

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

## Part Four – The Fix

This is the last of my four Veterans Administration (VA) studies and if you missed a report please go to [www.chronicleonline.com](http://www.chronicleonline.com), or my website [www.veteranspage.com](http://www.veteranspage.com). Previously I covered good, bad and ugly aspects of the VA and this final report provides recommended fixes to some of the problems in the VA.

I truly do not know where to begin because so much needs to be done to improve support of our military veterans. I did read an interesting list of recommendations in a Concerned Veterans of America task force report and would like to comment on their 10 principles for VA reform, which were:

1. The veteran must come first, not the VA.
2. Refocus on, and prioritize, veterans with service-connected disabilities and specialized needs.
3. The VHA should be improved, and thereby preserved.
4. Grandfather current enrollees.
5. Veterans should be able to choose where to get their health care.
6. Veterans' health care reform should not be driven by the budget.
7. Address veterans' demographic inevitabilities.
8. Break VHA's cycle of "reform and failure."
9. Implementing reform will require bipartisan vision, courage and commitment.
10. VHA needs accountability.

A very good list but I must agree and disagree with a couple of those principles. My biggest disagreement being number 3 because the word, "should", is sadly incorrect. Instead, the VA must be improved! If not, the VA should (must) not be preserved and I would highly recommend we shut down all VA hospitals, allow veterans to find their own care in the free market and let our VA become a new billing process center to cover the cost of care. Perhaps this would make more money available and improve the care of our veterans. How much money you ask? It is difficult to ascertain but let me give you an idea.

There are currently about 1,233 health care facilities, including 168 VA Medical Centers and 1,053 outpatient sites. You can only imagine the cost to maintain them, from physician down to janitorial services. According to [Federalpay.org](http://Federalpay.org), in 2015 there were 327,957 employees in the VA system with an average pay (salary and bonus) of \$75,514.29. My calculator ran out of numbers trying to compute total pay for these employees. Add to that facility maintenance, new building's, equipment purchases, leases, subcontracts, transportation, food and kitchen items, medical supplies, bedding, clothing, etc., etc., etc. Is there an actual known number of just how much the true cost could be? I doubt it.

I once discussed my hospital closure idea with a congressman who said it could not be done because we would put over 300,000 people out of work. My response was we would put the bad ones out of work, the good ones would be needed in the civilian sector to care for the influx of veterans and the bad ones could enlist in the military and learn what it is like to serve and sacrifice and be forgotten. I've also discussed it with various veterans organizations and usually the only concern was ensuring there are civilian sector physicians knowledgeable in the unique medical issues of combat veterans, particularly mental health. My response is that few VA mental health physicians served in combat and civilian mental health physicians should be able to provide adequate treatment, as they could to veteran's diseases and injuries.

The 10th principle above, accountability, may be one of the most important endeavors for Secretary Shulkin as he discovered shortly after assuming office when he could not fire an employee found watching pornography at work. He then got the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017 through Congress and signed by President Trump. It will be a major fix in the Department (if properly applied) making it easier to fire bad VA employees and shortening the overall termination and appeals process for VA employees found to have engaged in misconduct. Hopefully, the new Accountability Act will remove some of the bad VA employees who have for decades contributed to the poor care of our veterans in many areas of the country. Unfortunately, it will still be difficult to rid the VA of some employees committing crimes outside of the job area.

"As is true in private-sector employment, a federal employee generally cannot be terminated for off-duty misconduct unless there is a clear connection between the misconduct and the individual's employment," Shulkin said.

Transparency is an important fix for Shulkin to implement. Many, many of the problems now being identified would have been corrected if they had been known and not hidden by upper management for decades. The Secretary is trying to instill transparency and, as example, has begun publicly listing at an online internet site the firings and demotions of employees as part of his pledge to bring more accountability to the bureaucracy.

One of the greatest fixes needed is in the Veterans Choice Program which was developed to fix the medical support system by allowing veterans to get faster care in the civilian sector, but it became a horribly failed fix. Now, the fix needs a fix, or we will see many veterans seriously harmed from lack of care. There are three proposals in Congress to do the fix but we will see how successful the selected fix will become. Without an effective program disaster surely looms ahead as more and more veterans of the 16-year war in the Middle East, without an end in sight, will need medical care and will be unable to get it or face significant delays in doing so.

There are other fixes immediately needed in the VA. Coordination care between VA providers, consistency in providers across the entire VA spectrum, better mental health care and access for veterans, future system changes should grandfather previous VA enrollees unless they choose to opt out of the old system, and of prime importance the veteran comes before the VA

in priority. Yes, we are priority. Not secondary to budgets, manpower shortages, or other VA problems. We served, we sacrificed, and we should not be considered as a problem.

This four-part series could be easily stretched to 10 or 15 studies to discuss problems in the VA, ongoing improvements we've seen and the planned future upgrades by the new Secretary. By now I think you have the ideas I wanted to pass along to perhaps give you a better understanding of the difficulties we veterans face and the huge fight ahead for Secretary Shulkin. I would, however, like to make one final point.

We have some wonderful people working in the VA system, especially at our local clinic in Lecanto. Yes, there may be a small number around the country not fulfilling their responsibilities but we must consider their impact and rid ourselves of them. Our good VA employees suffer from poor upper level management, improper budget restraints, manpower shortages, an overwhelming number of regulations, the system bureaucracy, etc. Until those areas are fixed we will continue to see poor health care, or no care whatsoever, in many areas of the country.

Thank you for reading my reports and if you enjoyed them I only ask in return that you support our veterans by demanding VA improvements and remembering our veteran's sacrifices for your freedom. May God Bless our veterans of past, present and future who offered and will offer their lives for America.

John Stewart  
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