll have a significant number of communities over the next few months being able to get there," he said. It's also signaling to cities that although the 2015 deadline has come and gone, the effort is ongoing and new cities can still make a pledge, although there is no specific new deadline to aim for. "Just because communities didn't get there by 2015 is no reason to stop," he said. "We're committed to achieving the goal on the earliest timeframe."

Thus far, however, Cho says he's disappointed with the role the issue of homelessness has played in the race for president — which is to say, none at all. "I think it's really disappointing, especially given that we have many communities where they're feeling an uptick in homelessness and things are reaching a crisis level," he said. Lawmakers have called the situation facing their homeless populations states of emergency in the cities of Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle and in the entire state of Hawaii. And while homelessness declined 2 percent between 2014 and 2015, at the current rate it won't be eradicated for another 40 years.

"Homelessness in the context of a national affordable housing crisis is something that I'm hoping more people will talk about," he said. After all, there used to be a surplus of affordable housing units, but there is now a deficit of 5.5 million.

Cho and his agency also want to make sure that the progress that has been made during Obama's tenure isn't allowed to fade away after he leaves office. "What we hope to do is set in motion a few things this year that will make sure the work continues into the next administration," he said. Part of that will be making it clear that the gains made in ending veteran homelessness will only be sustained as long as the considerable resources Congress has allocated toward the issue are sustained. It also means ensuring there are systems in place to keep housing homeless veterans "regardless of who's in the White House and who's in city halls or statehouses."

The point of setting a goal to end veteran homelessness was never meant to only address veterans' needs, but to also prove that certain approaches work and can be applied to all other groups of homeless people across the country. "That's the big focus for this year, to really shine a light on the things that worked well for ending veteran homelessness," Cho said. Things like a housing first approach — which aims to put people into housing, stabilizing their lives, before addressing other needs and concerns — and targeting resources to the people with particular needs.

But that secondary goal has been much harder to achieve. Cho said Congress has increased funding for supportive veteran housing eight-fold and for rapid rehousing six-fold. That sense of

urgency has yet to translate to other homeless people. “We’ve not seen anything near that investment for other groups,” he said. The original goal was to end all chronic homelessness by the end of this year, but that had to be pushed back to 2017 when Congress failed to provide resources for the housing units necessary to get there. There has been even less attention devoted to the needs of homeless families and youth. “We’re facing the reality that we will not be able to achieve that goal because we’re facing a significant shortfall in resources,” he said.

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### **3.4 - The Sun: [Loma Linda apartment complex OK’d for homeless, low-income veterans](#)**

(12 January, Joe Nelson, 102k online visitors/mo; San Bernardino, CA)

The San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday unanimously approved an 88-unit apartment complex in Loma Linda for low income and homeless veterans, which will be built near the Jerry L. Pettis Memorial VA Medical Center.

Loma Linda Vets will offer 40 1-bedroom, 30 2-bedroom, and 18 3-bedroom apartments to veterans and their families, plus one 2-bedroom manager’s unit. The complex will also include a community area, barbecue grills, a children’s play area, a community room and a community garden. It will be built a quarter of a mile from the VA hospital.

Last year, the Board of Supervisors set a goal to end veteran homelessness in the county by Dec. 31, 2015. Though the county did not plan to disclose whether it met its goal until Jan. 21, board Chairman James Ramos announced Tuesday that the county did in fact meet its goal.

“Last year, we achieved the goal of housing 100 percent of the county’s homeless veterans,” Ramos said in a statement. “We are very proud of this accomplishment and we will continue to search for funding opportunities to bring more services and more housing units like Loma Linda Vets, to our county’s homeless veterans and their families.”

Los Angeles-based Meta Housing Corporation will build the complex in partnership with the Housing Authority of the County of San Bernardino, VA Loma Linda Healthcare System, and Volunteers of America, a faith-based nonprofit that provides affordable housing and other services to low income people.

In July, the Board of Supervisors approved the implementation of a strategy to permanently house all of the county’s homeless veterans, 401 at the time, by the end of 2015. Within two months, more than half of the county’s homeless veterans had been placed in permanent housing.

On Jan. 28, hundreds of volunteers will fan out across the county for the point-in-time homeless count, now an annual event. Last year’s homeless count revealed that the homeless population in the county dropped by 8 percent since 2013, but the count also revealed that 25 families with a combined total of 58 children were among the 1,302 homeless people counted.

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## 4. Ending the Claims Backlog

**4.1 - WUSF-FM (NPR-89.7, Audio): [Congress Wants Accountability For VA Backlog](#)** (12 January, Bobbie O'Brien, 3.3M online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

Brandishing a photograph of 1,600 boxes, stacked haphazardly in a storage room, Florida U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller of Pensacola opened a congressional hearing Tuesday into the backlog of veterans benefits claims.

The photo Miller referenced came from an Inspector General report that found more than 41,000 packages of veterans' records from the St. Petersburg Regional VA Benefits Office waiting to be scanned at a contractor's facility in Georgia.

"The IG found that the St. Petersburg regional office had a significant number of unprocessed veterans' claims information at a scanning contractor facility," Miller directed attendees at the hearing to look at a projected image or inside their packets. "And I'm sure the ranking members are appalled that Florida veterans may have waited longer than any other veteran due to this delay in scanning."

The IG photo is a year old and reportedly those veterans' records have been secured and scanned. But when asked, VA officials were not able to say if the contractor or VA employees responsible for the mess were held accountable.

Miller, chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs, told the VA officials they've lost the committee's trust.

Miller concluded the nearly two hour hearing saying the VA must admit when mistakes are made and must hold their employees and contractors accountable for poor performance.

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**4.2 - Washington Examiner: [Veterans Affairs manipulated data to hide its growing backlog](#)** (12 January, Sarah Westwood, 3.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Department of Veterans Affairs officials have poured more than \$1 billion into a system meant to speed up the processing of veterans' benefits claims, only to see the backlog of such claims climb significantly higher.

But VA officials have attempted to downplay the problem by manipulating data in the agency's benefits office, creating the perception that the backlog is lower than it actually is.

Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said Tuesday during a hearing on the matter that the VA refused to count appeals as part of its backlog of claims. Instead, the agency only looked at a veteran's initial claim when tallying the backlog.

In fact, the VA had not even enabled its expensive and incomplete digital system to handle appeals, disability claims or pension applications, masking the true number of veterans waiting to hear back from the VA on some administrative aspect of their care.

Miller noted the backlog of benefits appeals had grown from 250,000 in April 2013 to 433,000 at the start of this year, although he said the VA does not count those appeals as part of its official backlog.

"As of January 1, 2016, there were over 360,000 disability claims pending, over 75,000 of which were pending more than 125 days, which is what VA defines as the 'backlog,'" Miller said.

The Florida Republican said the massive backlog has climbed despite increased funding and a surge of new staff dedicated to processing the appeals. Between 2007 and 2014, the VA added 7,300 full-time employees to its benefits office.

While the cost of the digital management system has doubled from the VA's initial projections, the system is still not finished, the committee noted.

The VA had asked for \$580 million in September 2009 to complete the project; Congress has so far allocated \$1.3 billion for the system, with no guarantee that the price will not continue to balloon down the road.

The VA had vowed to eliminate its benefits backlog by the end of 2015.

Brent Arronte, an official in the VA's Office of Inspector General, testified that the VA was able to argue it had shrunk its backlog in part because officials changed the way they counted how many claims were waiting to be processed.

The hearing came on the heels of the agency watchdog's discovery that 41,900 mail packages containing veterans' benefits claims were stacked, unopened and gathering dust, in a storage room at the St. Petersburg, Fla., VA office.

Although the VA was paying a contractor to scan hard copies of benefits claims into the system within five days of a veteran mailing them in, the average claim sat for at least 30 days before it was even scanned, let alone addressed, by the VA.

Another inspector general report made public Friday indicated the VA's regional office in Oakland, Calif., also struggled to keep track of its benefits claims.

The watchdog found 537 informal claims that were stored "improperly," as well as potentially thousands more that were seemingly lost.

"[B]ecause of [the VA regional office] management's poor recordkeeping, we could not verify or locate the [the VA regional office]'s original document count of 13,184 unprocessed informal claims," the inspector general wrote.

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**4.3 - The Tampa Tribune: [House committee demands to see messy boxes of VA claims](#)**  
(12 January, Howard Altman, 790k online visitors/mo; Tampa, FL)

The chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee is demanding that the Department of Veterans Affairs turn over boxes containing benefits materials from St. Petersburg that were found in disarray in a Georgia scanning center .

U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller, a Pensacola Republican, made the demand during a committee hearing Tuesday examining problems with the VA's claims processing computer system.

He was reacting to an investigation by the VA Office of Inspector General, first reported by The Tampa Tribune, that found veterans who filed benefits claims at the St. Petersburg Regional Office waited longer in 2014 because claims materials weren't prepared properly.

Inspectors also found that personal information was inadequately stored at a contractor scanning center, posing a risk of identity theft. Because of the problems, the average wait time at the St. Petersburg office increased from 152 days in June 2014 to 179 days the following December, the report says.

Investigators found a backlog of nearly 1,600 boxes and 42,000 packages sent by mail, with each package containing an unspecified number of individual claims, the report says.

This "significant backlog of unpressed veteran material" was the result of "inefficient preparation and handling of veteran-provided documentation" at a Noonan, Georgia, contractor center operated by CACI International, the report says.

The problem was in part the result of poor handling of the veterans' materials by the St. Petersburg office, the report says.

CACI officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The VA will respond to all requests for information discussed at the hearing today, spokeswoman Jan Northstar told the Tribune.

"It's not just junk mail," Miller told Beth McCoy, VA deputy under secretary for field operations, who appeared as a witness at the hearing.

"The committee would like to see what was in those boxes," Miller told McCoy. "I know it's going to be difficult. I know the secretary is going to raise Cain. And I'd rather not do it with a subpoena. I'd rather do it because this committee is asking in a good-faith effort. You gotta hold some people accountable."

Miller added that he had "yet to hear you say because these people did not meet their contractual requirement, that they are going to be held accountable."

McCoy said she did not know what, if anything, the VA was doing to hold the contractor accountable for the documents in question.

U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis, the Palm Harbor Republican and vice chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee, wanted to know whether VA officials have any plans to ensure claims from the St. Petersburg Regional Office were not hurt by missing or unprocessed information.

McCoy said that while there was a delay in processing, there was no delay in "making sure the right decisions were made for veterans."

After the hearing, Bilirakis told the Tribune that the responses from the panel “were disappointing to say the least. It was made clear that the VA is not only unable to locate the files and boxes in question in the OIG report, they were unable to clarify the process of keeping veterans’ records and did not have set plans to hold employees responsible for their blatant mistakes.”

Bilirakis added, “It became painfully obvious that we have much more work to do to change the culture at the VA and ensure they are upholding their sacred vow to care for our veterans.”

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**4.4 - Modern Healthcare: [VA's backlog reduction questioned](#)** (12 January, Shannon Muchmore, 495k online visitors/mo; Chicago, IL)

An investigator who oversees the Veterans Affairs Department said during a hearing Tuesday that he doesn't fully trust the agency's recent assertion that it has substantially reduced the backlog of benefit claims.

Brent Arronte, the VA's deputy assistant inspector general for audits and evaluations, also said he suspects there may be a systemic problem of data integrity at VA field offices across the country.

“I would say right now it's safe to say we're not out of the woods,” he said.

The VA said at the end of 2015 that it had a backlog of about 75,000 cases, which is nearly a 90% reduction from a high of about 612,000 cases in 2013. That is thanks largely to the implementation of the automated Veterans Benefits Management System, which replaced a pen and paper method of processing claims in 2012.

Arronte said the VA's Office of Inspector General has uncovered several instances of data manipulation, however, and that means that claims about reducing the backlog cannot be substantiated.

Beth McCoy, deputy undersecretary for field operations at the VA, disputed the allegation, saying the data systems now are more robust and transparent, and there is not substantial data manipulation.

“We are much better off and veterans are much better off,” she said.

Members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee grilled VA officials about whether anyone has been held accountable or disciplined for the backlog and what has been done with the extra funding and employees that was provided to help eliminate it.

Chairman Jeff Miller of Florida said the VA continues to ask for more money without giving deadlines or final cost estimates for projects. He referred to a recent VA OIG report (PDF) that found thousands of backlogged mail packages at a regional office in St. Petersburg, Fla. The report states the documents were disorganized, not secured and not ready to be scanned.

Rep. Mike Coffman (R-Colo.) said the VA has a culture of “bureaucratic incompetence” and he would like to see someone brought to task for the mismanagement and cost overruns.

Also Tuesday, the nominee for the new permanent inspector general with the VA is being reviewed by a Senate committee. The post is responsible for investigating the agency.

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**4.5 - WFED-AM (AM-1500): [Lawmakers pan VA disability system, despite cuts in claims backlog](#)** (12 January, Scott Maucione, 441k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Congress and the Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General are skeptical of the Veterans Benefits Management System, despite substantial reductions in backlogged disability claims.

The VBMS price tag has ballooned from about \$580 million to \$1.3 billion, and combined with a lack of tangible goals, some lawmakers are questioning the value of the endeavor.

“We had a paper-based system under the previous administration. The electronic system we are trying to move to with VBMS has obviously had its share of problems, but my contention is we are probably better off even with all the problems we had [before with paper] ... than we were had we not attempted to [move to electronic filing],” said Mark Takano (D-Calif.) during a Jan. 12 House Committee on Veterans Affairs hearing.

“I concur,” said committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Fla.).

VBMS is only one of the department’s attempts since 1988 to move to an electronic claims processing system. VBMS was created in 2009 with a mission of reducing claims processing times and improving accuracy in adjudications.

During the hearing, Veterans Benefits Administration officials said they have reached the goal of creating an “electronic file room” for disability claims. VBA has gone further to try to provide more services, but could not articulate what goals it was striving toward.

VBA officials said they are working toward coming up with goals for 2018.

“You have a never-ending project with a never-ending price tag that has moving goals, and you tell us at the beginning it’s only going to be \$580 million, but magically it’s at \$1.3 billion with no end in sight, no timeframe in sight, just ‘we’ll let you know in 2018,’” said Tim Huelskamp (R-Kan.).

VBA officials said they have reduced the backlog of disability claims by 88 percent from 2013. The backlog currently stands at about 75,000.

VBA Deputy Undersecretary for Field Operations Beth McCoy partly attributed faster disability claims to the VBMS.

“In every step of the process, from intake processing to evidence gathering to the rating decisions to awarding the benefit, VBMS continues to transform the way our claims processors work,” McCoy said.

McCoy said VBA is also working with a 91 percent claims processing accuracy rate.

An American Federation of Government Employees survey found 62 percent of VBA employees thought VBMS improved their productivity at work. Also, 83 percent said VBMS as a whole has improved.

Still, the VA IG found that the reduction in backlogs cannot specifically be attributed to VBMS.

Deputy Assistant IG for Audits and Evaluations Brent Arronte testified that VBA used more than 40 initiatives to reduce its backlog, including \$130 million in mandatory overtime and reallocating staff to process only claims that affect the backlog, while sacrificing time for other claims such as those on appeal.

“Further, VBA’s improved claims processing accuracy rate is related to a change in methodology regarding how they calculate error rates for claims processing accuracy, and not specifically an aspect of VBMS,” Arronte said.

VA IG also found a significant backlog of unprocessed mail waiting to be scanned into the VBMS.

“This resulted from inefficient preparation and handling of veteran-provided documentation at a contractor-operated facility,” Arronte said.

One such facility in Florida had almost 42,000 packages of veterans’ claims material that were backlogged and more than 1,600 boxes awaiting processing at the scanning facility.

A Government Accountability Office report from September found that “the development of VBMS was expected to be completed in 2015 [but] implementation of functionality to fully support electronic claims processing has been delayed beyond 2015.”

Additionally, the report states VBA has not yet produced a plan that identified when the system will be completed.

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

**5.1 - The Times & Democrat: [Veteran taking advantage of GI Bill needs advice](#)** (12 January, 86k online visitors/mo; Orangeburg, SC)

DEAR HARRIETTE: I am a military veteran, and I was able to go back to college at the age of 40 because of the GI Bill. I just finished my undergrad program a few weeks ago, and I will start my first month of grad school in February. I have not told my parents that I am starting my graduate program. They are expecting me to find a job and move out of the house shortly thereafter. I am taking advantage of the GI bill, and the military is going to pay for my education as long as I go to school. I do not know why I have not told my parents that I am going back to school to pursue further education. I need some help in telling them because I feel like I am doing something bad. Please help. -- Master Veteran, Elizabeth, New Jersey

DEAR MASTER VETERAN: Given that you expect to continue living with your parents, you absolutely must tell them the truth immediately. Your trepidation may come as a result of wishing that you already had your life together. The good news is that you are taking positive steps to ensure that you will be attractive as an employee in your chosen area because of your pursuit of higher education.

Go to your parents. Tell them you need to talk to them. Reveal that you have been accepted into graduate school and that it starts in February. Apologize for not telling them sooner. Describe the schedule for this program and your timeframe for moving out of their house. Ask for their blessing. If they choose not to support this elongated stay, look for a roommate situation that you can afford.

DEAR HARRIETTE: My husband is a foodie, and we go to some amazing restaurants in New York City on a regular basis. I love our dinner dates, but there is one thing that he does that is a bit strange for me to handle. My husband makes random noises when he eats his dinner. It is quite embarrassing because he does not realize that he making these sounds. How can I make my husband aware of the sound he makes during dinner without embarrassing him? -- Bad Habits, West Orange, New Jersey

DEAR BAD HABITS: Your duty as your husband's wife -- in my way of thinking -- is to let him know that he is doing something that seems off. Choose a time when you are at home and without distractions to bring up this sensitive topic. Ask your husband if he would be open to a bit of feedback. With his blessing, tell him about the sounds that he makes when you go out to eat and how uncomfortable it makes you. You might need to demonstrate the sounds so that he understands what you are talking about. Suggest that he tone down the sounds in public. Be prepared, however, to have to live with it. These noises may be his unique way of reflecting his pleasure during the meal. You may have to accept that they come with the territory.

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**5.2 - KAMC-TV (ABC-28, Video): [Texas Tech Military and Veterans Affairs Programs Recognized, 5th Time Tech Honored by Military Advanced Education & Transition's Magazine](#)** (12 January, Wes Rapaport, 78k online visitors/mo; Lubbock, TX)

The military programs and veterans affairs department at Texas Tech University was honored as a top college for military personnel and veterans in 2016.

According to a statement released by Tech officials, "Military Advanced Education & Transition's (MAE&T) magazine, Texas Tech University was recognized as a top school in the 2016 Guide to Colleges and Universities for its efforts in providing active military, veterans and their family members with an affordable education and the resources they need to help transition from military to civilian life" in a December 2015 issue.

The Military and Veterans Programs at Texas Tech, provide resources to military families and veterans who attend Texas Tech.

"It's a great honor to be given this recognition," said Debra Crosby, Assistant Director of the program. "This is our 5th year receiving the Military Advanced Education Award."

The rankings for MAE&T's recognition of Tech follows several guidelines. Factors such as military culture, online support, on-campus support, and financial assistance, were considered when selecting Tech as a top program.

"We are thrilled to be selected as a top school for the 2016 Guide to Colleges and Universities," program director Lou Ortiz said in a statement. "This honor reflects Texas Tech's commitment in providing a support system for smooth campus transition and academic success for our military and veteran students."

Texas Tech serves more than 2,200 military students. More than 250 employees have military backgrounds.

"We have top-down support," Crosby said. "It's a very supportive environment."

"We care so much about veterans and their success. There might be some other schools that are out there who are just looking for the bucks," Crosby added. "Tech isn't that way."

Crosby, who's father served in the Navy, has worked in veterans education for over 20 years. She credited the recognition of Tech's military programs to the people involved in the veterans affairs department.

"I think it all has to do with the people," she said. "The people that work in this department have a vested interest. They're either a veteran themselves or a family member."

To see the growth that Tech has had in this area of helping veterans, it's a great passion of mine, and it's very personal to me, and very gratifying," Crosby added. "This department cares, Texas Tech cares, the Lubbock community cares."

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## 7. Other

**7.1 - The Washington Post (Federal Eye): [House panel moves to cut workplace rights for top civil servants, Federal Diary](#)** (12 January, Joe Davidson, 23.7M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

In the name of protecting veterans, Democrats on Capitol Hill and in the White House joined Republicans in attacking the due-process rights of top civil servants in the Department of Veterans Affairs almost 18 months ago.

Democrats, who might normally oppose such a measure, told themselves undermining the workplace protections of VA Senior Executive Service (SES) members was necessary to help reform a department that had disgraced itself with a scandal over the cover-up of long wait times.

But it didn't take much foresight to see what Republicans had in mind – making it easier to fire federal employees across the government, starting with senior executives.

That plan took an important step forward Tuesday when the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee approved legislation that would do just that. The SES “expedited removal” measure was just one of the bills approved by the committee. Together they amount to the advance of a movement toward what passes in some quarters as civil service reform. Another bill, affecting federal construction projects, would overturn one of President Obama’s early executive orders.

The civil service needs some repair. But expedited removal in its current form means slashing workplace rights to get rid of feds faster.

Like the VA law, the current legislation would allow an agency to fire senior executives or demote them from the SES with only five days notice for reasons related to conduct or performance. Employees would have just seven days to appeal to a Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) administrative judge, who would then have to render a decision within 21 days or the agency’s decision would be final. No appeal to the full MSPB or the courts would be permitted. Democrats now say the measure could be used to quickly get rid of whistleblowers. Remember, it was whistleblowers who exposed the VA corruption.

Why small and medium-sized businesses need to update their technology.

“Thanks to scandals at agencies like the IRS and VA, the American people increasingly view the federal government as untrustworthy and encroaching on their personal liberties,” said Rep. Tim Walberg (R-Mich.) “When senior government officials blatantly abuse their position and the public trust, they must be held accountable. Increasing accountability measures when misconduct occurs will go a long way towards restoring public trust and demonstrating greater stewardship of taxpayer dollars.”

This truncated procedure is just a short step away from turning senior executives into employees who can be fired at will. The small window for the abridged appeal process provides them little opportunity to mount a meaningful appeal against a case management could have taken its time to build. Furthermore, the measure denies a role for the presidentially appointed MSPB members and the judiciary. The constitutionality of the VA measure, which has the same provisions, is being challenged in the courts.

Tim Dirks, interim president of the Senior Executives Association, said the bill sends “a dangerous and discouraging message that those who enter or consider entering the SES will be met with a ‘guilty until proven innocent’ style of justice.”

A word here about why civil service due process is necessary for government employees. Without the workplace protections, government workers would be subject to partisan punishment and dismissal with a change in administrations. The civil service is designed to serve the public no matter which party is in office. It protects the government and the nation’s people from partisan whims and witch hunts as much as it does individual employees.

“This committee should examine whether improving the ability of agencies to hold senior executives accountable is necessary,” said Rep. Elijah E. Cummings (Md.), the committee’s senior Democrat. “But, we cannot do so by sacrificing the fundamental right to due process. And, we cannot do so by sacrificing whistleblower rights and protections.”

The Democrats lost that argument, as they did most others at the committee meeting.

A bill introduced by Rep. Ken Buck (R- Colo.) would extend the probationary period for many federal employees from one year to at least two. That two-year clock would not start until after any required formal training is completed or a needed license is granted.

The Government Neutrality in Contracting Act, introduced by Rep. Mick Mulvaney (R-S.C.) would repeal Executive Order 13502, which Obama signed in February 2009, about two weeks after taking office. The order encourages federal agencies to use project labor agreements in large construction projects. These agreements with labor unions set the terms and conditions for employment on the projects. Among other things, the executive order says any agreement shall "contain guarantees against strikes, lockouts, and similar job disruptions" and provide "mechanisms for labor-management cooperation on matters of mutual interest and concern, including productivity, quality of work, safety, and health."

Another bill, offered by Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah), says agencies must include adverse findings from a finished investigation in a separated employee's personnel file. The committee accepted an amendment from Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-Va.), who said it would allow employees due-process protection by "providing them an opportunity to respond in writing to the investigation and appeal any decision" to MSPB.

That was about it for bipartisanship at the committee.

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**7.2 - FOX News Channel (Video): [Suspended Veterans Affairs bosses return to agency jobs](#)** (12 January, 23M online visitors/mo; New York, NY)

This three-minute clip reports on the decision, to return to work, two VA executives who were suspended during a wait list scandal. The two executives were on paid leave for 19-months. This clip includes an interview with Concerned Veterans for America's Dan Caldwell.

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**7.3 - Houston Chronicle: [VA to Texas veterans: No open carry here](#)** (12 January, Lauren McGaughy, 5.7M online visitors/mo; Houston, TX)

Open carry is now the law of the land in the Lone Star State, but the federal government is reminding Texan veterans that guns still are not allowed on VA property.

In a reminder posted to the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System website, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs made clear that firearms will remain prohibited at all of the federal agency's sites.

"Texas concealed and open carry handgun laws DO NOT apply to VA property," the alert stated. "No firearms or weapons are allowed on our VA controlled property. Any confiscated firearms will be destroyed and offender will appear before Federal Court. Only certified police officers in the commission of his or her duties may bring a firearm onto VA property."

Central Texas VA spokesperson Deborah Meyer said the prohibition on firearms extends to all federally-controlled property in the state, not just the VA, but said the posting was simply a reminder to Texans. There was no incident that led to the alert, she confirmed.

The VA operates several dozen hospitals, clinics and centers in Texas.

"We wanted to remind everybody that it still remains the same. Concealed carry is the same as open carry, there's still no firearms on federal property," Meyer said.

The new open carry law allows Texans with a license to carry to openly tote handguns in shoulder or hip holsters. Certain areas, such as public schools, courthouses and polling places, remain off-limits to all weapons, including knives, clubs and brass knuckles. Open carry of long arms -- rifles and shotguns -- is legal in Texas and does not require an owner to have a license to carry.

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**7.4 - Washington Examiner: [Chaffetz moves to stop abuse of paid federal leave](#)** (12 January, Pete Kasperowicz, 3.1M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Rep. Jason Chaffetz on Monday introduced legislation that would stop federal workers from receiving paid leave for months and sometimes even years after being removed from their jobs for disciplinary reasons.

The Utah Republican chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, and on Tuesday morning, his committee considered his new Administrative Leave Reform Act. The committee didn't approve it then, as Chaffetz indicated that a tweak needed to be made to ensure federal workers are given due process in the course of limiting their paid leave.

Still, Chaffetz also indicated his bill would soon be marked up by his committee, which has run into numerous examples of abuse of paid leave over the last few years. That includes former IRS employee Lois Lerner, who Republicans say directed the IRS targeting scandal. "She sat on administrative leave for four months before retiring," Chaffetz said during the committee meeting.

He said an EPA official who was known to be watching pornography from his work computer was given administrative leave for a full year. And he noted that many Department of Veterans Affairs officials involved in the healthcare scandal or other scandals have been given paid leave.

Most recently at the VA, officials announced that an official charged with seven counts of sexual assault was still getting paid.

"Abuse of administrative leave is a problem," he said. Chaffetz's bill would only give workers 14 days of paid leave per year.

"During any calendar year, an employee may not be placed on administrative leave, or any other paid non-duty status without charge to leave, for more than 14 total days for reasons relating to misconduct or performance," his bill states.

It will allow longer paid leave status for reasons other than misconduct or performance.

In 2013, the Government Accountability Office found that the federal government spends about \$1 billion per year on paid leave.

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**7.5 - The Washington Free Beacon: [Obama Touts Care for Veterans As Success Story for His Administration](#)** (12 January, David Rutz, 1.6M online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

President Obama cited “more care” for U.S. veterans as an example of progress made under his administration during the State of the Union address, a curious statement in the wake of the Veterans Affairs scandal of delayed care and secret waiting lists at numerous facilities that came to light in 2014.

The deaths of American veterans waiting for healthcare disgusted the country and led to the resignation of VA secretary Eric Shinseki. However, Obama touted veteran care Tuesday night.

“In fact, it’s in that spirit that we have made progress these past seven years,” Obama said. “That’s how we recovered from the worst economic crisis in generations. That’s how we reformed our health care system, and reinvented our energy sector. That’s how we delivered more care and benefits to our troops coming home and our veterans, and how we secured the freedom in every state to marry the person we love.

“But such progress is not inevitable. It is the result of choices we make together. And we face such choices right now. Will we respond to the changes of our time with fear, turning inward as a nation, and turning against each other as a people? Or will we face the future with confidence in who we are, what we stand for, and the incredible things we can do together?”

Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton downplayed problems at the VA on the campaign trail last fall, but soon after reports exposed shortfalls across the nation.

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**7.6 - WISC-TV (CBS-3): [New director sworn in at Madison VA hospital](#)** (12 January, 1.1M online visitors/mo; Madison, WI)

A new director was formally sworn in at the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital in Madison on Monday.

John Rohrer replaces Judy McKee, who retired as the hospital director in Madison last June, hospital spokesman Tim Donovan said in a news release Tuesday afternoon.

Rohrer had been acting director of the Madison VA Hospital since Oct. 18 up until the time he was sworn in. He also served as acting director of the Tomah VA Medical Center from March to October 2015, and associate director of the Madison VA Hospital beginning in 2012.

Rohrer, who's originally from La Crosse, has worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs for 26 years, beginning as an administrative intern at the Madison VA in 1986.

William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital is a 129-bed facility that provides health care for about 42,000 veterans who live in a 13,600-square-mile service area comprising 15 counties in south central Wisconsin and five in northwestern Illinois.

The hospital also operates an annex primary care clinic in Madison and community-based outpatient clinics in Baraboo, Beaver Dam and Janesville, Wisconsin, and in Rockford and Freeport, Ill.

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**7.7 - The Tennessean: [Veteran spends 104th birthday at Nashville VA hospital](#)** (12 January, Jen Todd, 940k online visitors/mo; Nashville, TN)

On his 104th birthday, Bennie Woolam still remembered the first insurance he ever sold, all four of his teachers and the day he enrolled at Nashville's Veterans Affairs hospital.

He also recalled telling his first wife that he wouldn't live past 85.

"All my Christian friends are up in heaven," he said. "They think I didn't make it."

The hospital invited his friends, nurses who had cared for him, and other veterans Tuesday to celebrate his birthday.

Although the Franklin resident battled pneumonia two weeks ago, he dressed in his usual attire — a suit and dapper hat — chatted with guests and practiced his tools to remembering their names: learning, repeating and transcribing.

After working in a cotton mill since he was 13, Woolam enrolled in the Army at 18 years old. He retired in 1941, just before World War II started. The Army wouldn't let him re-enlist, but he was hired to find Nazi sympathizers.

Since then, he ran two insurance businesses and even officiated weddings as a notary in Florida, where he lived.

"He stopped counting around 3,500 (weddings)," his wife of five years, Gloria, said.

And he hasn't slowed down.

"He paints the furniture at the swimming pool, he gardens around the (apartment) complex, he drives to Florida — he's on his way to Florida in two weeks," said friend Duane Carpenter, who has delivered Meals on Wheels to the couple for about three years.

Carpenter, a member of the Christian Motorcyclists Association, first informed Woolam about the benefits of the veterans hospital in 2013.

He's also invited him to ride.

"I'm a pretty adventurous person, but I don't know about riding a motorcycle behind you," Woolam said.

While Woolam did not give a secret to long life, he did give out advice.

"Be nice to everybody, because you may be talking to your future boss."

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**7.8 - KNXV-TV (ABC-15, Video): [Veterans' affairs left out of State of the Union; Phoenix VA whistleblower disappointed in speech](#)** (12 January, Nohelani Graf, 737k online visitors/mo; Phoenix, AZ)

One topic missing in the President's State of the Union speech Tuesday night was veterans' affairs and Phoenix VA whistleblower Dr. Katherine Mitchell took note.

Dr. Mitchell came forward nearly two years ago alerting federal investigators of a cover up by administrators to hide wait times at the Phoenix VA Hospital.

She says since then, changes have happened, the wait time still exists but is drastically shorter. She says the VA is still in crisis and there's a massive shortage of resources.

"People are dying because of the gaps in care," said Dr. Mitchell. "There's significant issue with continued whistleblower retaliation."

President Obama did recognize U.S. soldiers in his speech but not what happens after their fight is over.

"Our troops are the finest fighting force in the history of the world," said President Obama.

Dr. Mitchell says the President not only left out what she says is one of the most important issues in our country, but he misrepresented it.

"He's the Commander in Chief, he essentially glossed over every issue important to veterans health care by saying we provided more care to veterans," she said.

She's hopeful the next administration will take a more active and vocal stance in repairing the VA system.

"My vision is that the VA healthcare system becomes the premier health care provider in the United States."

Two big developments Tuesday support Dr. Mitchell's point that the VA has seen continued progress coupled with continued breakdowns.

The President's nomination of a new chief watchdog for the Department of Veterans' Affairs has been approved.

The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has approved Washington lawyer Michael Missal to be the VA's Inspector General. The IG's office has not had a permanent leader since December 2013.

The Chairman of the Senate Veterans panel, Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson of Georgia, says the top priority of the inspector general must be to "Hold bad actors at the VA accountable" for chronic delays for veterans seeking medical care and other problems at the agency.

At the same time, at the Phoenix VA, two top administrators who were put on leave as a result of the wait times scandal are back on the job in a new capacity pending the outcome of a review by the VA of recently obtained evidence to determine what accountability actions may be appropriate.

Lance Robinson, who was Assistant Director of the Phoenix VA Health Care System, is assigned duties as the Strategic Planner for VA Southwest Healthcare Network, in its Gilbert office.

Brad Curry, the former Phoenix Health Administration Services Chief, is now assigned duties as a Health System Specialist

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**7.9 - The Clarion-Ledger: [Gulf Coast lawmakers oppose VA transfer to the region](#) (12 January, Deborah Barfield Berry, 510k online visitors/mo; Jackson, MS)**

Despite a pitch from Veterans Affairs' Secretary Robert McDonald Tuesday, Mississippi lawmakers still oppose a plan to name Skye McDougall head of the South Central VA Health Care Network, which includes Louisiana and Mississippi.

Mississippi lawmakers met Tuesday morning with McDonald and McDougall in the office of Republican Sen. Thad Cochran, the dean of the delegation. Members of the delegation wrote McDonald in December opposing her transfer.

VA officials said the meeting was a follow-up to a call McDonald held with Mississippi lawmakers late last year.

McDougall, former director of the Desert Pacific Health Care Network covering Southern California, has been accused of giving false testimony to Congress regarding how long patients have had to wait for care at VA facilities. The concern comes in the wake of a national scandal that focused attention on problems at the VA, including long wait times to see a doctor.

Mississippi lawmakers would not comment on the meeting, but in the letter to McDonald complained about the VA "hopscotching" McDougall across the country.

"In view of her deplorable record in the VA system and her questionable testimony to Congress, Dr. McDougall has proven to be, at the very least, untrustworthy as it relates to the vitally important task of providing for the health care needs of our veterans," the lawmakers wrote.

In addition to Louisiana and Mississippi, the network also includes centers in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma. It was not clear late Tuesday whether McDougall was already serving as director of the network, which is based in Ridgeland, Miss.

Some Louisiana lawmakers also oppose McDonald's transfer.

"This is another case of the VA shuffling its employees instead of holding them accountable for their mistakes. It's clear to me the VA wants to find a soft spot for her to land," said Rep. Ralph Abraham, R-La., chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs subcommittee. "Well, the South should not be a dumping ground for the VA's unwanted employees."

Louisiana lawmakers and advocates for veterans successfully lobbied last year to expand medical services for veterans in the southwestern part of the state. They have also complained about long wait times for veterans.

Sen. David Vitter, who pushed the effort, also said McDougall should not head the region's network.

"The honorable men and women who have served our nation deserve far better than backlogs and long bureaucratic delays," said Vitter, R-La. "Our veterans deserve someone who will aggressively tackle the problems that plague the VA, not cover up for them or blatantly lie, as Dr. McDougall has demonstrated."

The VA had named McDougall director of the Southwest Health Care Network, but after Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., objected, McDougall said she would instead work at the network that oversees the VA in Jackson.

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**7.10 - WFED-AM (AM-1500): [House considers expanding VA-like SES firing authorities governmentwide](#)** (12 January, Nicole Ogrysko, 441k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Members of the Senior Executive Service accused of misconduct and poor performance could face some of the same firing procedures that senior officials in the Veterans Affairs Department now come under. The provisions are part of a new bill the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee is considering.

The committee is marking up the Senior Executive Service Accountability Act, the Official Personnel File Enhancement Act and one amendment to the U.S. Code, which would change paid leave, probationary periods and removal practices for career appointees and SES members.

The SES Accountability Act, which Tim Walberg (R-Mich.) introduced Jan. 12, stems from a similar bill he introduced in 2014. It extends the probationary period from one to two years for career employees, changes pay retention rates for employees accused of misconduct and poor performance, and gives agency leaders the authority to put employees subject to removal on mandatory leave.

But it also sets procedures for agency leaders to fire poor performing executives and appointees faster — using similar requirements that Congress mandated for the VA under the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act.

Walberg acknowledged most federal employees are hardworking public servants, but his bill is in reaction to the “bad actors” and numerous scandals among senior executives who abuse their positions, he said.

In urging the committee to consider his bill, Walberg reminded members of the similarities between the SES Accountability Act and the VA Choice Act, which most voted for.

But some members said the VA — and the legislation they passed to address pervasive accountability issues at the department — isn’t a model for how all agencies should operate.

“We never intended, in support of that, for that to become the new standard for all federal agencies,” said Gerry Connolly (D-Va.). “Quite the opposite. We made an exception quite clearly. We pointed out that the VA was broken, that there was a backlog, that lives were at risk.”

Connolly said these requirements could also deter potential candidates from applying to the SES or a government job in general. He said he fears agencies would lose out on talented, qualified applicants to the private sector.

The Senior Executives Association has similar concerns.

“We need to address the growing imbalance between the risks and rewards of becoming a senior executive and other factors that are really holding back the potential ... candidates from entering the SES,” said Jason Briefel, SEA’s legislative director. “We do think there’s a lot of work that’s necessary, but we don’t think these punitive firing-centric provisions are really going to help us get there.”

Walberg’s legislation covers everything from shorter administrative leave to mandatory, five-year reassignments to other positions at a different geographic location within an agency — proposals where most of the committee’s Democrats and some federal employee groups indicated their opposition.

But for the SEA, it’s the expedited firing authorities that raise the most concerns for SES members and their due process rights.

“We see some of those provisions as guilty until proven innocent, which fundamentally turns the notion of justice in the American legal system on its head,” Briefel said.

The firing authorities the VA has for SESers already are under review at the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, the SEA wrote in a letter to the committee.

Specifically, the bill lets agency leaders entirely remove an employee for bad performance or misconduct or transfer the employee from an SES to General Schedule position, with five days notice.

If an employee appeals the case, the Merit Systems Protection Board has 21 days to make a decision. Otherwise, the decision is final.

Debra D'Agostino, a federal employment attorney at the Federal Practice Group who often represents senior executives in their appeals cases, said the bill puts the onus on the employee, rather than the agency.

It's the agency, she said, that spends too much time on the employee's investigation, often months or years, before proposing a disciplinary action.

"In any of these games, all of the deadlines are pointed to the employee, and all the accountability for missing a deadline is pointed at the employee," she said. "Where there are deadlines on the government and the government misses them, there's no accountability for that. There's nothing an employee can do to say 'hey, government, you missed your deadline, don't I win?' That just doesn't exist."

Longer probationary periods?

Despite much debate, the committee also is considering an amendment to title 5 of the U.S. Code, which would extend the probationary period from one to two years for members of the competitive service and SES.

The amendment's proponents argue that longer probationary periods will help employees with more technical jobs complete training they need.

"There are some very complex jobs out there," Committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) said. "FAA, for instance, we've been chatting with them. It takes a year and a half or so until they're properly trained up. There are IRS officials that deal with very complex tax cases."

Several groups that represent federal employees under the Government Managers Coalition (GMC), as well as the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association, said they generally favor the idea.

"The existing probationary period often places an unfair burden on both the employee and the manager," the GMC wrote in a letter to the committee. "In many cases, managers are placed in the position of having to decide whether to retain employees when they may not have had sufficient time, or even any time, to evaluate them. If a marginal employee is not removed during the one-year probationary period, the burden of proof required to take a removal action becomes much greater."

But the coalition also urged more flexibility.

Briefel said the committee should consider letting agencies evaluate employees who have proven themselves after the first year.

Some committee members, however, questioned a blanket requirement on all agencies.

"The committee has not yet examined whether there is a problem," said Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), the committee's ranking member. "We have not seen any evidence that federal agencies need a blanket one year extension on probationary period for every federal job in the competitive and senior executive service."

Cummings urged the committee to first study the agencies, such as the Defense Department, that already have longer probationary periods to determine whether the idea is working. But the committee rejected his amendment.

The committee also added an amendment to Chaffetz's Official Personnel File Enhancement Act. The chairman's legislation would require agency leaders to include any findings of a government investigation in an employee's personnel file. It specifically applies to employees accused of bad performance or misconduct who leave government before the agency can finish the investigation.

"There are people who do silly, stupid stuff, they get caught and it should be notated as such," Chaffetz said. "If you simply switch jobs from one part of the federal government to another part of the federal government, that record should follow you. That's how we know the type of person and the type of employee you might be."

The amendment, which Connolly introduced, ensures that an employee can submit an appeal after an investigation ends.

"I fear the bill provides no opportunity ... for rebuttal or appeal for the separated employee," Connolly said.

Agencies already note when an employee leaves in the middle of an investigation, Briefel said.

D'Agostino said there already are checks and balances in places for employees who leave under a cloud of investigation and look for another job. Agencies still can give whatever reference they like, she said.

"If somebody quits when their security clearance is up for debate and then they get a new job, you know what happens," D'Agostino said. "They pick up right where they left off. You can't escape it."

Chaffetz also withdrew the Administrative Leave Reform Act, which would have limited the number of days an employee accused of misconduct or poor performance could stay on leave.

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**7.11 - WFED-AM (AM-1500): [VA IG, OSC nominees pledge accountability, transparency, whistleblower protection](#)** (12 January, Meredith Somers, 441k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

Protecting whistleblowers while ensuring transparency and responsiveness are what lawmakers said they are looking for in the candidates to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, and the Office of Special Counsel.

On Tuesday Michael Missal, President Barack Obama's nominee as VA IG, and Carolyn Lerner, who was nominated for a second term as special counsel for the OSC, appeared before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, to answer questions and offer members assurances that they will work together to reform the struggling agency.

“I recognize the important role an inspector general can play in assisting the committee and Congress in its oversight responsibilities,” Missal said. “I think you’ll find me highly communicative, I do respond very quickly to requests. I may not always have the answer right away, sometimes it takes time to develop it, but I just believe it’s important to keep people informed of the progress so you know exactly what’s going on.”

“In 2015, for the first time in the agency’s history, we received and resolved over 6,000 cases, a 50 percent increase from 2011, when I took office,” Lerner said. “This dramatic increase in filings indicates that whistleblowers believe they can make a difference by bringing a claim to OSC. Studies have shown that the number one reason employees do not report waste, fraud, or abuse is not because they fear retaliation. It is because they do not believe any good will come from their risk. If the number of whistleblower cases is any indication of employees’ willingness to raise concerns — and I think it is — then we are certainly moving in the right direction.”

#### Working together to shield whistleblowers

The VA has for years been plagued by problems ranging from backlogged disability claims to budget overruns to whistleblower retaliation. As early as September Lerner testified at a hearing that she had sent a letter to President Obama, stating the VA had attempted to fire or suspend whistleblowers for minor indiscretions for activity directly related to the employee’s whistleblowing.

The department has not had a congressionally-confirmed inspector general since January 2014. Richard Griffin has been acting inspector general since that time.

In November, Missal appeared before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. He currently works as a partner at K&L Gates LLP, an international law firm based in Washington.

During that appearance as well as his Jan. 12 appearance before the homeland security committee, Missal acknowledged that this was a “critical time” for the department, and that the IG position would play a significant role in cutting waste, fraud and abuse of power, as well as address whistleblower protection.

“If confirmed, one of my goals will be to promote an improved environment in which whistleblowers have confidence that their concerns will be fairly and effectively considered by the Office of Inspector General and that their identities will be protected from disclosure,” Missal said. “I will also take the necessary steps to ensure that whistleblowers are fully aware of their right to be free from reprisal for making protected disclosures and how to seek redress from appropriate authorities if reprisal occurs.”

Senate homeland committee Chairman Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) and the committee’s ranking member, Thomas Carper ( D-Del.) both highlighted whistleblower retaliation in their statements and questions.

At the Tomah VA Medical Center in his home state, Johnson said a doctor committed suicide after he was fired for reporting over-medication procedures. Months later, Johnson said, a white paper published by the VA OIG urged readers to review a sheriff’s report on the doctor, which mentioned marijuana and drug paraphernalia in his home.

“I have no idea what any of this had to do with the issue at hand ...,” Johnson said. “This is the office of the inspector general, writing a report that is retaliating against a dead whistleblower.”

Carper highlighted the case of mismanagement at the Dover Air Force Base mortuary and the OSC coming to the defense of the whistleblowers.

"We all know whistleblowers play an important role, and an increasingly important role in routing out waste and fraud and abuse in the government," Carper said. "They're often the first to raise concerns and highlight instances where we can better serve the American people. The special counsel office also plays an important role in ensuring whistleblowers are heard and protected after they speak up."

Heading in a new direction

Committee members who attended the nomination hearing brought other concerns from their home states and constituents, including struggles with the Veterans Choice Program, interoperability of health records, and mental health care.

"We have to have a watchdog, because this is a very big bureaucracy that thinks they're just gonna wait this out. That if people's attention just deviates from the problems of the past, that we will in fact be pulled off target," said Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.)

Missal told the committee he would immerse himself in the work of the OIG to get an understanding on the status of outstanding and incomplete investigations, as well as work to make the office as transparent and responsive as possible with congressional members.

Lerner pledged to continue her office's work to investigate, mediate and resolve cases from all agencies, while also helping to keep the VA headed in the right direction.

"There is a really good message that's coming from the top," Lerner said. "That sets a tone that is really important. The problem is the VA is such a large institution, it has so many facilities, it has regions and then individual facilities, and that message has to trickle down throughout the country and it may take a little bit of time."

Lerner said discipline at the manager level is still an area of concern for her, but installing a new inspector general will help.

"So there's reason to be optimistic, but there's still a lot of work to be done," she said.

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**7.12 - WZTV-TV (FOX-17, Video): [104-Year-Old Veteran Visits Vets at VA](#)** (12 January, Eric Alvarez, 289k online visitors/mo; Nashville, TN)

For retired Army veteran Bennie Woolam, age is just a number.

"I was born January 12th, 1912," Bennie said. "Three months before the Titanic sunk."

On Tuesday friends and staff members at the VA Medical Center celebrated his birthday. The cake didn't have candles, because friends weren't sure if they could find or fit 104 of them.

Bennie's pinstripe suit is older than some of the injured veterans who came to greet him. His fedora, almost as sharp as his wit.

Bennie has visited injured veterans for years. He's always ready with a handshake stronger than you'd expect or a hug for anyone who needs it.

As the federal government works to fix VA problems at the national level, the staff is thankful for people like Bennie.

"I think in spite of what's been said in the press and what's going on, I think that our community still supports our veterans, still wants to give back to those who gave so much to us," said Tom Gallagher, chief of voluntary services.

Bennie is thankful for the staff.

"They are far better than they implied with the congressional hearing they had," Bennie said. "They're all professionals, I see nothing but the very best to say for them."

Seeing the best in others is part of Bennie's secret to a long life. So is smiling, and doing his best to make others smile too.

"It's not hard," Bennie said. "Just be good like you'd like others to be to you."

Bennie served in the U.S. Army in the years between WWI and WWII.

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**7.13 - Hattiesburg American: [Miss. lawmakers oppose VA appointee](#)** (12 January, Deborah Barfield Berry, 267k online visitors/mo; Hattiesburg, MS)

Despite a pitch from Veterans Affairs' Secretary Robert McDonald on Tuesday, Mississippi lawmakers still oppose a plan to name Skye McDougall head of the South Central VA Health Care Network, which includes Louisiana and Mississippi.

Mississippi lawmakers met Tuesday morning with McDonald and McDougall in the office of Republican Sen. Thad Cochran, the dean of the delegation. Members of the delegation wrote McDonald in December opposing her transfer.

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McDougall, former director of the Desert Pacific Health Care Network covering Southern California, has been accused of giving false testimony to Congress regarding how long patients have had to wait for care at VA facilities. The concern comes in the wake of a national scandal that focused attention on problems at the VA, including long wait times to see a doctor.

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“In view of her deplorable record in the VA system and her questionable testimony to Congress, Dr. McDougall has proven to be, at the very least, untrustworthy as it relates to the vitally important task of providing for the health care needs of our veterans,” the lawmakers wrote.

In addition to Louisiana and Mississippi, the network also includes centers in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma. It was not clear late Tuesday whether McDougall was already serving as director of the network, which is based in Ridgeland.

Some Louisiana lawmakers also oppose McDonald’s transfer.

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The VA had named McDougall director of the Southwest Health Care Network, but after Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., objected, McDougall said she would instead work at the network that oversees the VA in Jackson.

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**7.14 - iHealthBeat: [Gun Control Rule's HIPAA Modification Draws Mixed Reactions](#)** (12 January, 102k online visitors/mo; Washington, DC)

A veterans group has expressed concern that a new gun control rule modifying the HIPAA privacy law could discourage veterans from seeking help, while other groups say more is needed to improve the sharing of mental health data, Modern Healthcare reports (Conn, Modern Healthcare, 1/8).

Background

Last week, HHS finalized a rule allowing certain health care providers to disclose -- without consent -- the names of patients with mental health illnesses to the FBI's firearms background check database.

The National Instant Criminal Background Check System, or NICS, launched in 1998 and is used by gun dealers to ensure they are not selling weapons to individuals who are prohibited from owning firearms, such as individuals with severe mental health issues and those convicted of felonies.

However, many states have declined to release certain information to the NICS, citing prohibitions under HIPAA, despite the law's allowance to disclose data when it is required by law.

The final rule modifies HIPAA to allow certain covered entities to disclose to the NICS the names of individuals who are barred from owning a firearm for mental health reasons, without consent from a patient.

The rule clarifies that only limited information would be disclosed, such as:

A patient's name; and

The submitting entity.

The rule states, "Underlying diagnoses, treatment records and other identifiable health information are not provided to or maintained by the NICS."

Further, the final rule removes the threat of legal repercussions against eligible health providers for disclosing information to the database.

The rule is scheduled to take effect in February (iHealthBeat, 1/5).

Veterans Group, ACP Comment on Rule

In a statement, American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett said, "The American Legion strongly believes that treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder or depression by itself, which a number of wartime veterans experience, should not be the sole factor in denying a veteran the right to purchase a firearm," adding, "Barring some additional circumstances that would indicate that a veteran represents a dangerous threat, veterans should not have to forfeit their Second Amendment rights."

According to Modern Healthcare, a "fair reading" of the rule does not suggest that an individual could be denied gun ownership from a diagnosis of depression or PTSD alone (Modern Healthcare, 1/8).

Meanwhile, the American College of Physicians in a release expressed support for President Obama's executive orders to expand gun control, but the group "caution[ed] against broadly including those with mental illness in a category of dangerous individuals" who should be disqualified from purchasing firearms (ACP release, 1/5).

Groups Push for More Change

Meanwhile, the American Health Information Management Association and the National Association of Medicaid Directors said they hope the HIPAA modification will prompt the federal government to update another federal privacy rule (42 CFR Part 2).

The rule requires providers of drug and alcohol misuse treatment to receive a patient's consent before sharing medical records with another general health provider.

Matt Salo, executive director of the National Association of Medicaid Directors, said, "We're pushing pretty hard for exemptions for the existing guidelines around privacy. The 42 CFR stuff does need to happen, because there are a lot of people suffering because of it" (Modern Healthcare, 1/8).

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**7.15 - The Indiana Lawyer: [Donnelly champions federal support of veterans courts](#)** (12 January, Marilyn Odendahl, 27k online visitors/mo; Indianapolis, IN)

In advance of the State of the Union address tonight, Sen. Joe Donnelly highlighted the need to help military veterans and praised the work being done in Indiana's veterans courts.

The Hoosier Democrat said the federal government can bolster veterans courts by providing funding and promoting the expansion of the specialty court in all 92 Indiana counties. He maintained that every dollar spent in veterans courts gets returned many times over when the former service members get their lives back on track and are able to get jobs, pay taxes and be a part of their communities again.

Donnelly talked about veterans affairs and his other priorities with reporters Tuesday. Joining him for the press conference was Floyd Superior Court 3 Judge Maria Granger who will be the senator's guest during the President Barack Obama's final State of the Union.

Granger established the first veterans court in Indiana in 2011. Since then the number has grown to 15 with another nine more in the planning stages.

The goal of the specialty court, Granger said, is to fulfill the Indiana Constitution's promise of restorative justice. She worked to start the veterans court in Floyd County after seeing veterans getting entangled with the criminal justice system because they were trying to use alcohol to cope with night terrors, post-traumatic stress disorder and brain injuries.

Granger said there is no place like home but for veterans returning from war with mental health and addiction issues, home can be a strange and scary place. In veterans courts, the offenders are provided a variety of services that address the root cause of the problem to help them change their behavior and get out of the criminal justice system.

Echoing Donnelly's call for more funding, Granger said the veterans courts do not have a lot of extra resources and any help would be beneficial.

Another way Congress could help would be to address the prescription opioid problem among veterans. Granger has seen offenders come into her veterans court with addictions to pain killers that were given to them at the Veterans Affairs Medical Centers.

Her team has talked to the local veterans hospital at length about this issue, she said. The court defers to the treatment professionals but it does alert the doctors when a veteran has a drug problem.

Congress is starting to look at the problem of VA Hospitals overprescribing narcotics to veterans who come for care. Republican Rep. Jackie Walorski of Indiana has proposed a measure that would require all Veterans Administration Medical Centers to participate in prescription drug monitoring programs.

Donnelly has championed getting mental health services to veterans, including co-authoring the Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act of 2014. He has been working with the Veterans Administration to try to reduce the number of opioid prescriptions and he plans to work to make sure that military personnel have a seamless transition from the Department of Defense to the VA system so their medical care is not upended.

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**7.16 - KMMS-AM (AM-1450): [Tester Leads Efforts to Strengthen Accountability and Oversight at the VA](#)** (12 January, Chris Griffin, 27k online visitors/mo; Bozeman, MT)

Senator Jon Tester introduced VA Inspector General nominee Michael J. Missal this morning during a Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee hearing. Following Tester's introduction, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee confirmed Missal's nomination where it will now go to the Senate floor for a final vote.

The VA has been without a permanent Inspector General for over two years.

"It is clear that the VA needs to operate in a more transparent manner and folks need to be held accountable when they do not do right by veterans," Tester said during the hearing. "We can't afford to allow systemic failures to continue – failures that deny or delay care for veterans or compromise their well-being. We need increased accountability and we need it now."

Missal's confirmation comes one day after MTN news reported that in 2010 the VA lost documents containing the private information of 171 veterans, including 44 Montana veterans.

The VA Inspector General is tasked with providing independent oversight at the VA through audits and recommendations to improve transparency and ensure that taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely.

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**7.17 - Wisconsin State Journal: [New Madison VA Hospital director named](#)** (12 January, David Wahlberg, 17k online visitors/mo; Madison, WI)

John Rohrer, interim director of Madison's Veterans Hospital since October, became director this week, the hospital announced Tuesday. He replaces Judy McKee, who retired in June.

Rohrer was acting director of the Tomah VA Medical Center from March to October 2015 and associate director of the Madison VA Hospital beginning in 2012.

Rohrer began his 26-year career in the Department of Veterans Affairs as an administrative intern at the Madison VA Hospital in 1986. He is originally from La Crosse.

The 129-bed Madison VA Hospital provides health care for about 42,000 veterans who live in a 13,600 square mile primary service area that includes 15 counties in south central Wisconsin and five in northwestern Illinois. The hospital also operates an annex primary care clinic in Madison and community-based outpatient clinics in Baraboo, Beaver Dam and Janesville, Wis., and in Rockford and Freeport, Ill.

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