

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

## **Part Two – The Bad**

This is part two of four studies on the Veterans Administration (VA) and if you missed the first part please go to [www.chronicleonline.com](http://www.chronicleonline.com), or my website [www.veteranspage.com](http://www.veteranspage.com). My first report addressed some good aspects of the VA and in this portion I will cover some bad areas of VA's support of America's veterans. As indicated in part one, newly appointed Secretary David Shulkin has some very difficult challenges in improving his department after years, if not decades, of constant and repeated failures to support veterans at many VA facilities. Let's take a look at some of the bad areas.

In May of this year there were over 49,000 vacancies in VA job positions, a staffing problem severely impacting care of our veterans. Noting this problem, Secretary Shulkin is implementing a Manpower Management Office to track open positions. Something much needed but virtually non-existent in past VA management. Of course, there have been past attempts to have properly staff VA. I believe failure occurred because of VA's constant media coverage about problems at medical centers, because salaries are below that of like civilian positions, there was/is mismanagement and poor leadership at upper levels, and workers have to deal with the bureaucracy of government operations.

National Public Radio (NPR) covered staffing problems in a January 2016 article when they reviewed the \$16 billion Veterans Choice and Accountability Act of 2014. This was a program designed to get veterans medical care more quickly by allowing those on waiting lists for more than 30 days, or those living over 40 miles from a VA hospital, the ability to gain access to non-VA medical support.

NPR and local member stations had been following that \$16 billion fix which included about \$2.5 billion to hire more doctors, nurses and other medical staff at VA medical centers. The goal of the hiring money was to address a simple math problem. The number of veterans coming to the VA had significantly increased in recent years as a result of the ongoing war in the Middle East and an aging Vietnam War veteran populace. However, the numbers of medical staff have not kept pace despite VA's hope that more caregivers would cut wait times. Actually, NPR found the VA has about the same number of new hires as the VA would have been projected to hire without the additional \$2.5 billion. What is truly bad about this situation is new hires weren't sent to VA hospitals with the longest wait times and the VA medical centers receiving new hires did not see reduced waiting times for veterans seeking medical care. Adding to this problem, according to Secretary Shulkin, was that once VA does have the right talent onboard it takes too long get new employees in their seats and working. About 110 days for a new nurse and 177 days for a new nurse practitioner to begin actual duties.

An unbelievable proposal in President Trump's 2018 budget was to cut billions of dollars from our country's most disabled veterans to "fix" the Veterans Choice Program which is in dire funding straits. About 225,000 disabled senior veterans had paid little into Social Security or were unable to be employed for years because their disability was so serious they were

declared unemployable by the VA. The government's plan was to take away their disability compensation and use it to help fund the mismanaged, poorly planned and failing Choice program's budget shortfall. This would have seen severely disabled veterans with limited income outside of their disability compensation face serious financial consequences. Veterans groups fought this plan, alongside 57 members of Congress who sent a letter to Secretary Shulkin in protest, and the idiotic proposal was recently withdrawn. It is sad that any thought was given to such a ridiculous process to penalize disabled veterans and "fix" a very bad Choice program while insulting the service and sacrifice of our nation's veterans now medically disabled and suffering from their service.

At time of this report here there are three draft proposals in Congress to replace the Choice program with a better effort. We will see how this goes and hopefully something will be better than trying to penalize disabled veterans for being disabled.

In part one of this report I somewhat discussed the well-known fiasco around the country at VA medical facilities when staff members falsified records to indicate veterans were being treated in a timely manner. USA TODAY reported last year they found VA supervisors had instructed employees to falsify patient wait times at Veterans Affairs' medical facilities in at least seven states. In reality, employees at 40 VA medical facilities in 19 states and Puerto Rico had regularly "zeroed out" veteran wait times for as long as a decade in some instances. All done to make managers look good without thought for veterans seeking medical care. Since their report, more instances of this appointment manipulation have been found by investigating authorities. In fact, I believe I was possibly a victim of some appointment "adjustments" last year when attempting to see a physician.

I have serious health issues related to Agent Orange exposure during my service in the Vietnam War and Thailand. Somewhere along the way my 6 month VA checkup schedule was changed to an annual visit. Frankly, I was unhappy with that change but accepted it when I assumed more veterans could be seen and I could survive another 6 month wait. However, last year, I had a new very serious health issue and asked to see my physician as soon as possible but could not remember when my next annual appointment date was scheduled. I was told my appointments are now scheduled every two years and my physician should have informed me at my last appointment. If he had done so, I would have raised hell because this seemed to be a wee bit insane considering my health history (cardiac bypass, heart stent, multiple TIA's, memory loss, etc.). Obviously I complained, received a new physician and it was changed back to the original 6 month schedule but it surely seems suspicious my appointment schedule was so radically amended without my knowledge or permission. I have had two other local veterans tell me of similar occurrences. Was this an action to manipulate the appointment system to appear we were being seen in a timely manner?

As you can see, this sampling of bad is pretty darn bad. Part three of my study is coming shortly and will address some really ugly areas. Then, stick around for part four that will provide some recommendations for improvements in the VA.

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