

America's Veterans Administration - The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, The Fix

Part One – The Good

As a disabled war veteran I am always concerned about our nation's support of my brothers-in-arms and their families. The recent appointment of Secretary David Shulkin to lead the Veteran's Administration (VA), an organization filled with many disappointments, may or may not lead to needed improvements to a growing dire situation in providing optimum support to our veterans. He says it is time for reform and has implemented over 135 assessments and studies of the VA's problems within America's second-largest government agency of nearly 370,000 employees. Unfortunately, reform has been tried for decades and his success may or may not occur.

In three separate studies, I am going to cover a few of VA's good, bad and ugly scenarios based upon research from a number of organizations, media outlets and my own experiences. You will read about planned improvements while learning of some very unfortunate situations severely impacting the care of our nation's heroes and their families. In a final report I will offer suggestions for VA fixes.

Let's start with some of the good changes being directed by Secretary Shulkin.

He has entered a huge fight and is seemingly struggling to correct the many, many problems found within the VA. Granted, in some instances, he is off to a good start. For instance, he was able to convince Congressional leaders and President Trump to pass the long overdue Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act. One important segment gives the VA secretary more power to discipline or fire employees while shortening an appeals process that can go on for years. In 2014 VA medical facilities across the country were found to have covered up delays in providing care and veterans waited months instead of days for healthcare. Many died as a result of this horrendous mismanagement and since that scandal's discovery VA fired fewer than 10 people and continued to pay many under investigation. As example, in the past it took VA around 51 days after steps were initiated to suspend or remove an employee until the action actually took effect. During that period and no matter how serious an event occurred, such as causing the death of a veteran, an appealing employee continued to be paid. Fortunately, the new legislation prohibits payment during an appeal. The measure also grants Secretary Shulkin the authority to revoke bonuses from underperforming staffers and, in certain cases, reduce the pensions of disciplined executive-level employees.

The Secretary directed the department to post information on adverse employee actions, requiring senior official sign-to off on all settlement actions above \$5,000. Any settlement above this amount will require personal approval of the under secretary, assistant secretary or equivalent senior-level official within the organization where the dispute occurred.

“When people lose their values, and deviate from the ethics and values we hold dearly, they no longer have the right to work in VA,” Shulkin said. “We’re going to make sure they don’t work in VA.”

A major action item of Secretary Shulkin is to accelerate the VA’s benefit claims program where a backlog is considered if the veteran’s claim has been in the system in excess of 125 days. From a backlog of hundreds of thousands a few years back it has been reduced to about 93,000 but that is still far too many delays in needed healthcare. Unfortunately, the number seems to be increasing once again and I expect it to continue as more and more Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom troops enter the backlogged claims system.

“Although we have made tremendous progress, we still have more we can do to make faster decisions,” Shulkin said.

Mental health of veterans, particularly during America’s ongoing longest war in history approaching 17 years in length, for those with other-than-honorable discharges has been a huge issue for the Secretary. Over 13,000 separated for misconduct suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and other disorders. We see many of these veterans homeless, suicidal, in trouble with the law, with serious family situations, etc. VA now offers emergency mental health services to these veterans for up to 90 days at over 300 centers in America and if deemed a result of service-connected injury the veteran may be eligible for continued care. Getting help for mental health related issues is paramount for our veterans. The Veterans Crisis Line, for example, has received over 3 million calls since launch with about 75,000 emergency service responses. This hotline would also be available to other-than-honorable discharge veterans seeking help. Plus, to help all veterans, the 950 toll-free numbers to all VA facilities and health centers are to be consolidated to speed support.

Secretary Shulkin addressed burial of our veterans. I learned the National Cemetery Administration will bury over 133,000 veterans next year while taking care of 3.7 million gravesites and he plans to invest in the system’s infrastructure so existing cemeteries remain open and effective until more are built. This is a very important support action for our veterans and family members who served with honor and should know they will be treated with honor upon passing.

The Secretary has said VA will be overhauling its electronic health records to improve care for veterans and reduce wait times for medical appointments. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in the past to improve this outdated, under functioning computer system and a successful one is needed to seamlessly work with private doctor’s systems outside the VA. Why can’t a veteran leaving the military not have his health records easily transitioned to the VA’s system to gain faster service after submitting a claim for benefits? Something never seen to date because the VA and military systems were not compatible.

At a recent hearing, Shulkin said VA identified over 430 vacant buildings and another 735 described as underutilized, costing the federal government \$25 million a year. He said his

department was seeking to close more than 1,100 VA facilities nationwide as it develops plans to allow more veterans to receive medical care in the private sector. He further indicated he was not trying to privatize our medical care, but this action surely seems to lead toward using civilian healthcare as our primary healthcare source. And, though he attempts to sound progressive, \$25 million is only a drop in the bucket in needed funding to take care of our veterans.

These are only a few of the initiatives implemented by Secretary Shulkin to improve our healthcare, with more to come, and I sincerely hope for the sake of our veterans he is successful. We certainly deserve and need significant changes in the VA.

In part two of this study I'll discuss various bad areas of the VA, some of which should cause you some great concern. Stay tuned.

John Stewart
Vietnam War Veteran