DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Washington DC 20420

April 27, 2020

In Reply Refer To: 001B
FOIA Requests: 20-06067-F, 20-06076-F, 20-06079-F, & 20-06080-F

Austin Evers & Mehreen Rasheed
American Oversight
[no physical address provided]
foia@americanoversight.org

Dear Austin Evers & Mahreen Rasheed,

This is the Partial Initial Agency Decision (IAD) to your four (4) overlapping Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (OSVA).

FOIA 20-06067-F

On April 14, 2020, for your FOIA request **20-06067-F**, you requested,

1. "All email communications (including email messages, calendar invitations, and attachments thereto) sent by former Deputy Secretary James Byrne. In an effort to accommodate your agency and reduce the number of responsive records to be processed and produced, American Oversight has limited its request to emails sent by Mr. Byrne. To be clear, however, American Oversight still requests that complete email chains be produced, displaying both the sent messages and the prior received messages in each email chain. This means, for example, that Mr. Byrne's response to an email, the initial received message, and any subsequent messages within the same email chain are responsive to this request and should be produced.
   Please provide all responsive records from January 27, 2020, through February 3, 2020.
2. All email communications (including emails, email attachments, calendar invitations, and attachments thereto) between former Deputy Secretary James Byrne and (1) Andrey Kukushkin or (2) any employee or representative of Oasis LLC or Oasis Venture, LLC.
   Please provide all responsive records from August 28, 2018, through February 3, 2019.
3. All email communications (including emails, email attachments, calendar invitations, and attachments thereto) sent by Secretary Robert Wilkie containing any of the following terms:

Search Terms:

1. "Deputy Secretary"
2. "Dep Sec"
3. DEPSECVA
4. S2
5. Jim
6. Byrne
7. Goldstein
8. Kukushkin
9. Oasis
10. "Cooperative Research and Development Agreement"
11. CRADA
12. Fire
13. Fired
14. Firing
15. Dismiss
16. Dismissed

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17. Dismissing
18. Dismissal
19. Remove
20. Removed
21. Removal
22. Resign
23. Resignation
24. “Loss of confidence”
25. Assault.”

FOIA 20-06076-F

On April 14, 2020, for your FOIA request **20-06076-F**, you requested:
“All text messages or messages on messaging applications similar in form to text messages (such as Signal, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Twitter DMs, etc.) of Secretary Wilkie or Chief of Staff Pamela Powers regarding any aspect of allegations of sexual harassment at a VA hospital made by House staffer Andrea Goldstein in fall 2019 (including but not limited to any communications regarding the allegations, Ms. Goldstein, or investigations of the allegations, or any communications with Rep. Dan Crenshaw). Please provide all responsive records from September 20, 2019, through the date the search is conducted.”

FOIA 20-06079-F

On April 14, 2020, for your FOIA request **20-06079-F**, you requested:
“All email communications (including email messages, calendar invitations, and any attachments thereto) between (1) any of the VA officials listed below and (2) Representative Dan Crenshaw (including but not limited to at the email address dan.crenshaw@mail.house.gov or any employee or representative of Representative Dan Crenshaw, including, but not limited to, Chief of Staff Eliza Baker (eliza.baker@mail.house.gov), Legislative Director Matt Hodge (matt.hodge@mail.house.gov), Communications Director Kerry Rom (kerry.rom@mail.house.gov), Spokesman Justin Discigil (justin.discigil@mail.house.gov) or Scheduler Danny Walden (danny.walden@mail.house.gov)).
VA Officials:
a. Secretary Robert Wilkie, or anyone communicating on his behalf (such as a scheduler or assistant)
b. James Byrne, Deputy Secretary
c. Pamela Powers, Chief of Staff
d. Jacquelyn Hayes-Byrd, Director of the Center for Women Veterans, or anyone communicating on her behalf (such as a scheduler or an assistant)
e. Aaron Kenneth Bailey, Senior Advisor for Investigations
f. Dr. Tamara Bonzanto, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection, or anyone communicating on her behalf (such as a scheduler or assistant)
g. William Hudson Jr., Acting General Counsel
h. Anyone serving as White House Liaison
Please provide all responsive records from September 20, 2019, through the date the search is conducted.”

As a reminder, for your FOIA requests for OAWP and OGC records, the OAWP FOIA office (FOIA **20-06090-F**) and OGC FOIA office (**20-06091-F**) will separately respond to you.

FOIA 20-06080-F

On April 14, 2020, for your FOIA request **20-06080-F,** you requested:
All email communications (including email messages, calendar invitations, and any attachments thereto) sent by any of the VA officials listed below containing any of the following key terms:
1. Goldstein
2. “Women Veterans Task Force”
3. WVTF
4. Crenshaw

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5. Baker
6. Walden
7. Unsubstantiated
8. Discredit
9. Discredited
10. Liar
11. Lies
12. Accusation
13. Allegation
14. Accusations
15. Allegations
16. Baseless
17. Serial
18. Dirt
19. “multiple complaints”
20. “numerous complaints”
21. “repeated complaints”
22. “frequent complaints”
23. Tone-deaf
24. “tone deaf”
25. Harassment
26. Assault
27. Assaulted
28. Brownley
29. Takano

VA Officials:

a. Secretary Robert Wilkie, or anyone communicating on his behalf (such as a scheduler or assistant)
b. Deputy Secretary James Byrne
c. Pamela Powers, Chief of Staff
d. Jacquelyn Hayes-Byrd, Director of the Center for Women Veterans, or anyone communicating on her behalf (such as a scheduler or an assistant)
e. Aaron Kenneth Bailey, Senior Advisor for Investigations
f. Dr. Tamara Bonzanto, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection, or anyone communicating on her behalf (such as a scheduler or assistant)
g. William Hudson Jr., Acting General Counsel
h. Anyone serving as White House Liaison.”

As a reminder, for your FOIA requests for OAWP and OGC records, the OAWP FOIA office (FOIA **20-06092-F**) and OGC FOIA office (**20-06093-F**) will separately respond to you.

Reasonable Searches Dated 2/18/20, 2/19/20, 2/27/20, 2/28/20, 3/4/20, & 3/23/20

Even before your FOIA request due to public interest, on February 18, 2020 and February 28, 2020, the OSVA FOIA Officer searched through the email boxes and calendar entries of Secretary Robert Wilkie, former Deputy Secretary Jim Byrne, and Chief of Staff Pam Powers. The OSVA FOIA Officer used the following stemmed search terms with search timeframe of September 1, 2019, to February 18, 2020: 1) Goldstein, 2) Byrne and (employ or dismiss or status or perform), 3) Takano, and 4) Crenshaw. These February 18, 2020, and February 28, 2020, search yielded three hundred twelve (312) pages of emails.

On February 18, 2020, the OSVA FOIA Officer requested that the VA Office of Operations, Security, and Preparedness (OSP) submit all responsive records in its possession. The VA OSP office replied that the responsive records were not under its possession, but likely at the

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DC VAMC. On February 19, 2020, the OSVA FOIA Officer requested that the DC VAMC submit all responsive records in its possession.

On February 27, 2020, the OSVA FOIA Officer searched through Jim Byrne's three (3) boxes of paper files for responsive records. The OSVA looked for records relating to Ms. Goldstein, Rep. Crenshaw, or Rep. Takano. This February 27, 2020, search yielded six (6) responsive pages.

On March 4, 2020, the DC VAMC submitted nine (9) pages of responsive records. On March 23, 2020, the OSVA FOIA Officer searched through the VA Secretary's cabinets where he keeps his notes. The OSVA FOIA Officer searched for references to Ms. Goldstein and Rep. Crenshaw. This March 23, 2020, search did not yield any responsive records.

VA OIG FOIA Consult on 3/11/20 & 4/1/20

By March 11, 2020, OSVA had already completed its preliminary redactions of three hundred twenty-seven (327) pages. On March 11, 2020, OSVA began consulting that the VA OIG FOIA office. On April 1, 2020, OSVA's consultation with the VA OIG FOIA office concluded.

Partial Initial Agency Decision

After reviewing the aforementioned three hundred twenty-seven (327) pages, OSVA redacts some information with FOIA Exemptions 5, 6, and 7(A). 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(5) exempts from required disclosure "inter-agency or intra-agency memorandums or letters which would not be available by law to a party other than an agency in litigation with the agency." Under the attorney-client and work product privileges, the VA redacts portions of records, emails, and communications between VA employees and VA/DOJ attorneys relating to legal issues on implemented smoking bans and their ongoing lawsuits, alleged criminal violations, pending civil and criminal investigations, and legal reviews of draft letters and draft responses to media or Congressional inquiries. The release of this information would impede the ability of VA employees and VA/DOJ attorneys to speak openly and frankly about legal issues concerning smoking bans and their ongoing lawsuits, alleged criminal violations, criminal/civil investigations, draft letters, and draft responses to media or Congressional inquiries. The release of this information would also compromise the VA's legal positions for any ongoing or potential lawsuits.

Exemption 5 permits an agency to withhold material reflecting the thoughts, opinions, and recommendations of federal officials reviewing an issue. Under the deliberative process privilege and FOIA Exemption 5, OSVA redacts VA's deliberations and discussions on at-the-time pending civil and criminal investigations, alleged criminal or civil infractions, investigation statuses and updates, details, witnesses, and investigation subjects; on proposed, preliminary responses to media and Congressional inquiries; on draft press releases and draft changes; and on drafts of the VA Secretary's letters and on their changes. The redacted information is both predecisional and deliberative because it reflects preliminary opinions and recommendations, which do not reflect VA's final decision. Exposure of premature discussions before a final decision is made could create undue public confusion. The release of the redacted information would negatively impact the ability of federal employees to openly and frankly consider issues amongst themselves when deliberating, discussing, reviewing, and making recommendations on pending criminal and civil investigations; on preliminary VA responses to media and Congressional inquiries and Congressional requests; on draft press releases and their changes; and on drafts of the VA Secretary's letters and their changes. The information reveals the thoughts, deliberations, and opinions that, if released, would have a chilling effect on the ability of federal officials to discuss, opine, recommend or be forthcoming

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about the agency's issues which require full and frank assessment. Here, the disclosure of the withheld information is likely to compromise the integrity of this deliberative or decision-making process. Moreover, the predecisional character of a document is not altered by the passage of time. Bruscino v. BOP, No. 94-1955, 1995 WL 444406 at *5 (D.D. C. May 15, 1995), aff'd in part, No. 95-5212, 1996 WL 393101 (D.C. Cir. June 24, 1996); Judicial Watch, Inc. v. U.S. Dep't of Commerce, 337 F. Supp. 2d 146, 174 (D.D.C. 2004) (protecting recommendations on how to answer questions); St. Louis Sewer Dist., No. 10-2103, at *18 (E.D. Mo. Mar. 2, 2012) (protecting e-mail communications, "press releases, talking points and 'Q & A,'"); Citizens for Responsibility & Ethics in Wash. v. DHS, 514 F. Supp. 2d 36, 44 (D.D.C. 2007) (protecting potential Hurricane Katrina responses including proposed "solutions and approaches"); Klunzinger v. IRS, 27 F. Supp. 2d 1015, 1026 (W.D. 1998) (protecting paper to brief commissioner for meeting); Thompson v. Dep't of the Navy, No. 95-347, 1997 WL 527344, at *4 (D.D.C. Aug. 18, 1997) (protecting potential media inquiries, as "disclosure of materials reflecting the process by which the Navy formulates its policy concerning statements to and interactions with the press" could stifle frank communication within the agency), aff'd, No. 97-5292, 1998 WL 202253, at *1 (D.C. Cir. Mar. 11, 1998) (per curiam); Williams v. DOJ, 556 F. Supp. 63, 65 (D.D.C. 1982) (protecting "briefing papers prepared for the Attorney General prior to an appearance before a congressional committee").

5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(6) exempts from required disclosure "personnel and medical files and similar files the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy." FOIA Exemption 6 permits VA to withhold a document or information within a document if disclosure of the information, either by itself or in conjunction with other information available to either the public or the FOIA requester, would result in an unwarranted invasion of an individual's personal privacy without contributing significantly to the public's understanding of the activities of the federal government. Specifically, the information being withheld, as indicated on the attached documents, under FOIA Exemption 6, consists of names, identities, email addresses, phone numbers, cellular numbers, facsimile numbers, and other contact information of: federal and Congressional employees and an alleged sexual assault victim. However, we release the names of Senior Executives, and names and contact information of journalists. Federal and Congressional employees and an alleged sexual assault victim retain a significant privacy interest under certain circumstances, such as in instances where the release of their information could represent a threat to their well-being, harassment, or their ability to function within their sphere of employment. The federal and Congressional employees and an alleged sexual assault victim whose information is at issue have a substantial privacy interest in their personal information. In weighing the private versus the public interest, we find that there is no public interest in knowing the names, identities, email addresses, phone numbers, cellular numbers, facsimile numbers, and other contact information of: federal and Congressional employees and an alleged sexual assault victim. The coverage of FOIA Exemption 6 is absolute unless the FOIA requester can demonstrate a countervailing public interest in the requested information by demonstrating that the FOIA requester is in a position to provide the requested information to members of the general public and that the information requested contributes significantly to the public's understanding of the activities of the Federal government. Additionally, the requester must demonstrate how the public's need to understand the information significantly outweighs the privacy interest of the person to whom the information pertains. Upon consideration of the records, I have not been able to identify a countervailing public interest of sufficient magnitude to outweigh the privacy interest of the individuals whose names are redacted. The protected information has been redacted and (b)(6) inserted. "Withholding a telephone number or e-mail address, alone, is not sufficient to protect that [privacy] interest; alternate means of contacting and harassing these employees would be

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readily discoverable on the Internet if this court ordered their names disclosed." Long v. Immigration & Customs Enf't, 2017 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 160719 (D.C. Cir. 2017).

5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(7)(A) exempts from required disclosure "records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes, but only to the extent that production of such law enforcement records or information . . . could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings." Redacted information includes discussions and deliberations amongst VA employees and between VA and DOJ employees on pending criminal investigations relating to two VA Medical Centers located in a U.S. Southeast state, alleged criminal infractions, investigation statuses and updates, details, witnesses, and investigation subjects. OSVA does **not** take any (b)(7)(A) redactions on any references to an alleged sexual assault victim at the DC VAMC.

The OSVA FOIA office will conduct additional searches with your requested additional custodians, additional requested key terms, and the search dates of February 19, 2020, to April 14, 2020.

FOIA Mediation
As part of the 2007 FOIA amendments, the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) was created to offer mediation services to resolve disputes between FOIA requesters and Federal agencies as a non-exclusive alternative to litigation. Using OGIS services does not affect your right to pursue litigation. Under the provisions of the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, the following contact information is provided to assist FOIA requesters in resolving disputes:

VA Central Office FOIA Public Liaison:
Name: Doloras Johnson
Email Address: vacofoiaservice@va.gov

Office of Government Information Services (OGIS)
Email Address: ogis@nara.gov
Fax: 202-741-5769
Mailing address:
National Archives and Records Administration
8601 Adelphi Road
College Park, MD 20740-6001

FOIA Appeal
This concludes OSVA's Partial IAD to requests **20-06067-F, 20-06076-F, 20-06079-F, 20-06080-F**. Please be advised that should you desire to do so, you may appeal the determination made in this response to:

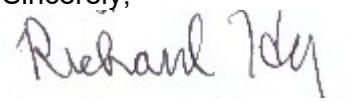
Office of General Counsel (024)
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

If you should choose to file an appeal, please include a copy of this letter with your written appeal and clearly indicate the basis for your disagreement with the determination set forth in this response. Please be advised that in accordance with VA's implementing FOIA regulations at 38 C.F.R. § 1.559, your appeal must be postmarked no later than ninety (90) days of the date

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of this letter.

Sincerely,



Richard Ha, JD, CIPP/G
OSVA FOIA Officer

Attachments – redacted three hundred twenty-seven (327) pages

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From: RLW
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 02:02:02 +0000
To: Hutton, James
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 8:47 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)i@va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Mr Secretary,

Isaac responded with another question (below).

If this response is sufficient please let me know and we will forward.

DRAFT RESPONSE:

At the meeting there was no discussion about Ms. (b) (6)

VR, James

From: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 8:37 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) Goldstein case

FYI —

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(www.blackberry.com)

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From: Isaac Arnsdorf <Isaac.Arnsdorf@propublica.org>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 8:28 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

To clarify, is the Secretary denying that he discussed (b) (6) "case" with Crenshaw (meaning the allegation that she was sexually assault at the DC VAMC in September) or discussing her with him at all?

On Feb 6, 2020, at 8:04 PM, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) i@va.gov> wrote:

Isaac, please see below, attributable to me unless otherwise noted. Please confirm receipt.

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously. As the Secretary wrote to the VA IG, on September 23, 2019, "I am asking that you investigate this very serious matter and make it an immediate priority for your team. I have taken the liberty of cc'ing the Deputy Attorney General should you need to call on his offices."

Q: Why does Secretary Wilkie want more details about the investigative findings to be shared with VA leadership?
A: At a minimum, the IG should let VA and committee leaders know if its investigation found any wrongdoing so the department can take action to protect and safeguard our patients.

VA relies on the independent inspector general to find the facts, determine the truth, and obtain justice. The OIG has informed VA leadership the case is closed. Even for cases with substantial allegations that are declined for prosecution by the Department of Justice, OIG still reports its findings to VA management officials responsible for taking action to address the findings. We need this help to make sure our facilities are safe.

Q: What is the legal authority for VA leadership to receive that information?
A: As part of the IG's stated mission to conduct "effective oversight of the programs and operations of the Department of

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Veterans Affairs," the IG has a responsibility to disclose wrongdoing or improper behavior among VA employees if the IG has documented it.

Q: While the IG/DOJ investigation was still pending, why did Secretary Wilkie conduct his own inquiry seeking information about Ms. (b) (6) service record?
A: He didn't. (Attribute this quote to Secretary Wilkie) "I never would do that to a fellow officer—it is a breach of honor."

Q: Why did Secretary Wilkie discuss Ms. (b) (6) case with Rep. Dan Crenshaw during a meeting in the Secretary's office?
A: He didn't.

Q: What did Secretary Wilkie intend to do with the information he collected about Ms. (b) (6) Why did he repeatedly share it with his senior staff, including public affairs officials?
A: The premise of your question is incorrect. This is false.

Q: What did Secretary Wilkie mean when he told his staff that he wondered how this information might get out?
A: The premise of your question is incorrect. Never said that period.

Q: Will Secretary Wilkie accept Rep. Brownley's request to apologize for the language in his Jan. 15 letter?
A: Sec. Wilkie had a 90-minute meeting with her last week, and he agreed that describing the allegations as "unsubstantiated" was a poor choice of words. He withdraws that word.

Thanks,

Christina Mandreucci
Press Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)
(b)(6) @va.gov
@cmandreucci

From: Isaac Arnsdorf <Isaac.Arnsdorf@propublica.org>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 4:16 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: VA Public Affairs <VAPublicAffairs@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>; Noller, Randal <(b)(6) @va.gov>;

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Carter, Susan <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Hi again,

Here are some additional questions:

1. Why does Secretary Wilkie want more details about the investigative findings to be shared with VA leadership? What does he intend to do with that information?

2. What is the legal authority for VA leadership to receive that information?

3. While the IG/DOJ investigation was still pending, why did Secretary Wilkie conduct his own inquiry seeking information about Ms. (b) (6) service record?

4. What did this inquiry consist of? Where did he get this information? Whom did he speak with and why? What records did he review and how did he obtain them?

5. Why did Secretary Wilkie discuss Ms. (b) (6) case with Rep. Dan Crenshaw during a meeting in the Secretary's office?

6. What did Secretary Wilkie intend to do with the information he collected about Ms. (b) (6) Why did he repeatedly share it with his senior staff, including public affairs officials?

7. What did Secretary Wilkie mean when he told his staff that he wondered how this information might get out?

7. Why was this an appropriate use of official resources?

8. Will Secretary Wilkie accept Rep. Brownley's request to apologize for the language in his Jan. 15 letter?

Thanks,
Isaac

> On Feb 5, 2020, at 6:00 PM, Isaac Arnsdorf <Isaac.Arnsdorf@propublica.org> wrote:
>
> Hi Christina,

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Could you please confirm the statement you made to Abbie Bennett clarifying the Secretary's comments today about the (b) (6) case?

VA spokeswoman Christina Mandreucci told Connecting Vets Wednesday afternoon that Wilkie "is not calling for a reopening of the investigation" but instead is "calling on the independent IG and the U.S. Attorney to provide detailed investigative findings to VA leadership, committee leaders and Ms. (b) (6) https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/wilkie-wants-to-review-case-of-vet-assaulted-at-dc-va

Thanks,
Isaac

Isaac Arnsdorf
PROPUBLICA
202.886.9568
isaac.arnsdorf@propublica.org

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From: RLW
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:07:38 +0000
To: Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Tucker, Brooks;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Stars & Stripes inquiry

I did not call (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 12:58 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: Stars & Stripes inquiry

Mr. Secretary,

Just for information, below is **what the IG is giving as an answer** to media that are asking for a response to your call for a reopening of the investigation about the DC VAMC. This is an
(b)(5)

VR, James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

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From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:28:06 +0000
To: RLW;Powers, Pamela;Tucker, Brooks;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Hutton, James
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

+ James.

From: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, February 5, 2020 1:24 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes Query

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:23 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Add (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our response to the query from Stars & Stripes about (b)(5)

Recommend approval.

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VR, James

###

QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the (b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

RESPONSE:

Secretary Wilkie is not calling for a reopening of the investigation. He's calling on the IG to provide detailed investigative findings to VA and committee leaders.

(b)(5)

###

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

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From: Tucker, Brooks
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:29:47 +0000
To: RLW;Cashour, Curtis;Powers, Pamela;Hudson, William A. (OGC)
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Leo Shane tweeted about (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: RLW <(b)(@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:24 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes Query

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:23 PM
To: Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Add (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW <(b)(@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our response to the query from Stars & Stripes abou (b)(5)

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Recommend approval.

VR, James

###

QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the (b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

RESPONSE:

Secretary Wilkie is not calling for a reopening of the investigation. He's calling on the IG to provide detailed investigative findings to VA and committee leaders.

(b)(5)

###

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:33:35 +0000
To: RLW
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Hudson, William A. (OGC);Tucker, Brooks;Cashour, Curtis;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

This is what we plan on sending out. We'll likely get additional, similar requests and we'll use it then too:

###
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(b)(5)

###

James

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Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
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810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461(b)(6)
Email:(b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:23 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Add (b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our response to the query from Stars & Stripes about (b)(5)

Recommend approval.

VR, James

###
QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the (b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

RESPONSE:

Secretary Wilkie is not calling for a reopening of the investigation. He's calling on the IG and U.S. Attorney to provide detailed investigative findings to VA and committee leaders.

(b)(5)

###

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
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Office: 202-461(b)(6)
Email:(b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:40:04 +0000
To: RLW
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Hudson, William A. (OGC);Tucker, Brooks;Cashour, Curtis;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Sir,

Roger. That's what we'll go with:

###
QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the (b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

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Secretary Wilkie is not calling for a reopening of the investigation. He's calling on the independent IG and the U.S. Attorney to provide detailed investigative findings to VA and committee leaders.

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VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, February 5, 2020 1:36 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Let's change (b)(5)
(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Sent with BlackBerry Work
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From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:33 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
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To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Add (b)(5)

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Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Stars and Stripes Query

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Recommend approval.

VR, James

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(b)(5)

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:43:39 +0000
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Tucker, Brooks;Cashour, Curtis;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

I would (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:41 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

That is what I have requested (b)(5)

(b)(5)

Vr Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
(202) 461(b)(6)

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:35 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Let's change (b)(5)
(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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From: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:33 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes Query

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(b)(5)

###

James

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Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
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Email: (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: RLW <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:23 PM

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

To: Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Add (b)(5)

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(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our response to the query from Stars & Stripes about (b)(5) (b)(5)

Recommend approval.

VR, James

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(b)(5)

###

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC)
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:52:10 +0000
To: RLW;Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Tucker, Brooks;Cashour, Curtis;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

And VA leadership

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
(202) 461-(b)(6)

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:51 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Please do

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:48 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

I've made the (b)(5)
(b)(5)

###
QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the (b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

RESPONSE:

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(b)(5)

###

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, February 5, 2020 1:44 PM
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

I would (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:41 PM
To: RLW <(b)(@va.gov>, Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

That is what I have requested (b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Do we also add (b)(5)

Vr Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
(202) 461-(b)(6)

From: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:35 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Let's change (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:33 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

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###
QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the (b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

RESPONSE:

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Secretary Wilkie is not calling for a reopening of the investigation. He's calling on the independent IG and the U.S. Attorney to provide detailed investigative findings to VA committee leaders and Ms. (b) (6)

(b)(5)

###

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:23 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Add (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6) va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW (b)(6 @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our response to the query from Stars & Stripes about (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Recommend approval.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

VR, James

###

QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the (b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

RESPONSE:

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(b)(5)

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James Hutton
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Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 18:57:58 +0000
To: RLW
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Tucker, Brooks;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

Final product (with comma in the right place):

###
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RESPONSE:

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###

James

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From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, February 5, 2020 1:52 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6) @va.gov>
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And VA leadership

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

I've made the change to add (b)(5)
(b)(5)

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(b)(5)
###

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Assistant Secretary
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From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

I would (b)(5)

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Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

That is what I have requested (b)(5)

Do we also add (b)(5)

Vr Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
(202) 461-(b)(6)

From: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)va.gov>
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Let's change (b)(5)

(b)(5)

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(b)(5)

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James

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Assistant Secretary
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Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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From: RLW <(b)(6) va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:23 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Add (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Stars and Stripes Query

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our response to the query from Stars & Stripes about (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Recommend approval.

VR, James

###
QUERY: Can you confirm Secretary Wilkie is looking into getting the IG to reopen the
(b) (6) investigation? Could I possible get a comment on that?

RESPONSE:

Secretary Wilkie is not calling for a reopening of the investigation. He's calling on the IG and U.S. Attorney to provide detailed investigative findings to VA and committee leaders.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(5)

###

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 19:10:02 +0000
To: Tucker, Brooks;RLW;Powers, Pamela;Hudson, William A. (OGC)
Cc: Hutton, James;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

We let him know.

Curt Cashour
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)
(b)(6)@va.gov
@curtcashour

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, February 5, 2020 1:30 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes Query

Leo Shane tweeted about "(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:24 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes Query

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 1:22 PM
To: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <P (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6) @va.gov>
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Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461 (b)(6)
Email: (b)(6) @va.gov

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 23:02:57 +0000
To: Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: RE: // for approval // RE: Military Times: VA secretary insists surprise firing of top official isn't a sign of leadership turmoil

(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 6:01 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: // for approval // RE: Military Times: VA secretary insists surprise firing of top official isn't a sign of leadership turmoil

Mr. Secretary,

In the Military Times article at the bottom of this message you'll see that Leo says that "Wilkie implied that the staffer fabricated the event."

Our pushback is below. Our central response in the paragraphs that start "(b)(5)
(b)(5)

Please let me know which you prefer.

VR, James

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Your story states: In a letter to committee chairman Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., **Wilkie implied that the staffer fabricated the event.**

OPTION 1: (b)(5)
(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

OPTION 2: (b)(5)

(b)(5)

Further, see Secretary Wilkie's comments from the National Press Club this morning:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0wY6anKKKA&feature=youtu.be&t=2375

Secretary Robert Wilkie: I'm not satisfied with the resolution of the (b) (6) case, and I said so to the Chairman of the House Veterans' Committee just yesterday.

I have to know, Ms. (b) (6) has to know, our women Veterans have to know if the facilities are safe.

And that is why I met with the IG yesterday. We're going to make a renewed push to get answers – not to divulge any confidential information, but to help us help ourselves and help women Veterans to make sure that they feel safe and welcomed.
###

———————

VA secretary insists surprise firing of top official isn't a sign of leadership turmoil
Military Times
By Leo Shane
February 5, 2020
https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/05/va-secretary-insists-surprise-firing-of-top-official-isnt-a-sign-of-leadership-turmoil/

Veteran Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie worked to downplay concerns about leadership turmoil in his department during his "state of the VA" speech on Wednesday, insisting that his firing of a top administrator earlier this week was simply a matter of team chemistry.

"There are times in any company, in the military and even in Congress when some people in the organization just don't gel with the team," Wilke said of his abrupt dismissal of Deputy Secretary James Byrne, the department's second-highest official, two days earlier.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"I wish Jim Byrne well. He is a man of great distinction, in terms of his service to the country. I will say this is a simple business decision."

VA leaders announced Byrne's dismissal on Monday with a two-sentence statement that said the move was made "due to loss of confidence in Mr. Byrne's ability to carry out his duties." Wilkie did not elaborate on that in his Wednesday speech, and said he is not worried that the move disrupts progress the department has made in a host of areas in recent months.

Byrne, a Naval Academy graduate who deployed overseas as a Marine infantry officer and later joined the Department of Justice as an international narcotics prosecutor, served as the acting deputy secretary for almost 13 months before his confirmation last September.

Numerous lawmakers and VA officials were shocked by the announcement, citing Byrne's work on key issues like electronic health records and department suicide prevention initatives.

Wilkie did not give any specific incident or action that prompted the firing, but he did state the decision had no connection to department leadership's controversial response to a sexual assault allegation at the Washington D.C. VA Medical Center last month.

Byrne was among several top officials who briefed Wilkie on the inspector general's investigation into the case, which involved a staffer from the House Veterans' Affairs Committee saying she was groped and accosted by a man during a routine health visit there.

Investigators declined to bring charges, saying they had insufficient evidence to confirm or refute the report. In a letter to committee chairman Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., **Wilkie implied that the staffer fabricated the event**. Veterans advocates have condemned the response as insensitive and potentially harmful to women wary of seeking VA care.

Wilkie said he is "not satisfied" with the outcome of the investigation, and has met with IG representatives to discuss steps forward on the issue.

But he said Byrne's role in that was not a factor. Instead, he said the firing was in the best interest of bettering VA operations.

"It has been my mission to ensure that everyone who works for (VA) is performing to the utmost," he said.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

"A few years ago, we were accused, when it came to accountability, of only holding those at the lowest end of our workforce to account. If people don't live up to the standards our veterans expect, I have taken action."

The move leaves VA without two of its top leadership posts. The department's Under Secretary for Health role has been vacant since President Donald Trump took office.

Wilkie said he expects to have an announcement on the open deputy secretary post soon.

Despite the leadership shake-up, Wilkie said reforms instituted during the Trump administration have put VA "in a (positive) position that we have not been in for many years." He lauded progress on new electronic medical records for veterans, new technology advancements in health care, and overhauled community care rules allowing veterans to receive care from private physicians more easily.

"VA is very different from what it was just a few years ago," he said. "Our veterans are satisfied in numbers we haven't seen."

Trump made only a quick reference to veterans policy issues in his State of the Union address on Tuesday night, noting that veterans unemployment has reached historically low levels during his term in office.

###

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 23:06:28 +0000
To: Hutton, James
Subject: RE: // for approval // RE: Military Times: VA secretary insists surprise firing of top official isn't a sign of leadership turmoil

This is (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 6:01 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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(b)(5)

Please let me know which you prefer.

VR, James

###
Your story states: In a letter to committee chairman Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., **Wilkie implied that the staffer fabricated the event.**

OPTION 1: (b)(5)
(b)(5)

OPTION 2: (b)(5)
(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(5)

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———————

VA secretary insists surprise firing of top official isn't a sign of leadership turmoil
Military Times
By Leo Shane
February 5, 2020
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"There are times in any company, in the military and even in Congress when some people in the organization just don't gel with the team," Wilke said of his abrupt dismissal of Deputy Secretary James Byrne, the department's second-highest official, two days earlier.

"I wish Jim Byrne well. He is a man of great distinction, in terms of his service to the country. I will say this is a simple business decision."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Numerous lawmakers and VA officials were shocked by the announcement, citing Byrne's work on key issues like electronic health records and department suicide prevention initatives.

Wilkie did not give any specific incident or action that prompted the firing, but he did state the decision had no connection to department leadership's controversial response to a sexual assault allegation at the Washington D.C. VA Medical Center last month.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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###

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 5 Feb 2020 23:12:47 +0000
To: RLW
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Cashour, Curtis
Subject: FW: VA chief calls deputy's sudden firing a 'simple business decision' but provides few answers

Mr. Secretary,

A Washington Post article posted this afternoon.

Clearly someone on our staff (b)(5) .

I will call you to discuss.

VR, James

VA chief calls deputy's sudden firing a 'simple business decision' but provides few answers
By Lisa Rein
The Washington Post
Feb. 5, 2020
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/va-chief-calls-deputys-sudden-firing-a-simple-business-decision-but-provides-few-answers/2020/02/05/77192cda-47a3-11ea-8124-0ca81effcdfb_story.html

Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie on Wednesday defended his abrupt firing this week of his deputy secretary, calling the dismissal a "simple business decision" to oust a leader "who was not jelling with other members of the team."

Wilkie also said he wants to work with authorities to review the case of a senior Democratic congressional aide who said she was sexually assaulted at the VA Medical Center in Washington. The secretary, whose characterization of the allegations has been criticized, said he was "not satisfied" with the outcome.

Wilkie's firing of James Byrne on Monday has unsettled the veterans community inside and outside of VA, and Wilkie provided few answers to why he dismissed a popular leader.

"There's nothing personal" about James Byrne's firing, Wilkie said at a previously scheduled appearance at the National Press Club, "but we have so many things going on...It's been my goal to ensure that everyone who works for us performs to the utmost."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

He tied Byrne's firing to an effort across his agency to hold poor performers accountable.

Wilkie praised Byrne, a popular former Marine infantry officer who was VA's general counsel before Wilkie recruited him as his second-in-command, as "a man of great distinction in terms of service to the country."

He said he is presenting names of potential successors to the White House for consideration. Byrne, whose elevation to second in command was advocated by Wilkie, declined comment.

His dismissal has flummoxed senior leaders at VA and veterans groups, who describe a leader well liked by the staff and loyal to Wilkie. The loss of a senior leader who was confirmed by the Senate just five months ago continues years of turmoil at the government's second-largest agency, which has had four secretaries in five years.

Veterans are a key constituency for President Trump, whose reelection campaign likely will focus in part on what he has done for former service members.

Byrne's firing comes as Wilkie himself has openly expressed frustration with his job and sought other high-profile positions in the Trump administration, rankling some White House officials, according to multiple people close to both VA and the White House.

Wilkie last year sought the defense secretary job following Jim Mattis's firing by the president. Then in recent months Wilkie put his name in for consideration as homeland security chief after Kevin McAleenan's resignation as acting secretary last fall, these people said.

Wilkie is from North Carolina and was an aide to the late U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). He is widely considered to be interested in a career in North Carolina politics, possibly as a candidate for the Senate seat that will open with the retirement of incumbent Richard Burr (R) in 2022, people familiar with his thinking said.

Wilkie said Wednesday that Byrne's dismissal was not connected to the investigation into the sexual assault allegations by Navy veteran (b) (6) a senior member on the staff of House Veterans Affairs Committee Mark Takano (D-Calif.).

(b) (6) said she was sexually assaulted and harassed by a patient at the DC VA Medical Center last September.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Wilkie issued a public letter to Takano calling (b) (6) claims "unsubstantiated" after authorities closed their investigation without bringing charges. The wording of the letter seemed to disparage (b) (6) and appeared to some as tone deaf in the #MeToo era.

Wilkie's letter prompted an angry rebuttal from Takano, and from Inspector General Michael Missal, who rebutted Wilkie's characterization of (b) (6) allegations. Missal said that just because no charges were filed did not mean her claims were unsubstantiated.

On Wednesday Wilkie cited what he called a record number of female veterans seeking health care in the VA system — about 780,000 or 41 percent of the population of women who served.

Wilkie said he wants assurances that "everyone who walks in a VA hospital is safe and taken care of." Asked if he was satisfied with the resolution in the (b) (6) case, he said he is not, and that he is making a "renewed push to get answers...to make sure those involved get satisfaction."

"We are working to make sure the [House] committee and Ms. (b) (6) receive all the information available to make sure their needs are taken care of," Wilkie said.

Missal said in a statement after Wilkie's remarks that the investigation is closed. "We are not working with anyone to seek additional information at this time," the office said in an email.

(b) (6) criticized Wilkie's response to her allegations in an article published on Monday by the website Jezebel. A spokesman for Takano did not respond to a request for comment.

The chairman said in a statement on Monday that "the American people deserve to know" why Byrne was dismissed. "As chairman of this committee, it is my duty to ensure veterans receive timely access to care and benefits without delay, and I want to make sure this personnel decision will not impact that commitment," Takano said.

Byrne, 55, a Naval Academy graduate and former international narcotics prosecutor at the Department of Justice, worked for the Lockheed Martin Corporation before joining the Trump administration. He had filled the deputy's position in an acting capacity since August 2018.

Byrne oversaw some of VA's biggest initiatives, including a plan to address the persistent problem of veteran suicide and an ambitious

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

project that will eventually merge veterans' military health records with their records at VA.

Wilkie has told colleagues that he and Byrne clashed in recent months, primarily over the authority the secretary has given his chief of staff, Pamela Powers, whom he brought to VA from the Pentagon. Powers served as a key aide to Wilkie when he was the senior official in charge of personnel and readiness.

Byrne had told Wilkie he was frustrated that Powers, who is not in a role requiring Senate confirmation, was assuming more and more responsibility, essentially usurping his authority, people close to Byrne said. Byrne discussed his concerns with other senior leaders, who agreed with his assessment but were wary of alienating both Wilkie and Powers, the two people said. They spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

Byrne did not have close allies in the White House, and when Wilkie brought his case to officials there to allow him to dismiss his deputy, the president approved.

###

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW
Sent: 6 Feb 2020 02:11:26 +0000
To: (b)(6) EOP/WHO
Subject: FW: VA chief calls deputy's sudden firing a 'simple business decision' but provides few answers

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Feb 05, 2020, 6:12 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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###

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW
Sent: 6 Feb 2020 23:45:35 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela;Hutton, James
Cc: Tucker, Brooks;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Done

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 6:39 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>, RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Recommend removing the last paragraph.

Pamela Powers
VA Chief of Staff

From: Hutton, James (b)(6)n@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 6:32 PM
To: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Pre-Decisional-Deliberative Process

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our recommended response.

VR, James

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously, which is why the department immediately reported this issue to VA's independent inspector general as well as the deputy attorney general.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Q: Why does Secretary Wilkie want more details about the investigative findings to be shared with VA leadership?
A: At a minimum, the IG should let VA and committee leaders know if its investigation found any wrongdoing so the department can take appropriate action.

(b)(5)

VA relies on the independent inspector general to find the facts and (b)(5) ustice (b)(5)
(b)(5)

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Sec. Wilkie used the term "unsubstantiated" in his letter to Chairman Takano because he thought the IG surely would have brought charges or issued formal findings if the allegations were substantiated.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email:(b)(6) @va.gov
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VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Isaac Arnsdorf <Isaac.Arnsdorf@propublica.org>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 4:16 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: VA Public Affairs <VAPublicAffairs@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) va.gov>; (b)(6) @va.gov>; (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on Andrea Goldstein case

Hi again,

Here are some additional questions:

1. Why does Secretary Wilkie want more details about the investigative findings to be shared with VA leadership? What does he intend to do with that information?

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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8. Will Secretary Wilkie accept Rep. Brownley's request to apologize for the language in his Jan. 15 letter?

Thanks,
Isaac

On Feb 5, 2020, at 6:00 PM, Isaac Arnsdorf <Isaac.Arnsdorf@propublica.org> wrote:

Hi Christina,

Could you please confirm the statement you made to Abbie Bennett clarifying the Secretary's comments today about the (b) (6) case?

VA spokeswoman Christina Mandreucci told Connecting Vets Wednesday afternoon that Wilkie "is not calling for a reopening of the investigation" but instead is "calling on the independent IG and the U.S. Attorney to provide detailed investigative findings to VA leadership, committee leaders and Ms. (b) (6) https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/wilkie-wants-to-review-case-of-vet-assaulted-at-dc-va

Thanks,
Isaac

Isaac Arnsdorf
PROPUBLICA
202.886.9568
isaac.arnsdorf@propublica.org

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: 6 Feb 2020 23:51:38 +0000
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Powers, Pamela;Hutton, James
Cc: Tucker, Brooks
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Bill - call James at 254220(b)(6)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 6:48 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Tucker, Brooks < va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis < @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

James what's your direct.

VR Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 6:46 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Done

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From: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
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To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>, RLW <(b)(6) va.gov>

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cc: Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Recommend removing the last paragraph.

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VA Chief of Staff

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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James

James Hutton
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 4:16 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: VA Public Affairs <VAPublicAffairs@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

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Thanks,
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 6 Feb 2020 23:54:15 +0000
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Powers, Pamela
Cc: Tucker, Brooks;Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

I called your number, no answer.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
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William A. Hudson, Jr.
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Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461(b)(6)

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Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Done

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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(www.blackberry.com)

From: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 6:39 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>, RLW <(b)(6) @va.gov>
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(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(5)

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Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 4:16 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: VA Public Affairs <VAPublicAffairs@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6)
(b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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isaac.arnsdorf@propublica.org

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC)
Sent: 6 Feb 2020 23:56:24 +0000
To: RLW;Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Tucker, Brooks;Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Concur on removing last para.

Sir, as discussed today I am still (b)(5)
(b)(5)

VR Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 6:43 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <B(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b)(6) case

Made (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 6:32 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Sec. Wilkie used the term "unsubstantiated" in his letter to Chairman Takano because he thought the IG surely would have brought charges or issued formal findings if the allegations were substantiated. Again he defers to the IG and withdraws his words.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Isaac Arnsdorf
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isaac.arnsdorf@propublica.org

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 00:35:04 +0000
To: Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Have Bill Hudson give it one last scrub.

Might want to add (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 7:16 PM
To: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Mr. Secretary,

The new text, based on our conversation, is highlighted in red below:

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously. As the Secretary wrote to the VA IG, Mike Missal, on September 23, 2019, "I am asking that you investigate this very serious matter and make it an immediate priority for your team. I have taken the liberty of cc'ing the Deputy Attorney General should you need to call on his offices."

Q: Why does Secretary Wilkie want more details about the investigative findings to be shared with VA leadership?
A: At a minimum, the IG should let VA and committee leaders know if its investigation found any wrongdoing so the department can take action to protect our patients.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Q: What did Secretary Wilkie intend to do with the information he collected about Ms. (b) (6) Why did he repeatedly share it with his senior staff, including public affairs officials?
A: The premise of your question is incorrect. This is false.

Q: What did Secretary Wilkie mean when he told his staff that he wondered how this information might get out?
A: The premise of your question is incorrect. Never said that period.

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A: Sec. Wilkie had a 90-minute meeting with her last week, and he agreed that describing the allegations as "unsubstantiated" was a poor choice of words. He withdraws that word.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461(b)(6)
Email:(b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: RLW [(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 6:43 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Made (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 6:32 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Pre-Decisional-Deliberative Process

Mr. Secretary,

Below is our recommended response.

VR, James

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
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Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
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From: Isaac Arnsdorf <Isaac.Arnsdorf@propublica.org>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 4:16 PM

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: VA Public Affairs <VAPublicAffairs@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b) (6) @va.gov>; (b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6) (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Hi again,

Here are some additional questions:

1. Why does Secretary Wilkie want more details about the investigative findings to be shared with VA leadership? What does he intend to do with that information?

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7. Why was this an appropriate use of official resources?

8. Will Secretary Wilkie accept Rep. Brownley's request to apologize for the language in his Jan. 15 letter?

Thanks,
Isaac

> On Feb 5, 2020, at 6:00 PM, Isaac Arnsdorf <Isaac.Arnsdorf@propublica.org> wrote:
>
> Hi Christina,

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Could you please confirm the statement you made to Abbie Bennett clarifying the Secretary's comments today about the (b) (6) case?

VA spokeswoman Christina Mandreucci told Connecting Vets Wednesday afternoon that Wilkie "is not calling for a reopening of the investigation" but instead is "calling on the independent IG and the U.S. Attorney to provide detailed investigative findings to VA leadership, committee leaders and Ms.
(b) (6) https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/wilkie-wants-to-review-case-of-vet-assaulted-at-dc-va

Thanks,
Isaac

Isaac Arnsdorf
PROPUBLICA
202.886.9568
isaac.arnsdorf@propublica.org

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Sent: 7 Feb 2020 00:52:03 +0000
To: Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Go with Bill's recommendations

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 7:50 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Secretary's comments on Andrea Goldstein case

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Sent: 7 Feb 2020 01:01:28 +0000
To: Hutton, James;RLW
Cc: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

James, please let WH Comms know.

Pam

Pamela Powers
VA Chief of Staff

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 7:59 PM
To: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 01:08:15 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela;RLW
Cc: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Done

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(www.blackberry.com)

From: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 8:01 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>, RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
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Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) Goldstein case

Sir, roger. Message is on the way.

VR, James

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Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

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Subject: FW: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Mr. Secretary,

This statement below is with Bill's scrub. Bill recommended (b)(5)

(b)(5)

VR, James

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From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 7:35 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>; RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

I made (b)(5)
(b)(6)

Calling James as we speak.

VR Bill

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 7:16 PM
To: RLW (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) (b) (6) case

Mr. Secretary,

The new text, based on our conversation, is highlighted in red below:

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously. As the Secretary wrote to the VA IG, on September 23, 2019, "I am asking that you investigate this very serious matter and make it an immediate priority for your team. I have taken the liberty of cc'ing the Deputy Attorney General should you need to call on his offices."

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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(b)(5)

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Subject: RE: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Made (b)(5)

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Pre-Decisional-Deliberative Process

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VR, James

James

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: VA Public Affairs <VAPublicAffairs@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6) @va.gov>
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Isaac

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Thanks,
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PROPUBLICA
202.886.9568
isaac.arnsdorf@propublica.org

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Powers, Pamela
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 01:33:02 +0000
To: (b)(6) EOP/WHO
Subject: Media Request

(b)(6)

As discussed, we received media requests from WAPO, WSJ and Pro Publica. All three centered around the DC Sexual Assault allegation and all are intended to attack the Secretary's deliberations on the subject. We expect they are coming from the previous DepSec. Below is our response.

———-

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously. As the Secretary wrote to the VA IG, on September 23, 2019, "I am asking that you investigate this very serious matter and make it an immediate priority for your team. I have taken the liberty of cc'ing the Deputy Attorney General should you need to call on his offices."

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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———————————-

Pam

Pamela Powers
VA Chief of Staff

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Sent: 7 Feb 2020 01:33:06 +0000
To: (b)(6) EOP/WHO
Subject: FW: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Pamela Powers
VA Chief of Staff

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
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I made (b)(5)
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VR Bill

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Pre-Decisional-Deliberative Process

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VR, James

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Sent: Thursday, February 6, 2020 4:16 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: VA Public Affairs <VAPublicAffairs@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Hi again,

Here are some additional questions:

1. Why does Secretary Wilkie want more details about the investigative findings to be shared with VA leadership? What does he intend to do with that information?

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Thanks,
Isaac

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>
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Ms.
(b) (6) https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/wilkie-wants-to-review-case-of-vet-assaulted-at-dc-va

Thanks,
Isaac

Isaac Arnsdorf
PROPUBLICA
202.886.9568
isaac.arnsdorf@propublica.org

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: RLW
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 01:51:40 +0000
To: Hutton, James
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Did Crenshaw say he did not talk about it

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 8:47 PM
To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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Mr Secretary,

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DRAFT RESPONSE:

At the meeting there was no discussion about Ms. (b) (6)

VR, James

From: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 8:37 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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FYI —

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 02:36:30 +0000
To: RLW
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Re: Secretary's comments on (b) (6) case

Correct

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: RLW (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Thursday, Feb 06, 2020, 8:51 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) r@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Powers, Pamela
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 17:45:06 +0000
To: Hutton, James;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Hudson, William A. (OGC);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

(b)(5)

Pamela Powers
VA Chief of Staff

From: Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Friday, Feb 07 2020 12:13 PM
To: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

All,

Please review the responses to the questions below. We a quick-turn. The bulk of the responses are similar to responses we put together last night for another query.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461 (b)(6)
Email (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

***Military Times* Query**

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously. As the Secretary wrote to the VA IG, on September 23, 2019, "I am asking that you investigate this very serious matter and make it an immediate priority for your team. I have taken the liberty of cc'ing the Deputy Attorney General should you need to call on his offices."

Allegation: I have been told that contrary to public remarks that the IG would handle the investigation into (b) (6) Secretary Wilkie made several calls investigating her background, including her military experience and past employment. I

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Response: These allegations are false.

Q: Did Secretary Wilkie conduct a separate investigation into the alleged DC medical center sexual assault?
A: He didn't. (Attribute this quote to Secretary Wilkie) "I never would do that to a fellow officer—it is a breach of honor."

Q: Was that investigation the basis of the decision to send out a letter to House Vet Affairs implying that (b) (6) had made up the incident?
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(b)(5)

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(b)(5)

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(b)(5)

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Q: Secretary Wilkie said earlier this week he is not satisfied with the results of that investigation. Is that because he wants the DC medical center fully cleared and the (b) (6) accusation labeled as a made-up story?

A: (b)(5)

(b)(5)

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(b)(5)

From: Shane III, Leo <lshane@militarytimes.com>
Sent: Friday, February 7, 2020 11:01 AM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6) va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

I think another news outlet may have already reached out on this topic. If that's the case, please let me know what statement you have on this.

I have been told that contrary to public remarks that the IG would handle the investigation into (b) (6) Secretary Wilkie made several calls investigating her background, including her military experience and past employment. I have also heard that he was encouraging members of the VA staff to make this information known more publicly in an attempt to discredit her.

-- Did Secretary Wilkie conduct a separate investigation into the alleged DC medical center sexual assault?
-- Was that investigation the basis of the decision to send out a letter to House Vet Affairs implying that (b) (6) had made up the incident?
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-- Secretary Wilkie said earlier this week he is not satisfied with the results of that investigation. Is that because he wants the DC medical center fully cleared and the (b) (6) accusation labeled as a made-up story?

Working to publish this ASAP, please let me know as soon as you have something available.

Leo Shane III
Deputy Editor, Military Times
lshane@militarytimes.com

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

202-656-3039

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 17:52:36 +0000
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

What is your cell number?

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
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From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Friday, February 7, 2020 12:49 PM
To: Hutton, James (b)(6)@va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Wilkie investigation into Andrea (b) (6)

I am at the DC VAMC but I just think we need t(b)(5)

Calling James on his cell.

Vr Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
(202) 461-(b)(6)

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All, we found another passage from the IG website that is highlighted at the bottom of this set of responses. Still need a quick turn:

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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(b)(5)

According to VA's independent inspector general, "In all cases, the goal is to determine the truth and obtain justice." (b)(5)

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Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
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To: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>
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VA relies on the independent inspector general to find the facts, determine the truth, and obtain justice. We need this help to make sure our facilities are safe (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Q: Secretary Wilkie said earlier this week he is not satisfied with the results of that investigation. Is that because he wants the DC medical center fully cleared and the (b) (6) accusation labeled as a made-up story?
A: (b)(5)
(b)(5)

VA relies on the independent inspector general to find the facts and (b)(5) justice (b)(5)
(b)(5)

From: Shane III, Leo <lshane@militarytimes.com>
Sent: Friday, February 7, 2020 11:01 AM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M.(b) (6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

<(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

I think another news outlet may have already reached out on this topic. If that's the case, please let me know what statement you have on this.

I have been told that contrary to public remarks that the IG would handle the investigation into (b) (6) Secretary Wilkie made several calls investigating her background, including her military experience and past employment. I have also heard that he was encouraging members of the VA staff to make this information known more publicly in an attempt to discredit her.

-- Did Secretary Wilkie conduct a separate investigation into the alleged DC medical center sexual assault?
-- Was that investigation the basis of the decision to send out a letter to House Vet Affairs implying that (b) (6) had made up the incident?
-- Did the secretary not trust the IG to conduct a full investigation into the incident?
-- Secretary Wilkie said earlier this week he is not satisfied with the results of that investigation. Is that because he wants the DC medical center fully cleared and the (b) (6) accusation labeled as a made-up story?

Working to publish this ASAP, please let me know as soon as you have something available.

Leo Shane III
Deputy Editor, Military Times
lshane@militarytimes.com
202-656-3039

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: 7 Feb 2020 17:52:45 +0000
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Hutton, James;Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Subject: RE: Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

Bill - what is your cell?

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Friday, Feb 07, 2020, 12:48 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

I am at the DC VAMC but I just think we need to (b)(5)
(b)(6)

Calling James on his cell.

Vr Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
(202) 461-(b)(6)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Friday, Feb 07, 2020, 12:36 PM
To: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

All, we found another passage from the IG website that is highlighted at the bottom of this set of responses. Still need a quick turn:

***Military Times* Query**

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously. As the Secretary wrote to the VA IG, on September 23, 2019, "I am asking that you investigate this very serious matter and

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make it an immediate priority for your team. I have taken the liberty of cc'ing the Deputy Attorney General should you need to call on his offices."

Allegation: I have been told that contrary to public remarks that the IG would handle the investigation into (b) (6) Secretary Wilkie made several calls investigating her background, including her military experience and past employment. I have also heard that he was encouraging members of the VA staff to make this information known more publicly in an attempt to discredit her.
Response: These allegations are false.

Q: Did Secretary Wilkie conduct a separate investigation into the alleged DC medical center sexual assault?
A: He didn't. (Attribute this quote to Secretary Wilkie) "I never would do that to a fellow officer—it is a breach of honor."

Q: Was that investigation the basis of the decision to send out a letter to House Vet Affairs implying that (b) (6) had made up the incident?
A: The premise of this question is false and we disagree with your characterization of the letter. See above.

Sec. Wilkie acknowledges that describing the allegations as "unsubstantiated" was a poor choice of words, and he withdraws that word.

Sec. Wilkie used the term "unsubstantiated" in his letter to Chairman Takano because he thought the IG surely would have brought charges or issued formal findings to VA if the allegations were substantiated.

According to the VA IG's website, "For cases with substantiated allegations that are declined for prosecution, OIG reports its findings to VA management officials responsible for taking action to address the findings."

(b)(5)

Q: Did the secretary not trust the IG to conduct a full investigation into the incident?
A: The IG has saidit conducted a thorough investigation, and VA accepts that.

(b)(5) er the VA IG's website, the IG should let VA and committee leaders know if its investigation found any wrongdoing so the department can take action to protect and safeguard our patients.

According to the VA IG's website, "For cases with substantiated allegations that are declined for prosecution, OIG reports its findings to VA management officials responsible for taking action to address the findings."

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(b)(5)

VA relies on the independent inspector general to find the facts, determine the truth, and obtain justice. We need this help to make sure our facilities are safe, (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Q: Secretary Wilkie said earlier this week he is not satisfied with the results of that investigation. Is that because he wants the DC medical center fully cleared and the Goldstein accusation labeled as a made-up story?
A: (b)(5)
(b)(5)

According to VA's independent inspector general, "In all cases, the goal is to determine the truth and obtain justice." (b)(5)
(b)(5)

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Hutton, James
Sent: Friday, February 7, 2020 12:14 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

All,

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Please review the responses to the questions below. We a quick-turn. The bulk of the responses are similar to responses we put together last night for another query.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

***Military Times* Query**

VA takes all allegations of sexual assault seriously. As the Secretary wrote to the VA IG, on September 23, 2019, "I am asking that you investigate this very serious matter and make it an immediate priority for your team. I have taken the liberty of cc'ing the Deputy Attorney General should you need to call on his offices."

Allegation: I have been told that contrary to public remarks that the IG would handle the investigation into (b) (6) Secretary Wilkie made several calls investigating her background, including her military experience and past employment. I have also heard that he was encouraging members of the VA staff to make this information known more publicly in an attempt to discredit her.
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A: He didn't. (Attribute this quote to Secretary Wilkie) "I never would do that to a fellow officer—it is a breach of honor."

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(b)(5)

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(b)(5) per the VA IG's website, the IG should let VA and committee leaders know if its investigation found any wrongdoing so the department can take action to protect and safeguard our patients.

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(b)(5)

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(b)(5)

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(b)(5)

From: Shane III, Leo <lshane@militarytimes.com>
Sent: Friday, February 7, 2020 11:01 AM

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Wilkie investigation into (b) (6)

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Working to publish this ASAP, please let me know as soon as you have something available.

Leo Shane III
Deputy Editor, Military Times
lshane@militarytimes.com
202-656-3039

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: (b)(6)
Sent: 9 Feb 2020 06:14:08 -0500
To: RLW;Contact Us;Wilkie, Robert L., Jr.
Cc: Powers, Pamela;Stone, Richard A., MD;Lapuz, Miguel H.;Russo, Paul M. (Bay Pines VA);Majority, HVAC;Rubio, Casework (Rubio)
Subject: [EXTERNAL] To: Robert Wilkie - Looks like the end of your VA tenure is finally near. Let the celebration begin...

https://www.propublica.org/article/vva-secretary-looked-for-dirt-on-a-house-staffer-who-reported-sexual-assault-in-a-va-hospital-complaint-says

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie personally sought damaging information about a congressional aide who said she was sexually assaulted in a VA hospital, according to an anonymous complaint to the House committee the woman works for. The written complaint was obtained by ProPublica. In addition, a former senior official with direct knowledge of the matter said Wilkie discussed damaging information he collected about the aide and suggested using it to discredit her. Another person said he spoke with other officials who were in those discussions, and they corroborated the former senior official's and the written complaint's account. The people interviewed spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying they feared retaliation.

Mr. Wilkie:

Looks like you are close to being escorted out the VA front door in disgrace. THANK GOD! I do want to thank you for firing Jim Byrne.

We exchanged emails when he was the VA GC before your appointment. I showed him where the VA OGC attorneys were acting unethically, but he refused to act. The oath you folks take - it doesn't mean a thing to you, does it? Byrne was as bad as VA IG Missal who lied to a member of Congress in November 2016 to keep from investigating negligent VA doctors, corrupt VA administrators, and two corrupt members of his senior staff. You refused to act on that complaint as well. Byrne never did what he told me he was going to do. He refused to carry out his positional responsibilities in violation of various VA policies. Pam Powers confirmed that Byrne and you had been briefed on my complaints. FOIA searches confirmed it as well. Neither one of you did anything regarding the corruption, medical negligence, and fraud that I had reported. Absolutely no integrity in this VA leadership group.

This time, when Trump picks an acting VA Secretary to replace you, that person is going to be vetted by experienced members of the Veteran patient community. The VA doesn't need another Trump appointee who doesn't give a damn about the Veteran patient community! I sent you many emails during your tenure (which you received) in an effort to try and work with you - and you never once afforded this VA injured patient the courtesy of a response.

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You have disgraced yourself by the way you have acted during your tenure and for trying to discredit Ms. (b) (6) **(hope she sues the hell out of you.)**

Looks like the VACO people in DC have had enough of you, too. They have reportedly dropped a dime on you and the end of your tenure is near...

Just wanted to say good bye before I lose the means (and the desire) to communicate with you.

You will NOT be missed!

(b)(6) (727) 337-(b)(6)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC)
Sent: 10 Feb 2020 12:48:16 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Subject: Letter
Attachments: Request of an investigation.docx

My recommendation and latest edits attached.

VR Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)

ATTENTION: This electronic transmission may contain attorney work-product or information protected under the attorney-client privilege. Portions of this transmission may contain information also protected from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 USC §552. Do not release this information without prior authorization from the sender. If this has inadvertently reached the wrong party, please delete this information immediately and notify the sender. Any security screening of this email by information officers or server administrators is not intended to be consent to any party to review the content of the email or a waiver of the attorney-client privilege and/or work product privilege.

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The Honorable Michael Missal
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Washington DC 20420

Dear Mr. Missal:

(b)(5)

Thank you for your continued support of our great Veterans and their families.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

DRAFT

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Byrne, Jim
Sent: 21 Sep 2019 00:44:32 +0000
To: RLW;Powers, Pamela
Cc: Bader, Christine E.;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Roger

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 8:35 PM
To: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Bader, Christine E. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Stand down until we get the report from Larry Connell and the police.

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 8:09 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Bader, Christine E. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Sir,
I have met Ms. (b) (6) (USNA graduate,Surface Warfare Officer) and would like to
(b)(5)

V/r,
Jim

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 6:02 PM

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

To: RLW <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Byrne, Jim (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Bader, Christine E. (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Sirs,

Please see attached HVAC Chairman's letter of a disturbing incident that happened this afternoon to one of his staffers. Larry Connell is (b)(5)

Pam

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:38 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6)@mail.house.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:12 PM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks –

Once you get a chance to read this, please give me a call at your earliest convenience. 765-914-(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)
Staff Director
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Chairman Mark Takano (CA-41)
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Powers, Pamela
Sent: 21 Sep 2019 17:01:38 +0000
To: Cashour, Curtis;Tucker, Brooks;Heimall, Michael S.
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B.;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)r@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 12:56 PM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Mike - do you have a (b)(5)

We are going to need that (b)(5)

Thanks.

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 12:33 PM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Thank you,Mike.

Adding COS and DepCOS.

I think more discussion with (b)(5)

(b)(5)

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(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 11:49 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B.(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

All,

I just spoke with(b)(6) and personally apologized. I made clear what happened, and the lack of timely intervention/action by our staff is not the standard I've set for the DC team or the way the Department expects incidents like this to be handled.

I also told him if Ms (b) (6) needs any support, we have counseling services available and they can call me directly to arrange that. I also told him I would like to call her on Monday to discuss the incident with her directly.

He appreciated the call. (b) (6) has been traveling around the country hearing similar stories from women Veterans as what she experienced yesterday. They are convinced that staff is trained on staff-on-staff harassment and assault but they don't have good training on what to do when a Veteran reports it to them. Clearly, our Veteran Experience staff reinforced that perception yesterday.

Brooks, I think the Chairman or Ms Brownly may want to visit next week for a tour and possible press event so the VA and HVAC can demonstrate a commitment to solving this issue. I told(b)(6) that was a discussion he should have with you. I reinforced my concern for(b) (6) well-being and my commitment to ensuring our staff handles incidents like this better in the future.

Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 8:12 AM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <L(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <C(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Adding Larry and Curt for input.

Could be (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 8:10 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks,

Thanks for sending. Police are investigating. (b)(5)

Do you mind if I reach out to (b)(5)

Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:22 PM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <M(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

FYI

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6)r@mail.house.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:12 PM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks –

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(6)

(b)(6)
Staff Director
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Chairman Mark Takano (CA-41)



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Tucker, Brooks
Sent: 21 Sep 2019 20:07:13 +0000
To: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Cashour, Curtis
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B.;Powers, Pamela
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Yes, I have told (b)(6) a visit of any sort is not helpful until we know exactly what occurred and have a path to resolving the incident from Friday. I don't intend to (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 3:30 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Minus Michael here - until we have a (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 1:18 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Curt,

We do not have a (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Mike

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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(www.blackberry.com)

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To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>
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Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 12:33 PM
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Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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(b)(5)

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(www.blackberry.com)

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Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 11:49 AM

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

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Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

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Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 8:12 AM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

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Could be (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 8:10 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>
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(www.blackberry.com)

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Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:22 PM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

FYI

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) @mail.house.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:12 PM
To: Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks –

Once you get a chance to read this, please give me a call at your earliest convenience. 765-914-(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)
Staff Director
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Chairman Mark Takano (CA-41)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Byrne, Jim
Sent: 22 Sep 2019 03:07:35 +0000
To: Bader, Christine E.
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Re: DC VAMC

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) @mail.house.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 10:17 PM
To: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6) gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: DC VAMC

Sir -

Thank you for the note. I'll let (b) (6) know you wished her well.

And thank you for everything VA is doing to make this right.

(b)(6)

Sent from my iPhone

On Sep 21, 2019, at 8:12 PM, Byrne, Jim (b)(6) @va.gov> wrote:

(b)(6)

I am very disturbed by the incident at DC VAMC involving Ms. (b) (6) from your office. Please extend to her my sympathy and assurance that VHA and possibly OIG will thoroughly investigate this matter. VA will then ensure appropriate discipline is administered and take appropriate remedial action to prevent such incidents from happening again at the DC VAMC or on any VA property. Please inform Ms. (b) (6) that VA has MST services and other counseling available if needed.
Please contact me directly if I may be of assistance.
Jim

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Sent: 23 Sep 2019 13:44:54 +0000
To: Tucker, Brooks;Connell, Lawrence B.;Cashour, Curtis
Cc: Powers, Pamela
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Agree

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) r@va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 9:25 AM
To: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

I don't think Stone is needed at this juncture.

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 9:21 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Do we need Dr. Stone?

Larry Connell
Chief of Staff
Veterans' Health Administration
(b)(6) @va.gov
202.461.7(b)(6)

From: Tucker, Brooks
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 9:15 AM
To: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

I spoke with COS on a Sync call on this matter.

When would be a good time to set one up later today?

Thinking afternoon sometime.

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(www.blackberry.com)

From: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 7:48 AM
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Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Not yet. Heading over there at 1030.

Larry Connell
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(b)(6)@va.gov

From: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 7:26 AM
To: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6)l@va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Larry – is there a timeline regarding what (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Thanks,

Curt Cashour
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)
(b)(6)@va.gov
@curtcashour

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Sent: Saturday, September 21, 2019 3:31 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Minus Michael here - until we have a (b)(5)
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Curt,

We do not have a (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Mike

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Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
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Mike - do you have a (b)(5)

We are going to need that (b)(5)

Thanks.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Thank you,Mike.

Adding COS and DepCOS.

I think more discussion with (b)(5)
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Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

All,

I just spoke with (b)(6) and personally apologized. I made clear what happened, and the lack of timely intervention/action by our staff is not the standard I've set for the DC team or the way the Department expects incidents like this to be handled.

I also told him if Ms (b) (6) needs any support, we have counseling services available and they can call me directly to arrange that. I also told him I would like to call her on Monday to discuss the incident with her directly.

He appreciated the call. (b) (6) has been traveling around the country hearing similar stories from women Veterans as what she experienced yesterday. They are convinced that staff is trained on staff-on-staff harassment and assault but they don't have good training on what to do when a Veteran reports it to them. Clearly, our Veteran Experience staff reinforced that perception yesterday.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Brooks, I think the Chairman or Ms Brownly may want to visit next week for a tour and possible press event so the VA and HVAC can demonstrate a commitment to solving this issue. I told (b)(6) that was a discussion he should have with you. I reinforced my concern for (b) (6) well-being and my commitment to ensuring our staff handles incidents like this better in the future.

Mike

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Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Adding Larry and Curt for input.

Could be (b)(5)

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From: Heimall, Michael S. (b)(6) @va.gov>
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To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks,

Thanks for sending. Police are investigating (b)(5)

Do you mind if I reach out to (b)(5)

Mike

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(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:22 PM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

FYI

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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(b)(6)

(b)(6)

Staff Director
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Chairman Mark Takano (CA-41)

THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Tucker, Brooks
Sent: 24 Sep 2019 02:31:24 +0000
To: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Subject: FW: Phone Call with HVAC Staffer

???

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6) va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 10:20 PM
To: Stone, Richard A., MD <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6) @va.gov>, Oshinski, Renee <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Walton, Robert <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Chung, Raymond (VISN5) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Phone Call with HVAC Staffer

Dr. Stone,

Sorry for the late note, busy evening

I spoke with Ms. (b) (6) around 4 pm this afternoon. I expressed my concern for what happened and apologized that the staff at the information desk and patient advocate staff did not take a proactive approach to getting her in touch with the VA Police.

She appreciated the call. We discussed the incident a bit and I told her I expected the police to follow up with her this week.

I asked her if she would be willing to come and speak with our staff about her experience and what she has observed and heard from female Veterans as she has traveled across the country. She told me she would be willing to do that. I think it might be a good inservice for our folks.

I gave her my cell phone and encouraged her to reach out to me or her PACT team if she needs any support services.

Regards,
Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Tucker, Brooks
Sent: 24 Sep 2019 16:00:05 +0000
To: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Powers, Pamela;Cashour, Curtis;Connell, Lawrence B.
Cc: Hutton, James
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

(b)(6) s our point person and she was given coaching points for the SMEs yesterday. One of my OCLA senior leaders is also attending.

- September 25, 2019. 2:00 P.M.; Rayburn 2261

OCLA POC: (b)(6)

Driver: Women Veterans Congressional TF Roundtable

Subject: Military Sexual Trauma Roundtable

Participants: Congressional TF Members of Congress and Professional Staff; VA: Dr. David Carroll, Executive Director, Office of Mental Health & Suicide Prevention; Dr. Susan McCutcheon, National MH Director, Family Svc/Women's MH/MST; Willie Clark, Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations and Beth Murphy, Director, Compensation Service.

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Sent: Tuesday, September 24, 2019 11:50 AM
To: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>; Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

My understanding is that the this "task force" has sort of kept VA at an arms length with their efforts.

From: Powers, Pamela
Sent: Tuesday, September 24, 2019 11:46 AM
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Cc: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks, who do we have (b)(5)

From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: Tuesday, September 24, 2019 11:43 AM
To: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Fyi: https://veterans.house.gov/events/hearings/women-veterans-task-force-roundtable-breaking-the-silence-addressing-military-sexual-trauma-in-the-military-and-veteran-communities

Curt Cashour
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Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461(b)(6)
(b)(6) va.gov
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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To: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Powers, Pamela;Cashour, Curtis;Connell, Lawrence B.
Cc: Hutton, James
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Yes, they declined to have Jacquie Hayes Byrd be a member.

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Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

All,

I just spoke with (b)(6) and personally apologized. I made clear what happened, and the lack of timely intervention/action by our staff is not the standard I've set for the DC team or the way the Department expects incidents like this to be handled.

I also told him if Ms (b) (6) needs any support, we have counseling services available and they can call me directly to arrange that. I also told him I would like to call her on Monday to discuss the incident with her directly.

He appreciated the call. (b) (6) has been traveling around the country hearing similar stories from women Veterans as what she experienced yesterday. They are convinced that staff is trained on staff-on-staff harassment and assault but they don't have good training on what to do when a Veteran reports it to them. Clearly, our Veteran Experience staff reinforced that perception yesterday.

Brooks, I think the Chairman or Ms Brownly may want to visit next week for a tour and possible press event so the VA and HVAC can demonstrate a commitment to solving this issue. I told (b)(6) that was a discussion he should have with you. I reinforced my concern for (b) (6) well-being and my commitment to ensuring our staff handles incidents like this better in the future.

Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 8:12 AM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

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Adding Larry and Curt for input.

Could be (b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 8:10 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks,

Thanks for sending. Police are investigating. (b)(5)

Do you mind if I reach out t (b)(5)

Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:22 PM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

FYI

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) @mail.house.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:12 PM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks –

Once you get a chance to read this, please give me a call at your earliest convenience. 765-914 (b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)
Staff Director

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

House Veterans Affairs Committee
Chairman Mark Takano (CA-41)



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Tucker, Brooks
Sent: 25 Sep 2019 13:54:38 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela;Stone, Richard A., MD;Hutton, James
Cc: Jensen, Jon M.;Connell, Lawrence B.;Cashour, Curtis;Mandreucci, Christina M.(b)(6)
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] HVAC tour of DC VAMC
Attachments: 9.25.19 - DC VAMC visit-presser outline.docx

All: FYI, recommend we convene a conference call or meeting today to discuss this.

Brooks

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) @mail.house.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Sep 25, 2019, 9:41 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] HVAC tour of DC VAMC

Brooks –

First, thank you to you and VA Leadership. The Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Mr Heimall, and you have all taken the incident that occurred at the DC VAMC very seriously and clearly doing everything in your power to find justice for (b) (6) This is not lost on anyone.

Last night the Chairman made the final decision that he should tour the facility and meet with key personnel to discuss they work they are doing to prevent these types occurrences and discuss ways to ensure all employees know how to intervene on anyone's behalf if they observe harassment or assaults taking place.

Attached, you will find an outline of the Chairman's expectations of what the visit will look like. As you can see he would like to have VA leadership involved.

Happy to jump on the phone to assuage your concerns.

(b)(6)
Staff Director
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Chairman Mark Takano (CA-41)
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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- Meet & Greet with DCVA Leadership*
- Visit to Atrium + (Patient Advocate)*
- Visit to Compensation & Pension
- Visit to VA Police Department*
- Visit to Women's Health Clinic
- Visit to Beneficiary Travel**

* - If the purpose is to have an in-depth conversation with VA staff/empoloyees this list could include the Chief of Police, Chief Patient Advocate, and Human Resources (ER/LR). Would show we're focused on not only veterans but employees as well.
** - need to confirm, but this may be in a high trafficked location that women visit frequently.

Press Conference:

Topline – Women veterans have earned the right to seek care and access benefits at VA. No veteran, family member, caregiver, VA employee or contractor should be the victim of sexual assault or harassment at a VA facility.

Overview – Leadership (HVAC, VA) will attend press conference recognizing the need for VA to develop a Department-wide anti-harassment and sexual assault policy, and that every VA employee is trained to take immediate action, including intervening to prevent further assault or harassment, contacting law enforcement, and providing aid and assistance to individuals reporting harassment and assault.

Attendance
-Chairman Mark Takano, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
-Chairwoman Julia Brownley, Subcommittee on Health, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
-Secretary Robert Wilkie, Secretary Department of Veterans Affairs
-(b) (6) Professional Staff Member, Women Veteran Task Force, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
-DCVA Leadership

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: 26 Sep 2019 21:40:36 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela;Connell, Lawrence B.
Cc: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Tucker, Brooks;Hutton, James
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Correction: Takano's Kojo Nnamdi Show appearance is scheduled for Oct. 15, not tomorrow. Apologies for the confusion.

From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: Thursday, September 26, 2019 5:24 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)r@va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

FYI: Below is a roundup of the coverage from today.

Additionally, NBC's local DC affiliate is doing a story this evening and Takano will be appearing on the Kojo Nnamdi Show (DC NPR) tomorrow to discuss "a growing number of complaints from women veterans in the Washington Metro region about harassment by other veterans at the D.C. VA Medical Center," according to the show's producer. The producer invited a VA representative on the show, but we instead provided a statement about the investigation and info about VA's efforts to end harassment and better serve women veterans.

Please let us know if you have questions. Thanks.

Congressional Staffer Recounts Assault at VA Hospital
By Richard Sisk
Military.com
26 Sep 2019
https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/09/26/congressional-staffer-recounts-assault-va-hospital.html

House committee urges change after staff member reports assault at VA hospital in DC
By NIKKI WENTLING
STARS AND STRIPES
September 26, 2019
https://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/house-committee-urges-change-after-staff-member-reports-assault-at-va-hospital-in-dc-1.600584

Lawmaker demands overhaul of VA anti-harassment policies after staffer reports assault at veterans hospital
Bu Leo Shane
Military Times
September 26, 2019

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https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/09/26/lawmaker-demands-overhaul-of-va-anti-harassment-policies-after-staffer-reports-assault-at-veterans-hospital/

Veteran, Congress senior advisor says she was sexually assaulted at DC VA
By Abbie Bennett
Connecting Vets
September 26, 2019
https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/veteran-congress-senior-advisor-sexually-assaulted-dc-va

Woman Trying to End Sexual Assault at V.A. Centers Says She Is Attacked in One
By Jennifer Steinhauer
The New York Times
Sept. 26, 2019
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/us/politics/women-veterans-sexual-assault-harassment.html

Curt Cashour
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)
(b)(6) va.gov
@curtcashour

From: Powers, Pamela
Sent: Tuesday, September 24, 2019 11:46 AM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6) va.gov>
Cc: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks, who do we have (b)(5)

From: Cashour, Curtis
Sent: Tuesday, September 24, 2019 11:43 AM
To: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Fyi: https://veterans.house.gov/events/hearings/women-veterans-task-force-roundtable-breaking-the-silence-addressing-military-sexual-trauma-in-the-military-and-veteran-communities

Curt Cashour
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(6) va.gov
@curtcashour

From: Connell, Lawrence B.
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 7:48 AM
To: Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Not yet. Heading over there at 1030.

Larry Connell
VHA Chief of Staff
(b)(6) @va.gov

From: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019 7:26 AM
To: Connell, Lawrence B (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Tucker, Brook (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Larry – is there a timeline regarding what (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Thanks,

Curt Cashour
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)
(b)(6) @va.gov
@curtcashour

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Sent: Saturday, September 21, 2019 3:31 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. (b)(6) @va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Minus Michael here - until we have a (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

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From: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 1:18 PM
To: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Curt,

We do not have a (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 12:56 PM
To: Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>, Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Mike - do you have a (b)(5)

We are going to need that (b)(5)

Thanks.

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 12:33 PM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B.(b)(6)l@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Thank you,Mike.

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Adding COS and DepCOS.

I think more discussion with (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 11:49 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

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To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Connell, Lawrence B. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)r@va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Could be (b)(5)

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(www.blackberry.com)

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Date: Saturday, Sep 21, 2019, 8:10 AM
To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks,

Thanks for sending. Police are investigating. I'm unhappy with how we handled this.

Do you mind if I reach out to (b)(5)

Mike

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Tucker, Brooks (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Friday, Sep 20, 2019, 5:22 PM
To: Heimall, Michael S. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

FYI

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(www.blackberry.com)

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To: Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Letter to SecVA

Brooks –

Once you get a chance to read this, please give me a call at your earliest convenience. 765-914-(b)(6)

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Staff Director
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Chairman Mark Takano (CA-41)



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hipolit, Richard (OGC)
Sent: 1 Oct 2019 11:45:00 +0000
To: Byrne, Jim;Hogan, Michael R. (OGC);Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC);Pope, Brent (OGC);Bader, Christine E.
Subject: FW: 1 October Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips
Attachments: 191001_Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips.docx, 191001_Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips.pdf

Item 2.1 reports that three persons in Maryland, two of them Veterans, have been indicted on Federal charges for allegedly stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in VA disability benefits through fraudulent claims. Item 7.2 reports that a Texas woman has been indicted for mail fraud, health care fraud, and making a false statement relating to health care matters after allegedly filing false prescription drug claims under CHAMPVA after the death of her Veteran husband. Item 2.5 reports that a California man has pleaded guilty in Federal court to a single count of conspiracy to steal government property after stealing a government vehicle and illegally charging more than $15,000 on Federal government gas cards for fuel that he sold to friends at a discount while employed by VA.,

The smoking ban at VA medical facilities, which goes into effect today, receives coverage in several local outlets (items 2.2, 2.8, 2.13, and 2.15). Although some grumbling among Veterans and union representatives is reported, we have heard nothing about any legal (b)(5)

(b)(5)

Item 2.4 reports that a former custodian at the St. Louis VAMC has filed an EEO suit claiming racial and disability discrimination, alleging that he was forced out of his job due to his agoraphobia, which causes him anxiety in large crowds. His problems reportedly began when he was moved from the night to the day shift.

Item 2.7 reports on the introduction of legislation, the VA Workplace Integrity Act (H.R. 4503), that would prevent VA from entering into a collective bargaining agreement that offers “financial incentives” to prospective union members. Item 6.4 reports on the introduction of the Stop Harassment and Sexual Assault at VA Act, which would require a Department-wide policy at VA to combat sexual harassment and sexual assault at VA facilities. This comes in the wake of allegations by a Hill staffer that she was assaulted and harassed at the VAMC in Washington, DC.

The suspicious Veteran deaths at Clarksburg, WV continue to receive coverage (item 2.9), as do OIG reports on opioid prescription practices (item 2.10) and concerns over care at the Eastern Oklahoma VAMC (item 2.11).

Item 2.12 repeats coverage on the naming of Manchester VAMC Director Alfred Montoya as the new Director of the VA Connecticut Healthcare System. Mr. Montoya is named as a defendant in the Manchester bible-display suit *Chamberlain v. Montoya*.

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The *Wolfe* case is mentioned in passing (not by name) in an article on the MISSION Act in item 4.2.

From: VA Media Analysis <VAMediaAnalysis@aptiveresources.com>
Sent: Tuesday, October 01, 2019 5:03 AM
To: VA Media Analysis <vamediaanalysis@aptiveresources.com>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] 1 October Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

Good morning,

Please find the attached Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips.

VA Media Analysis
VAMediaAnalysis@aptiveresources.com
www.aptiveresources.com
aptive

Confidentiality Notice: This email message and any attachments are for the sole use of the intended recipient(s) and may contain confidential information protected by law. If you have received this message in error, please notify the sender and delete it from your system.

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1. Top Stories

1.1 - U.S. News & World Report (AP): Veterans Clinic Planned for UMass Medical School Campus (30 September, 23.3M uvm; Washington, DC)
The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus. The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

Hyperlink to Above

1.2 - Federal News Network: Why VA is scrapping a successful pilot in favor of Cerner's scheduling system (30 September, Nicole Ogrysko, 238k uvm; Washington, DC)
The Department of Veterans Affairs will implement a new, commercial, off-the-shelf patient scheduling system by 2025, two years later than VA originally advertised to Congress. VA has chosen to implement a scheduling solution from Cerner, the same contractor that's spearheading its electronic health record modernization efforts, which the department said will mirror a similar, successful pilot it launched several years ago.

Hyperlink to Above

2. Improving Customer Service

2.1 - Connecting Vets: Two veterans, Navy spouse allegedly pretended to be disabled, defrauded VA for $820,000 (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)
Three people from Maryland -- two of them veterans -- have been indicted on federal charges for allegedly stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in Department of Veterans Affairs benefits. Angela Marie Farr, 33, and Michael Vincent Pace, 39, both of Leonardtown, and Mary Francis Biggs, 62, of Lexington Park, were charged with conspiracy and theft of government property, the DoJ announced last week.

Hyperlink to Above

2.2 - WTAE (ABC-4, Video): VA anti-smoking policy draws heat from veterans, VA employees (30 September, Paul Van Osdol, 2.1M uvm; Pittsburgh, PA)
A new anti-smoking policy at Veterans Administration facilities in Pittsburgh has area veterans and VA employees fired up. The policy takes effect Tuesday. The VA says all tobacco products will be prohibited at their campuses, outpatient clinics and Vet Centers. "It's a pretty bad situation and there are a lot of concerns," said Warren Park, a spokesman for the American Federation of Government Employees and the American Legion.

Hyperlink to Above

2.3 - Military Times: Will climate change hurt VA hospitals and programs? (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)
A pair of Democratic senators want Veterans Affairs officials to start better preparing for climate change, noting that extreme weather events have already disrupted operations at a host of

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department sites. “VA, like all federal agencies, has finite resources and must balance competing budget priorities. However, those priorities must include adapting VA infrastructure and operations to climate risks,” Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Brian Schatz of Hawaii wrote in a letter to VA leadership today.

Hyperlink to Above

2.4 - KMOV (CBS-4, Video): Veteran fired for VA files suit alleging racial, disability discrimination (30 September, 904k uvm; Saint Louis, MO)
Eric Carter spent years fighting for his country. Monday, the Vietnam veteran is taking the next step in his two-year fight for equality. Carter claims the VA medical center in St. Louis forced him out of a job, despite him working for them for nearly 10 years. He said they pushed him out due to his agoraphobia, an illness which gives him anxiety around large crowds.

Hyperlink to Above

2.5 - KNBC (NBC-4): Former VA Employee Pleads Guilty to Gas and Vehicle Thefts (30 September, 837k uvm; Los Angeles, CA)
An Inglewood man pleaded guilty Monday to stealing a government vehicle and illegally charging more than $15,000 on federal government gas cards for fuel he then sold to friends at a discount while he was employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Kyle Sidney Freedman Flournoy, 35, entered his plea in Los Angeles federal court to a single count of conspiracy to steal government property…

Hyperlink to Above

2.6 - WJHG (NBC-7, Video): The VA thought one local veteran was dead; he's still alive (30 September, Olivia Michael, 318k uvm; Panama City, FL)
In July, Richard Johnson passed away at the age of 57... or at least that's what the Department of Veterans Affairs believed. "I was declared deceased without a death certificate. I don't know how that happens but that's what happened," said Army Veteran Richard Johnson. The truth is, Johnson is very much alive, but for about a month, he was dead in the eyes of the VA.

Hyperlink to Above

2.7 - Government Executive: Lawmakers Look to Ban 'Bribes' Federal Unions Use to Recruit New Members (30 September, Eric Katz, 250k uvm; Washington, DC)
House Republicans are looking to prevent federal employee unions from offering prospective new members incentive payments to join, equating the discounted rates to a “bribe.” The VA Workplace Integrity Act (H.R. 4503) would apply only to the Veterans Affairs Department, preventing its secretary from entering into a collective bargaining agreement that offers “financial incentives to prospective members.”

Hyperlink to Above

2.8 - WJHL (CBS-11, Video): VA smoking ban begins Tuesday. Medical Center Director said efforts directed to help vets, staff quit smoking. (30 September, Jessica Fuller, 92k uvm; Johnson City, TN)
Tuesday, Mountain Home Veterans Affairs will join 4,000 other facilities across the country and ban smoking from all campuses. All types of smoking and vaping will be prohibited on campus

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including cigarettes, pipes, cigars and any type of electronic cigarette on campus. The ban does not include smokeless tobacco.

Hyperlink to Above

2.9 - Parkersburg News and Sentinel: Fifth person identified in VA med center deaths (1 October, Jess Mancini, 83k uvm; Parkersburg, WV)
A fifth veteran who died under suspicious circumstances last year at the Veterans Administration hospital in Clarksburg was identified by USA Today. William Alfred "Sport" Holloway, 96, of Fairmont died on April 8, 2018, while at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center, the newspaper said.

Hyperlink to Above

2.10 - The Register-Herald: VA inspector general says VA medical centers failed to perform required opioid checks (30 September, Jessica Farrish, 69k uvm; Beckley, WV)
The Veterans Administration Medical Center in Beckley is among those in the nation which failed to perform required opioid database checks for patients who were being prescribed opioids, a study by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Attorney General found in a report released in September.

Hyperlink to Above

2.11 - Muskogee Phoenix: VA hospital addresses inspector general's findings (28 September, Chesley Oxendine, 14k uvm; Muskogee, OK)
A report published this past week by Office of the Inspector General about the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System makes multiple recommendations for improvement — Director Mark Morgan hopes to have addressed all of them by December. "We've already started the performance improvement as early as December (2018)-January time frame, well before the report was released," Morgan said.

Hyperlink to Above

2.12 - Business NH Magazine: Manchester VA Director Accepts Post in Connecticut (30 September, 3k uvm; Manchester, NH)
Manchester VA Medical Center Director Alfred Montoya has been named the new director of VA Connecticut Healthcare System. In his new role, Montoya will oversee the delivery of health care to approximately 59,000 Veterans throughout Connecticut and southern New England beginning Oct. 13.

Hyperlink to Above

2.13 - New England Public Radio (Audio): VA Officials To Take 'Soft Approach' As Smoking Ban Begins (30 September, Kari Njiiri, Springfield, MA)
All Veterans Administration health facilities nationwide will officially become smoke-free as of October 1. VA officials in Massachusetts, however, say the policy will not be strictly enforced — for now. Cigarettes have been a big part of military culture since World War I. But faced with rising tobacco-related health care costs, the military has tried to discourage smoking.

Hyperlink to Above

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

2.14 - FEDweek: VA Understaffing Leading to Burnout, Higher Attrition, Panel Told (30 September, Glen Allen, VA)
Persistent understaffing at VA is raising issues with patient care at its medical centers and contributing to burnout among employees in other short-staffed occupations that in turn leads to higher attrition and still more severe shortfalls, GAO has said. In testimony before a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing, the GAO cited "large staffing shortages" at medical centers in positions including physicians, registered nurses…

Hyperlink to Above

2.15 - The Times-Picayune: Veterans Affairs Medical Center to enforce stricter, nationwide smoking ban Tuesday (30 September, Emily Woodruff, New Orleans, LA)
At the main entrance of the New Orleans Veterans Affairs Medical Center, a large white easel with the words "No Smoking" sits about 50 feet from a long line of benches where several veterans are perched with cigarettes. Starting October 1, those veterans will be asked to move completely off campus to smoke.

Hyperlink to Above

2.16 - KFBB (ABC-5): Drive-Thru Flu Clinic at Fort Harrison VA Medical Center (30 September, Black Eagle, MT)
The Montana VA will hold their 9th annual drive-thru flu clinic and health festival for Veterans on October 1st, from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in Parking lot A at the Fort Harrison VA Medical Center. Flu shots are free for enrolled Veterans. The County Health Department will also be available from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to provide flu vaccines for family members. Health insurance will be accepted, or cash options are available.

Hyperlink to Above'

3. Business Transformation

3.1 - WBZ (CBS-4, Video): New 'State-Of-The-Art' Veterans Clinic To Be Built In Worcester (30 September, 1.3M uvm; Boston, MA)
The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus. The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

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3.2 - The Republican: UMass Medical School building new $75M community-based VA outpatient clinic, to open in 2021 in Worcester (30 September, Melissa Hanson, 932k uvm; Springfield, MA)
A new state-of-the-art community-based outpatient clinic for veterans is planned to open in 2021 at UMass Medical School in Worcester, officials announced Monday. The clinic is planned to combine primary care and several medical specialties all in one facility, according to VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System and UMass Medical School.

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3.3 - Telegram & Gazette: **Veterans Administration to occupy new clinic on UMass Medical School campus** (30 September, Brad Petrishen, 408k uvm; Worchester, MA)
The Veterans Administration Monday announced the completion of a long-desired deal that will see a new, larger facility built for veterans' care on the campus of University of Massachusetts Medical School. "This is a day of celebration," U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, said at a news conference announcing the more than $70 million, 100,000-square-foot building, slightly more than half of which will be occupied by the VA.

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4. DOD Cooperation / Electronic Health Records / MISSION Act Implementation

4.1 - Politico: **DOJ cracks down on $2.1B genetic testing scam** (30 September, Mohana Ravindranath, 14.4M uvm; Arlington, VA)
The Open Source Electronic Health Record Alliance will continue its operations in October, despite failing to generate adequate funds from the VA, the group said last week. OSEHRA, a nonprofit established to improve and distribute the source code for VA's VistA EHR, hs struggled to sustain its operations, especially as the VA embarks on its massive Cerner implementation to replace VistA.

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4.2 - WEAU (NBC-13, Video): **Mission Act to forgive medical debt, expand health coverage** (30 September, Denton Postlewait, 204k uvm; Eau Claire, WI)
Along with the debt forgiveness, the policy would allow veterans to get care from providers outside VA facilities. This means veterans can get the care they need, even if a VA hospital doesn't offer it. "I think it's going to be more beneficial and help more veterans than the previous plan," said Chippewa County Veteran Services director, Travis Ludvigson.

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4.3 - Federal Computer Week: **Can a joint DOD-VA oversight body catch up with health record deployment?** (30 September, Adam Mazmanian, 45k uvm; Vienna, VA)
Last Thursday marked the one-year anniversary of a joint statement signed by Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie and then-Defense Secretary James Mattis to establish a governance process for the joint implementation of Cerner electronic health record software. The statement promised "an organizational structure that supports the delivery of a single, seamlessly integrated EHR that maximizes commercial health record interoperability" and "a detailed implementation timeline."

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5. Suicide Prevention

5.1 - Portland Press Herald: **Our View: Rise in suicide among veterans proves vexing** (30 September, Editorial Board, 725k uvm; Portland, ME)
It should be shocking that 48 Maine military veterans died by suicide in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Sadly, it is not. It's not surprising

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because, despite a dip to 30 in 2016, Maine has suffered an average of 43 such deaths a year since 2010, every one a tragedy.

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5.2 - WTSP (CBS-10, Video): 'Be There' program geared toward veterans in crisis (30 September, Jenny Dean, 554k uvm; Saint Petersburg, FL)
It's the last day of September, which is also suicide prevention month. Suicide is a public health issue that affects all Americans, especially veterans. The Veterans Administration is doing what it can to teach everyone how to 'be there' with a new campaign. Dr. Matt Miller is the acting director of Suicide Prevention for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.

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5.3 - WIBW (CBS-13, Video): Former MO Sec. of State inspires fellow veteran to pursue healing from PTSD (28 September, Marleah Campbell, 311k uvm; Topeka, KS)
Chuck Fox retired from a 20-year Air Force career in 2008. When he returned to civilian life, he noticed something was off. "I was in what I felt like what was one of the darkest holes I had ever been in in my life, and I didn't know how I was going to get out of there," Fox said Friday at the VA's Community Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Summit at the Dole Institute of Politics.

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5.4 - Maine Public: Federal Data: 48 Maine Veterans Died By Suicide In 2017 (30 September, Patty Wight, 49k uvm; Lewiston, ME)
Forty-eight veterans died by suicide in Maine in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs — a number that has held relatively steady for the past several years. The suicide prevention coordinator for Veterans Affairs in Maine, Tracy Charette, says a crisis line specifically for veterans is available, as is a warm line for family and friends seeking resources.

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6. Women Veterans / Homelessness / Benefits / Cemeteries

6.1 - CNN (Video): Trump moved by wounded veteran's performance (30 September, Betsy Klein, 131M uvm; Atlanta, GA)
It wasn't the 21-gun salute, a speech, or the pomp and circumstance that made Monday's Armed Forces Welcome Ceremony memorable, but rather, a musical performance by Army Captain Luis Avila. At the conclusion of a swearing-in ceremony for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, Avila, a wounded veteran, sang "God Bless America."

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6.2 - FOX News: Funeral service for veteran with no immediate family expected to draw crowd (30 September, Bradford Betz, 73.9M uvm; New York, NY)
A Florida funeral service for a veteran who had no immediate family members is nonetheless expected to draw a crowd. Naples resident Edward Pearson, a U.S. Army veteran who served from 1962 to 1964, died last month at the age of 80, according to the funeral home. The funeral

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home wrote that Pearson has “no immediate family” and invited the public to attend his Tuesday burial service with military honors at Sarasota National Cemetery.

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6.3 - Miami Herald (Video): **This veteran had no family to bury him. He won’t be laid to rest alone** (30 September, Mark Young, 7M uvm; Miami, FL)
It was a small obituary for Edward K. Pearson, 80, that appeared in a local newspaper recently. It simply said he was going to be interred at Sarasota National Cemetery on Tuesday and that, “This veteran has no immediate family and all are welcome to attend.” The obituary soon hit social media and the response has been overwhelming as hundreds of people who have never met Pearson are pledging to attend the veteran’s funeral.

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6.4 - Connecting Vets: **Congresswoman introduces bill to end 'epidemic' of harassment, sexual assault at VA** (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)
After a veteran and senior policy advisor on the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force said she was sexually assaulted at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center, a congresswoman has filed a bill to combat the issue. Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., on Monday introduced the Stop Harassment and Sexual Assault at VA Act, which would create a department-wide policy to stop "this epidemic of rampant" harassment and sexual assault Brownley says "too often occurs" at VA facilities nationwide.

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6.5 - Military Times: **Veterans benefits will see a cost-of-living bump this year, but how much?** (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)
Veterans will see a cost-of-living increase in their benefits payouts later this year, but it likely won’t be as big as the last one they received. Last week, President Donald Trump signed into law the annual Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, which guarantees that a host of veterans benefits will see the same annual boost as Social Security recipients.

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6.6 - Press-Telegram: **How Rock For Vets uses music to help veterans through the tough times** (30 September, Harry Saltzgaver, 117k uvm; Long Beach, CA)
Countless studies have shown the healing power of music. So when Frank and Katherine McIlquham and their friends started Rock For Vets in 2012, they knew they could make a difference in helping wounded veterans. “I got together with Jerry Salas,” Frank McIlquham said. “He’s with the band El Chicano, and he’s a Vietnam vet. We started a music program for the vets at the VA Hospital.”

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7. Other

7.1 - Forbes: **Christmas Comes In September, Not December, For Federal Contractors** (30 September, Adam Andrzejewski, 63.7M uvm; New York, NY)

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The largest federal agencies just completed a billion-dollar, year-end spending binge that likely exceeded $100 billion. Much of the excessive spending was waste. And every dime was borrowed, which added to our nation's $22.6 trillion national debt. It was the largest extravaganza of taxpayer abuse in U.S. government history. It just ended on September 30th – the feds fiscal year-end.

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7.2 - KHOU (CBS-11): Katy woman accused of defrauding VA of more than $600K (30 September, Chloe Alexander, 1.1M uvm; Houston, TX)
A Katy woman has been charged for allegedly defrauding the Department of Veterans Affairs of more than $600,000. A federal grand jury indicted Tammy Wilson, 49, on mail fraud, health care fraud and making a false statement relating to health care matters.

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1. Top Stories

1.1 - U.S. News & World Report (AP): Veterans Clinic Planned for UMass Medical School Campus (30 September, 23.3M uvm; Washington, DC)

WORCESTER, MASS. (AP) — The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus.

The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

It will replace a VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System facility on Lincoln Street in Worcester.

Ryan Lilly, director of the VA New England Healthcare System, said the announcement comes after years of hard work and planning to meet the needs of veterans in and around Worcester County.

John Collins, chief executive officer and director of VA Central Western Massachusetts, says combining primary care and medical specialties in one facility will improve access and the coordination of care.

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1.2 - Federal News Network: Why VA is scrapping a successful pilot in favor of Cerner's scheduling system (30 September, Nicole Ogrysko, 238k uvm; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs will implement a new, commercial, off-the-shelf patient scheduling system by 2025, two years later than VA originally advertised to Congress.

VA has chosen to implement a scheduling solution from Cerner, the same contractor that's spearheading its electronic health record modernization efforts, which the department said will mirror a similar, successful pilot it launched several years ago.

For VA, the decision to implement Cerner's scheduling solution just made financial and practical sense, especially as the department works to implement an electronic record that's interoperable across multiple spaces.

"Interoperability objectives … are more readily achieved by being on the same common solution. There is a cost to integrating platforms," John Windom, executive director of VA's Office of Electronic Health Record Modernization (OEHRM), said last week at a hearing on VA's scheduling system plans. "We paid for the Cerner licenses as part of the EHR contract. It made business sense to not duplicate that payment by installing another system."

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But Congress is still concerned VA is scrapping a successful scheduling pilot, which saw improved processing times, less overtime and less turnover among the department's patient appointment schedulers.

VA piloted the Medical Appointment Scheduling System (MASS), a commercial solution from Epic, at its medical facility in Columbus, Ohio, back in 2015.

That same facility in Columbus will pilot the new Cerner scheduling system. VA said it chose that site because its contract with Epic for the MASS pilot ends in June 2020, and the department needs to find and implement a new solution by that point.

"We have to integrate into an existing solution and minimize the disruption that takes place to our care provisions," Windom said. "This is a measure that minimizes that disruption."

Still, leadership on the House Veterans Affairs Technology Modernization Subcommittee said they had "serious reservations" about VA's "mid-flight" approach.

"Common business and management practice would dictate that VA would conduct an apples-to-apples comparison of off-the-shelf solutions, especially given the investment of resources and apparent success of the MASS pilot program," Susie Lee (D-Nevada), chairman of the House subcommittee, said. "Second, I wonder why none of this would have been done before proceeding with the Cerner scheduling solution implementation. It just seems a little backward to me."

VA has a long, storied history with this particular project. The department determined back in 2000 it needed to replace its aging Veterans Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA) scheduling system with a commercial product. VA spent $127 million over nine years to develop a replacement, but the project failed and the department had to start over.

It launched the VistA scheduling enhancement in 2014, which was supposed to be an interim upgrade until VA could find a more permanent replacement. But the department's effectively managed the project to make sure users' needs were met, the VA inspector general said.

A year later, VA awarded an indefinite-delivery, indefinite quantity contract for MASS for $624 million. That project was later downgraded to a pilot.

VA acknowledged the MASS pilot, which the department estimated it spent about $20 million on over the past few years, went well. The Cerner scheduling system, the department said, would achieve similar results.

The department, meanwhile, is still reviewing the estimated implementation costs for the new scheduling system. It will likely need to reallocate funds that have been set aside for later in the EHR modernization project lifecycle, but a specific plan hasn't been determined.

VA, however, was confident it could take the lessons it learned from the MASS pilot and apply them to Cerner's new scheduling solution.

"We have learned that it's critical to have the software implemented right," Michael Davies, senior adviser to the assistant deputy undersecretary for health access at the Veterans Health Administration, said. "We have teams doing site assessments, talking to the people that did the MASS contract in Columbus, the old contractor and connecting them with the new contractor to

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take advantage of the work that's already been done. Secondly, [for] the training of the schedulers, we're incorporating VA schedulers into the training going forward, because we learned how important it is to implement the new system in the VA environment."

Where's the FEHRM?
Subcommittee members seemed to accept the inevitably of VA's move to a Cerner scheduling system.

Rep. Jim Banks (R-Ind.), the subcommittee's ranking member, turned his attention to VA's broader EHR modernization efforts. He continued to raise his concerns about VA's cost estimates for the project, which he said haven't seemed to change as much as he'd think they would.

"OEHRM seems to have reacted to the subcommittee's oversight by zealously defending its funding," he said. "The cost estimate is still very much a black box. It is clear that the actual spending rate is trending further below the original projection. While that seems positive at first glance, OEHRM seems to have achieved it by shifting more costs on to other organizations within VA, and I intend to monitor that very closely."

It's been a year since both the Defense Department and the VA signed a joint memo of understanding recognizing the two agencies' common goal to achieve interoperable health records. Both departments were supposed to recharter their Interagency Program Office and rename it as the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization Office (FEHRM).

Banks and other lawmakers see this entity as critical, as both departments need to ensure their two EHRs are synchronized as they deploy them over the next decade. DoD and VA announced plans to established the FEHRM back in June but didn't give a timeline for the new office.

To date, the FEHRM isn't up and running, Banks said.

Windom said both departments are working together, even though they haven't stood up the official joint governance entity just yet. The two agencies had 27 joint decisions to make over the last two-to-three months, and DoD and VA made all but eight of them.

"That progress is fantastic," Windom said. "This is just the challenge of integrating two major agencies with differing methodologies in many cases. We have been moving progressively in the right direction. The FEHRM has been involved in that process in facilitating those. The evolution that you wanted to see I think is happening. It never happens as fast as you'd like, but I think it's happening."

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2. Improving Customer Service

2.1 - Connecting Vets: Two veterans, Navy spouse allegedly pretended to be disabled, defrauded VA for $820,000 (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)

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Three people from Maryland -- two of them veterans -- have been indicted on federal charges for allegedly stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.

Angela Marie Farr, 33, and Michael Vincent Pace, 39, both of Leonardtown, and Mary Francis Biggs, 62, of Lexington Park, were charged with conspiracy and theft of government property, the DoJ announced last week. Farr also was charged with "aggravated identity theft and Social Security fraud."

U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland Robert K. Hur, along with the FBI, VA and Social Security Administration announced the indictments Thursday.

According to the indictment, Farr organized a conspiracy where she sent false and fraudulent documents to VA claiming that her then-husband, Pace, and her father, were homebound and needed full-time help and disability benefits.

Farr's mother, Biggs, allegedly conspired with her to file the documents on behalf of her father. When Farr so exaggerated her father's disabilities that the VA determined he couldn't handle his own finances, the VA appointed Biggs his fiduciary -- or a person authorized to act on his behalf and receive his benefits.

But this wasn't the first time Farr allegedly committed VA fraud.

Farr is a Navy veteran who served from 2005-07. In 2009, Farr received a service-connected disability rating of 70 percent based on allegedly fake documents, which said she experienced post-traumatic stress disorder from an incident in which she said she was raped by a fellow service member.

But Farr allegedly told local law enforcement she made up the rape.

Farr also allegedly told the VA she experienced a traumatic brain injury during an on-duty car accident, "which was also determined to be a fabrication," according to the indictment.

Based on the false documents, the VA increased Farr's service-connected disability rating to 100 percent and she received about $390,000 in VA benefits she was not entitled to.

Farr is further accused of stealing the identity of a VA doctor when she submitted allegedly forged documents to the VA supposedly authored by that doctor. She also allegedly received about $35,000 in Social Security disability insurance benefits for her faked disabilities and has been charged with social security fraud.

Pace is an Army veteran and served from 2001-02, 2005-06 and in the Army National Guard in 2007.

Pace and Farr were married from 2008 until their divorce in 2017, the indictment says.

Pace was rated 100 percent disabled by VA based on allegedly faked medical documents submitted to VA.

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Though he claimed to be profoundly disabled, Pace also allegedly received a caregiver assistance stipend from VA of more than $2,500 each month for allegedly caring for Farr. As a result, Farr received about $274,000 in VA benefits he was not entitled to.

Biggs, the wife of a Navy veteran who served 1974-997, helped Farr fake her husband's 100-percent disability rating, the indictment says. As a result, Biggs and her husband received about $156,000 in disability benefits they were not entitled to.

Biggs further allegedly conspired with Farr to hide from VA the fact that her husband was able to work and was actively employed.

Farr, Pace and Bigg's husband all allegedly claimed to be wheelchair-bound and require in-home nursing for everyday tasks. But during that same time, the indictment says Farr operated a social media marketing company in Maryland, Pace raised three children and regularly exercised at a CrossFit gym and Bigg's husband was a division head at the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division in Maryland.

If convicted, Farr faces a mandatory minimum two years in federal prison and a maximum 10 years. Biggs and Pace face a maximum sentence of 10 years.

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2.2 - WTAE (ABC-4, Video): VA anti-smoking policy draws heat from veterans, VA employees (30 September, Paul Van Osdol, 2.1M uvm; Pittsburgh, PA)

A new anti-smoking policy at Veterans Administration facilities in Pittsburgh has area veterans and VA employees fired up.

The policy takes effect Tuesday. The VA says all tobacco products will be prohibited at their campuses, outpatient clinics and Vet Centers.

"It's a pretty bad situation and there are a lot of concerns," said Warren Park, a spokesman for the American Federation of Government Employees and the American Legion.

Park said he is particularly concerned about veterans with addiction or mental health issues being forced out of treatment because they cannot quit smoking.

"We have approximately 20 veterans a day committing suicide, and I would rather keep these guys from committing suicide," he said. "I'd give them a pack of cigarettes and work on that (smoking) problem later on down the line."

Action News Investigates obtained a copy of the VA anti-smoking policy. It says patients who violate the policy could be discharged from care and even face a federal court citation.

"There's going to be retaliation. A lot of these guys will be thrown out of the system. A lot of these guys will be leaving the system," Park said.

A VA spokesperson did not respond to multiple requests for comment about the smoking policy.

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The union representing VA employees has filed a grievance about the new policy, but that will not prevent it from taking effect on Tuesday.

UPDATE: The following statement by VA spokeswoman Christina Mandreucci was sent to Pittsburgh's Action News 4 on Monday night.

More than 4,000 non-VA health care facilities across the nation are already smoke free, and smoke-free policies begin to take effect at all VA health care facilities Oct. 1.

By Jan. 2020, these commonsense policies will be fully implemented for employees, patients, visitors, contractors, volunteers and vendors at all Veterans Health Administration facilities.

Three other national unions have already agreed to abide by these policies, which are being implemented regardless of AFGE's cooperation.

VA has extensive resources and programs to assist Veterans in their smoke-free journey. They can be found at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/.

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2.3 - Military Times: Will climate change hurt VA hospitals and programs? (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)

A pair of Democratic senators want Veterans Affairs officials to start better preparing for climate change, noting that extreme weather events have already disrupted operations at a host of department sites.

“VA, like all federal agencies, has finite resources and must balance competing budget priorities. However, those priorities must include adapting VA infrastructure and operations to climate risks,” Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Brian Schatz of Hawaii wrote in a letter to VA leadership today.

“Strengthening VA’s resilience to climate change is consistent with the agency’s mission to deliver timely, high-quality care and benefits to America’s veterans.”

The lawmakers are asking for a comprehensive evaluation of the department’s climate change preparation plans in the last five years, when officials in the last administration released reports on threats posed by future climate patterns to all government agencies.

They noted that VA has released several updates on efforts to operate environmentally-friendly facilities, but did not include how altered weather patterns and extreme storms could hurt existing locations.

“Natural disasters and extreme weather events have adversely affected VA infrastructure and operations at facilities across the country in recent years, including in Louisiana, Texas, New York, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Puerto Rico,” the letter stated.

Most of those referenced events are short-term closures of VA health facilities in the lead-up and aftermath of severe storms. Several Florida and North Carolina sites have had to

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temporarily close for repairs due to wind and water damage the senators argue are connected to global climate pattern changes.

In addition, VA officials were faced with significant supply and staffing issues in the wake of the category 4 hurricane that hit Puerto Rico in 2017.

Schatz, who is ranking member on the Senate Appropriations Committee's veterans panel, and Warren, who is running for president on a platform that includes more aggressive climate change policies, want to know how much those types of weather issues are being taken into account in new construction and how much past damage from storms has totaled in each of the last few fiscal years.

Similar requests have been made of Department of Defense planners and officials at other federal agencies as President Donald Trump's administration has worked to reverse or revoke a number of executive orders related to the issue, arguing they amounted to redundant or unapplicable work for the agencies.

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2.4 - KMOV (CBS-4, Video): Veteran fired for VA files suit alleging racial, disability discrimination (30 September, 904k uvm; Saint Louis, MO)

ST. LOUIS (KMOV.com) -- Eric Carter spent years fighting for his country. Monday, the Vietnam veteran is taking the next step in his two-year fight for equality.

Carter claims the VA medical center in St. Louis forced him out of a job, despite him working for them for nearly 10 years. He said they pushed him out due to his agoraphobia, an illness which gives him anxiety around large crowds.

"I feel like they thought if they forced me out I would just leave," Carter said. "I believe it's just harassment."

For eight years, Carter worked as the night-shift custodian with no issues, he said.

Then in July of 2016, he was given a letter asking him to switch buildings and move to a day shift.

Carter's doctor at the VA said he should only work the night shift due to his condition and when he explained this to his department head, he got nowhere.

"My doctor recommended I stay on the third shift, he in turn said 'I don't care what your doctor said,'" Carter recalled.

Rather than quit, Carter continued to show up for the scheduled night shifts he had worked for eight years.

"All I wanted to do was work," he said.

However, Carter said his boss sent him home each time he reported for work, meaning he wouldn't paid either.

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“He’ll tell the supervisor, ‘If he comes here send him home,’” said Carter of his department head. “‘If he doesn’t want to leave have VA police escort him off the premises.’”

Following a News 4 report in December of 2017, Carter was allowed to work one night shift, but that didn’t last long.

Six months later, Carter received a letter terminating his employment.

The letter cited unauthorized absences, failure to follow procedures and violation of uniform policies, all of which Carter denies.

Carter said he did not go AWOL on the days in question, but requested to take medical leave.

“Any time that I call in, it's for legit reasons,” he said.

Days ago, Carter and his attorney filed a 17-page lawsuit against the VA, claiming racial and disability discrimination. He said he’s hoping to get answers on why he was fired.

“All I wanted them to do at the time was to work my job the best that I could,” he said. “It’s the department that’s supposed to help you, and what they’re doing to me is totally wrong.”

News 4 reached out to the VA for comment, but have received no response.

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2.5 - KNBC (NBC-4): Former VA Employee Pleads Guilty to Gas and Vehicle Thefts (30 September, 837k uvm; Los Angeles, CA)

An Inglewood man pleaded guilty Monday to stealing a government vehicle and illegally charging more than $15,000 on federal government gas cards for fuel he then sold to friends at a discount while he was employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Kyle Sidney Freedman Flournoy, 35, entered his plea in Los Angeles federal court to a single count of conspiracy to steal government property, which carries a possible five-year maximum prison sentence. U.S. District Judge Virginia A. Phillips set a Dec. 16 sentencing hearing.

Flournoy stole a VA vehicle and rented it out to associates -- including gang members -- for $30 in 2013, court documents state.

He also admitted unlawfully using 11 different federal government gas cards over the course of several weeks to charge more than $15,000 in gasoline.

Flournoy gave the fuel to others who paid him 60 cents on the dollar, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

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2.6 - WJHG (NBC-7, Video): The VA thought one local veteran was dead; he's still alive
(30 September, Olivia Michael, 318k uvm; Panama City, FL)

LYNN HAVEN, Fla. (WJHG/WECP) - In July, Richard Johnson passed away at the age of 57... or at least that's what the Department of Veterans Affairs believed.

"I was declared deceased without a death certificate. I don't know how that happens but that's what happened," said Army Veteran Richard Johnson.

The truth is, Johnson is very much alive, but for about a month, he was dead in the eyes of the VA.

"My wife was diagnosed with colorectal cancer. She battled that fight for just over three years and she finally succumbed to the cancer on July 7th of 2019," said Johnson.

That's when condolence letters arrived from the VA, but they were addressed to the wrong person.

Johnson said, "One was addressed to my wife, Martha, who's already deceased and one was addressed to the estate of Richard Johnson--myself."

His children also received letters about their father's death.

"I got this letter in the mail this weekend that says 'Dear Miss Thomas, we at the Defense, Finance and Accounting Service Cleveland Center are sincerely sorry to learn of the death of your father,'" said his daughter Jamie Thomas as she read from a letter she received.

Johnson called the VA about once a week to check his status in their system with no luck. To them he was considered dead; erased from existence.

"I did not receive my disability entitlement for September so I called once again, explained to them that I have no other income, this is my income. I get paid disability, and I get paid my retirement," he said.

Unsure if he'd receive back-pay for September, Johnson tried to refinance a loan at his local bank only to learn it too had marked him in the system as being dead.

"The social security office was also showing me as deceased, so not only was I deceased in the VA, now I'm deceased in Bank of America, I'm deceased in Social Security," said Johnson.

It took about a month before the mistake was corrected, but Johnson is still waiting for his checks. Meanwhile, bills are piling up, and this mistake it taking its toll.

Johnson said, "I believe I ought to be compensated for the many hours that I've spent trying to fix my situation and driving to these different locations and having to prove that I'm not dead."

The VA sent us a statement saying, “Any time a Veteran or family member has concerns, we reach out to them directly, just as we have done with the Veteran in this case. The error made in this instance is in the process of being resolved and the Veteran will be receiving his payment soon. VA has apologized to the Veteran for this mistake and any inconvenience it may have caused.”

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But for Johnson, the damage is already done.

"I'm not the deceased person here. Sorry...," he said tearfully. "I'm just trying to finalize my wife's affairs the best I can and now I have to finalize my affairs and it's not fair."

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2.7 - Government Executive: Lawmakers Look to Ban 'Bribes' Federal Unions Use to Recruit New Members (30 September, Eric Katz, 250k uvm; Washington, DC)

House Republicans are looking to prevent federal employee unions from offering prospective new members incentive payments to join, equating the discounted rates to a “bribe.”

The VA Workplace Integrity Act (H.R. 4503) would apply only to the Veterans Affairs Department, preventing its secretary from entering into a collective bargaining agreement that offers “financial incentives to prospective members.” The American Federation of Government Employees, however, which represents most VA employees, said the program that prompted the bill is merely a discount it sometimes offers to solicit new members.

The incentives typically come in the form of a check from the union local in the new employee’s workplace, said Andrew Huddleston, an AFGE spokesman, referring to the payments as a rebate program. AFGE runs the initiative at agencies across government on an intermittent basis as determined by its specific councils. The rebate comes from their dues payment once all their union paperwork is completed.

“They’ve got a characterization here that is sort of strange to me,” Huddleston said.

Rep. Neal Dunn, R-Fla., who introduced the bill, said the rebates create an undue influence that pressures new employees to join the union.

“Manipulating new federal employees at the VA to join a union with a $100 bribe as they walk in the door is unethical,” Dunn said. “Federal employees should have the freedom to choose whether or not they join a union and participate in union activities on their own accord.”

Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., the top Republican on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, where VA employees first voiced concerns about the incentive payments, called the offering of $100 rebates of dues during employee orientation a “shocking” practice that amounted to “financial manipulation to strong-arm” employees. Dunn last week wrote a letter to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie asking for more information about the practice and for a general counsel ruling on its legality.

Huddleston said the rebates were intended only to make membership more accessible to employees who may otherwise face a financial burden in paying their dues. He equated the practice to an organization like the AARP offering a temporary 20% discount on its dues to recruit new members. He also accused lawmakers of deflecting from a more pressing issue of vacancies at VA, which currently total about 49,000.

J. David Cox, AFGE national president, said committee Republicans were wasting time.

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"Every American who buys groceries, makes a big purchase, or joins an organization with monthly fees understands how discounts and rebates work," Cox said. "When so much important work needs to be done for our nation's veterans, this type of nakedly political activity is a truly shameful distraction."

He added that doing "actual, substantive oversight work" and tackling the vacancies issue would "actually help some of our nation's veterans."

The VA inspector general issued a report on Monday that found 96% of Veterans Health Administration facilities maintain at least one "severe occupational staffing shortage," with a lack of qualified applicants and non-competitive salary as the two most common reasons for the shortfalls.

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2.8 - WJHL (CBS-11, Video): VA smoking ban begins Tuesday. Medical Center Director said efforts directed to help vets, staff quit smoking. (30 September, Jessica Fuller, 92k uvm; Johnson City, TN)

Tuesday, Mountain Home Veterans Affairs will join 4,000 other facilities across the country and ban smoking from all campuses.

All types of smoking and vaping will be prohibited on campus including cigarettes, pipes, cigars and any type of electronic cigarette on campus. The ban does not include smokeless tobacco.

Mountain Home Medical Center Director Dean Borsos said part of the goal is to point veterans, VA faculty and staff toward quitting smoking by offering different smoking cessation programs and support.

"We'll encourage them to participate in other activities, increasing their exercise levels, other things that would help lead them to a healthier lifestyle," he said Monday.

The move also aims to reduce secondhand and thirdhand smoke on the VA campus, according to the VA website.

Thirdhand smoke, according to Mayo Clinic, is leftover nicotine and other chemicals on indoor surfaces left by tobacco smoke. Thirdhand smoke tends to cling to furniture, clothes, drapes, walls, bedding, carpet, dust and vehicles after smoking has stopped, Mayo Clinic says, and can lead to tobacco-related health problems for children and non-smoking adults.

The VA will be closing previously-designated smoking areas, Borsos said, and smoking won't be allowed anywhere on campus, including parking lots.

He said veterans, faculty and staff will have access to ongoing support to quit smoking, and that's at the backbone of the move to ban smoking on campus.

"We're hoping that with the right caring and nurturing of people who are currently having issues, we can help them quit," he said, adding,
"One day, folks will look back and this won't be an afterthought, that everybody will believe that having a smoke-free campus is the right way to do it."

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2.9 - Parkersburg News and Sentinel: Fifth person identified in VA med center deaths (1 October, Jess Mancini, 83k uvm; Parkersburg, WV)

A fifth veteran who died under suspicious circumstances last year at the Veterans Administration hospital in Clarksburg was identified by USA Today.

William Alfred “Sport” Holloway, 96, of Fairmont died on April 8, 2018, while at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center, the newspaper said.

An investigation is underway at the medical center where authorities are investigating the deaths of possibly 10 veterans who died around the same time under similar suspicious circumstances of hypoglycemia, or severe low blood sugar. The deaths were first reported in August.

Holloway’s family was contacted by Veterans Administration investigators in the fall last year for permission to exhume the body, USA Today said. The autopsy showed he had hypoglycemic events, but the family believed Holloway, who was a diabetic and was on insulin, died of sepsis, the newspaper said.

“There is no natural cause that would explain this profound degree of (persistent) hypoglycemia,” the autopsy said, according to the newspaper. The low blood sugar “is strongly suspicious” because he was given an unprescribed dose of insulin, but the autopsy said the cause of death was undetermined, the newspaper said.

Members of the Holloway family couldn’t be reached for comment by The Parkersburg News and Sentinel. Attorneys representing the families of other veterans were unfamiliar with Holloway.

Michael Nacincik, the public affairs officer for the Department of Veterans Affairs, referred The News and Sentinel to the statements released in August by the Inspector General and the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of West Virginia.

Holloway served in the United States Army.

The first disclosure there were a number of veterans dying under suspicious circumstances at the medical center was in a notice of claim to the Veterans Administration filed by Melanie Proctor of Ellenboro for the April 9, 2018, death of her father, Felix K. McDermott, 82. The notice said investigators believe nine or 10 other veterans may have died under similar suspicious means and they had a person of interest in the deaths.

An autopsy performed on McDermott showed he died from hypoglycemia from an unprescribed injection of insulin. The medical examiner determine the death was a homicide.

Archie Dail Edgell, 84, who lived most of his life in Doddridge County, died on March 26, 2018. George Nelson Shaw Jr., 81, died April 10, 2018, also from hypoglycemia. John Hallman, 87, died on June 13, 2018.

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The deaths are under investigation by the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of West Virginia, the FBI and the independent Office of the Inspector General in the Veterans Administration. Dr. Glenn Snider, director of the medical center, said the person of interest is no longer at the facility.

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2.10 - The Register-Herald: VA inspector general says VA medical centers failed to perform required opioid checks (30 September, Jessica Farrish, 69k uvm; Beckley, WV)

The Veterans Administration Medical Center in Beckley is among those in the nation which failed to perform required opioid database checks for patients who were being prescribed opioids, a study by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Attorney General found in a report released in September.

The report found that in six VA facilities from April 1, 2017, to March 31, 2018, VA clinicians failed 73 percent of the time to enter a patient's name into an electronic database that tracks controlled substance prescriptions.

The goal of the program is to reduce prescription drug abuse and diversion, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

In Beckley, clinicians did not check the database in 53 percent of the cases, compared to 93 percent at a VA in Texas and 43 percent at a VA in Dayton, Ohio.

The audit estimated that about 19 percent of VA patients were placed at risk of having care coordination and management problems because clinicians did not run a query with a state database to discover if a veteran had obtained a controlled substance prescription from a non-VA pharmacy.

The report stated that the Veterans Health Administration lacks an "effective control system to monitor and evaluate" the performance of the drug monitoring program queries as part of the Opioid Safety Initiative, which the VA had launched in 2013 to help the VA manage pain in veterans while limiting the risks associated with opioids.

U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin expressed frustration with the report's findings and suggested that more stringent oversight is needed by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

"The VA is the first line of defense when it comes to protecting, preventing and treating our veterans who are struggling with opioid use disorder," Manchin said. "That's why it's an outrage that a VA facility in West Virginia was found by the VA's OIG to have not consistently used the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program databases, which are there to save lives and are designed to make sure doctors do not overprescribe opioids to a patient.

"I have continuously asked the Secretary of the VA if this system was working and he repeatedly assured me that it's effective," added Manchin. "The bottom line is that the VA has failed to fully train providers and enforce policies that Congress has created to prevent the spread of the opioid crisis.

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"Apparently, as a member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, we need to increase our oversight to ensure that the VA can do its job."

The VA OIG report showed that some local policies differed from national policy, contributing to a breakdown in the Opioid Safety Initiative. A second contributing factor was inadequate training and communication breakdowns.

In light of the study, the VA OIG recommended that VA clinicians increase their use of state prescription drug monitoring programs and that there should be increased oversight of VA health care facilities.

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2.11 - Muskogee Phoenix: VA hospital addresses inspector general's findings (28 September, Chesley Oxendine, 14k uvm; Muskogee, OK)

A report published this past week by Office of the Inspector General about the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System makes multiple recommendations for improvement — Director Mark Morgan hopes to have addressed all of them by December.

"We've already started the performance improvement as early as December (2018)-January time frame, well before the report was released," Morgan said. "We're quite optimistic by December of this year we'll have six months of meeting of the standard that we can submit to the OIG for review."

The inspection focused on eight areas of care: leadership and organization risks; quality, safety and value; medical staff privileging; environment of care; medication management; mental health; geriatric care; and women's health. Findings were drawn from what inspectors found during an unannounced visit on Dec. 10, 2018.

Inspectors found problems with medical staff privileging, environment of care, mental health, geriatric care, and women's health. Included in OIG's report were 11 recommendations addressing those five areas of concern.

"I see these recommendations as opportunities for us to stay focused and improve," Morgan said.

The first three recommendations address medical staff privileging, which the OIG identifies as issues related to the evaluation of practitioners working under the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System umbrella. The Veteran's Health Administration specifically "requires ongoing monitoring of privileged practitioners."

While "the OIG found there was general compliance with requirements for privileging," there was "evidence that solo practitioners were not evaluated by providers with similar training." The OIG also found "time limits were not delineated in the focused professional practice evaluation process, and providers were not notified of FPPEs for cause."

"Activities such as periodic chart review, direct observation, monitoring of diagnostic and treatment techniques, or discussion with other individuals involved in the care of patients can be included into the ongoing monitoring process," the VA's OIG team states in the report. "Data

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must be service and practitioner specific, reliable, easily retrievable, timely, justifiable, comparable, and risk adjusted where appropriate."

The OIG report also identifies problems with reporting and communication in addition to ensuring practitioners were evaluated by providers with similar training.

"We had some weaknesses in the timeliness and documentation and back and forth," Morgan said. "We already have three corrective actions underway in improving our practice evaluations."

The environment of care recommendation comes from an instance in which the OIG inspection turned up corrugated cardboard boxes shelved with clean and sterile supplies in five patient units, the report states.

"We've done some additional training on that," Morgan said. "We also saw this as an opportunity to reach out and confirm with the commission the standards on shipping packaging. We don't know where that box was before it got there, so that's why we removed the cardboard packaging."

The OIG's inspection of the system's mental health care — specifically with regard to victims of military sexual trauma — fell short in three areas, according to the report.

"The OIG noted concerns with the lack of (1) communication of MST services and initiatives to facility leadership, (2) tracking and monitoring MST-related data, and (3) completion of training by providers that warranted recommendations for improvement," the report reads.

Morgan said corrective actions were underway for all three recommendations. He said his staff is on tract to meet the October target date for completion of the corrective steps taken in compliance with recommendations included in the the OIG's report.

Two weaknesses identified by OIG regarding the provision of geriatric care include educating patients about their medications -- specifically in relation to antidepressants -- and keeping accurate patient health records to avoid unwanted medication interactions or similar problems.

Morgan said those two issues were being corrected as well.

The OIG made issued two final recommendations related to women's care in the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System: ensuring that the Women Veterans Health Committee includes all required members, and that the committee reports quarterly to the Medical Executive Committee.

Morgan said these recommendations were considered especially important in light of an 8.8 percent increase in the number of women who receive care from the system as veterans.

"They identified a weakness in making sure the team's reporting structure was clearly laid out," Morgan said. "Great find, a great catch -- it was a weakness in terms of the oversight and proper reporting, and we're already making corrective actions."

Morgan said his team welcomed the recommendations and the report as an additional "checkpoint" for improving their standard of care.

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"We take their input very seriously and see that as a potential opportunity to improve," Morgan said. "As a director of those facilities, this is an additional tool for me for making sure we're on track."

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2.12 - Business NH Magazine: Manchester VA Director Accepts Post in Connecticut (30 September, 3k uvm; Manchester, NH)

Manchester VA Medical Center Director Alfred Montoya has been named the new director of VA Connecticut Healthcare System. In his new role, Montoya will oversee the delivery of health care to approximately 59,000 Veterans throughout Connecticut and southern New England beginning Oct. 13.

Montoya was appointed to lead the Manchester facility following whistleblower complaints detailed in a special investigation by the Boston Globe. Business NH Magazine examined the turnaround under his leadership. (https://www.businessnhmagazine.com/article/new-leadership-gets-manchester-va-on-track)

Montoya joined the VA in 2009 and served in various leadership positions of increasing responsibility including Assistant Director, VA Connecticut HCS; Director, White River Junction VA Medical Center, and Manchester VA Medical Center. Montoya is also an Assistant Professor of Medicine at the Geisel School of Medicine, Dartmouth College.

U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) called Montoya's work in NH extraordinary service. "It can't be overstated how instrumental Director Montoya has been to changing the culture of the Manchester and White River Junction facilities, and improving care to the men and women who have served our country," says Shaheen.

In Manchester, he took over as director under very difficult circumstances, yet was able to immediately begin implementing successful reforms to operations and treatment delivery. While I'm greatly disappointed that he will no longer be leading the Manchester VA, I know his leadership and experience will improve care for veterans wherever he is called to serve. Director Montoya is an exemplary public servant and I wish him the very best in his next endeavor."

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2.13 - New England Public Radio (Audio): VA Officials To Take 'Soft Approach' As Smoking Ban Begins (30 September, Kari Njiiri, Springfield, MA)

All Veterans Administration health facilities nationwide will officially become smoke-free as of October 1. VA officials in Massachusetts, however, say the policy will not be strictly enforced — for now.

Cigarettes have been a big part of military culture since World War I. But faced with rising tobacco-related health care costs, the military has tried to discourage smoking.

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Andrew McMahon is acting director of the VA health care system in central and western Massachusetts. He said about 13 percent of the 8,000 veterans who use the main medical center in Northampton are smokers, and frequently visit the designated smoking shelters.

Andrew McMahon, VA: We have decided up here to keep our smoking shelters operational and approach the veterans in there – not with our police handing out tickets for smoking, but we're going to have our nurses and other liaisons from our staff just trying to encourage veterans to take advantage of our smoking cessation programs, and some of our other more healthy activities, like QiGong or yoga and mindfulness.

Kari Njiiri, NEPR: How are you going to convince them to do that?

This is a soft closing for us, so we're going to do our best to convince them. Of course, that's not going to work for everybody. But there is going to be a time at some future date where the smoking shelters will no longer exist, and we will just try to enforce – in an as nice and soft a way as we can – no smoking on the grounds.

This ban also applies to employees.

It does. So we have four unions on this campus. Three of them have agreed to the smoking ban, and one of them we are still in negotiation with. So they will really take effect in the end of December, we believe, as a target date for that negotiation.

So the ban for employees is going to be different. It's not going to commence on October 1?

We are not going to enforce it for anybody until the end of December. We are just trying to encourage people not to smoke in that time as we transition.

For both employees, as well as veterans?

That's correct.

What's been the reaction from folk?

Well, to me personally, they just ask how I think it's going to go. But I know there's some some grumbling there, and some people are going to be very hard to convince to adhere to the rule of "no smoking" on the campus.

And that's why we're really trying to take an outreach and soft approach. Our police are not going to be the ones engaging in the outreach; it's going to be clinical people. And we're going to really just try, from that approach, to be as cooperative and engaging as we can with these gentlemen and ladies.

Yeah, because this is quite a change of culture, no?

It is. It's a big change for us. And it's going to be a big effort on our part to see this through to a successful point, we believe.

What happens come January 1, and you still find people smoking? I mean, how long will the soft approach continue?

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I think that this is going to take years to change a culture. I envision the soft approach for as long as we are going to target this population, and reduce the smoking population in veterans.

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2.14 - FEDweek: VA Understaffing Leading to Burnout, Higher Attrition, Panel Told (30 September, Glen Allen, VA)

Persistent understaffing at VA is raising issues with patient care at its medical centers and contributing to burnout among employees in other short-staffed occupations that in turn leads to higher attrition and still more severe shortfalls, GAO has said.

In testimony before a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing, the GAO cited "large staffing shortages" at medical centers in positions including physicians, registered nurses, physician assistants, psychologists, and physical therapists, and "high attrition, increased workload, and burnout" among HR positions, for example.

It said that VA suffers a vacancy rate of about 11 percent in its Veterans Health Administration, including vacancies of more than 24,000 medical and dental positions alone. Department-wide, the latest vacancy figure is 49,000.

GAO said that the problems in part reflect the government's general challenges to recruit, retain, and develop workers, including "outmoded position classification and pay systems, ineffective recruiting and hiring processes and challenges in dealing with poor performers." However, others relate to VA's own problems such as a lack of a "modern and effective performance management system." It added that many recommendations of prior reports still have not been carried out, including that the VA develop a process to accurately count all physicians providing care at each VA medical center.

Meanwhile, the VA inspector general testified that the department has "chronic healthcare professional shortages since at least 2015," with 138 of 140 facilities reporting they have shortages in the medical officer occupational series and 108 in the nurse occupational series. Noncompetitive salaries are a "particular issue" which the VA is attempting to address with incentive and student debt repayment programs, but there is high turnover among high-performance staff with "follow-on impacts, as remaining staff became burned out from working overtime to cover existing vacancies."

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2.15 - The Times-Picayune: Veterans Affairs Medical Center to enforce stricter, nationwide smoking ban Tuesday (30 September, Emily Woodruff, New Orleans, LA)

At the main entrance of the New Orleans Veterans Affairs Medical Center, a large white easel with the words "No Smoking" sits about 50 feet from a long line of benches where several veterans are perched with cigarettes.

Starting October 1, those veterans will be asked to move completely off campus to smoke. A nationwide smoking ban will be implemented at all veteran's affairs facilities, including the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, which includes eight clinics serving 23

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parishes. Smoking has not been permitted at the new VA in New Orleans since it opened in 2016, but tighter regulations mean veterans waiting to be picked up will have to take their cigarettes elsewhere.

Will Whitcomb, 55, is one of those veterans. Waiting for a cab on Monday, his raised his eyebrows at the news that smoking wouldn't be allowed on the benches. After serving in the military for 11 years and touring in Iraq, he said that he wishes he could quit, but smoking offers a reprieve.

"It's kind of a crutch," said Whitcomb, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. "It keeps my mind occupied."

The ban represents a culture shift in the VA system, which has allowed for "smoking shelters" where patients could light up inside many hospitals.

"I remember when I started in the VA and they used to sell cigarettes in the retail store," said Fernando Rivera, the director of Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, who started working at the VA in the 1980s.

Rivera said the ban is not so much about policing and penalizing veterans and VA employees, but rather changing behavior and culture over time.

"When we stopped selling cigarettes a long time ago there was a tremendous outcry," he recalled. "Now, there would be an outcry if we sold them."

According to Sonia Duffy, a professor at Ohio State University's College of Nursing and researcher at the Department of Veterans Affairs Ann Arbor Healthcare System, smoking bans do work.

"It's a good thing," she said. "I think veterans will benefit. Every time you institute another layer of a smoking ban, you do see more people quitting."

While the New Orleans hospital may have an easier time enforcing the ban because the new building has never had the climate-controlled smoking shacks, veterans do smoke directly outside the building and in their cars on the campus. A few have used e-cigarettes in the building.

"We'll have people who hide cigarettes, who are nervous about coming to the hospital," said Rivera. "It will require constant vigilance, reporting and educating. But our [ban] will be more of a reminder."

A history of tobacco promotion

Cigarettes were included with military rations until 1975.

"We used to have a butt can in the barracks," said Stephen Rizzo, a Vietnam veteran who was drafted in 1967. "There was no such thing as a no-smoking area," said the 71-year-old as he took a drag from a cigarette outside the VA hospital on Monday.

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Rizzo didn't know about the impending ban. "It's a good idea," he said. "That's their privilege to [enforce] that. But I saw a whole lot of cigarette butts on the ground here, so I thought it was OK," he said, pointing to a patch of grass outside the VA entrance.

Veterans have a higher incidence of smoking than the general population. Compared to those who have never served in the military, veterans smoke at double the rate—29% compared to 14%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Smoking has profound effects on health. Over 80% of lung cancer patients are current or former smokers. Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S.

"Smoking just affects you systemically," said Duffy. "It can give you more hip fractures; it can give you bladder cancer."

But for people like Rizzo and Whitcomb, the ban highlights the need for a smoking alternative for veterans accustomed to the habit.

Whitcomb, who was also a fireman for 15 years, thinks the ban is the right thing to do. But he and other veterans point to a long history of smoking culture within the military as a roadblock for many patients who are accustomed to being able to walk outside to seek the relief of a cigarette.

Rizzo was a trucker after serving in the military. He would go through two or three packs a day to keep calm. "It's nerve-wracking driving down the street pulling a forty-foot trailer," he said. "I can't do without it."

The VA offers free smoking cessation programs to veterans and employees, but both Rizzo and Whitcomb said nicotine patches were not a substitute that worked for them. Whitcomb tried an e-cigarette a few months ago, but it didn't stick.

To change behavior, Rivera said the VA plans on pushing education more than penalizing.

"You can catch more flies with honey," he said. "My mother smoked three packs per day. I know how difficult it is to change that behavior. But it was the best thing to do for patients and staff."

The ban covers the grounds, parking lots and visiting cars. It extends to cigars, pipes and e-cigarettes and other vaping devices.

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2.16 - KFBB (ABC-5): Drive-Thru Flu Clinic at Fort Harrison VA Medical Center (30 September, Black Eagle, MT)

FORT HARRISON – The Montana VA will hold their 9th annual drive-thru flu clinic and health festival for Veterans on October 1st, from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in Parking lot A at the Fort Harrison VA Medical Center.

Flu shots are free for enrolled Veterans. The County Health Department will also be available from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to provide flu vaccines for family members. Health insurance will be accepted, or cash options are available.

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Health and wellness information will be available as part of the Fall Health Fest. Veterans and their family will be able to ask Montana VA health care professionals techniques on feeling better so they can enjoy the things they love for years to come.

“They have given us great feedback, that it's a lot more convenient,” says Katie Temple, a registered nurse.“They don't have to find a parking spot; they don't have to walk into the clinic and wait a few minutes for a nurse to give it. They can actually just get their flu shot and get some great health information and be on their way.”

Temple says between employee’s, family members and Veterans, they gave out 842 flu shots last year and are hoping to beat that this year as they have every year. She says they have many veterans who mark their calendar for the annual event.

For Veterans wanting a flu shot, but aren't able to attend the drive-thru clinic, they are asked to please contact their local VA clinic to inquire about dates and times that flu shots will be available. The Billings VA location will also be doing a walk-in clinic for Veterans.

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3. Business Transformation

3.1 - WBZ (CBS-4, Video): New ‘State-Of-The-Art’ Veterans Clinic To Be Built In Worcester
(30 September, 1.3M uvm; Boston, MA)

WORCESTER (CBS/AP) — The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus.

The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

It will replace a VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System facility on Lincoln Street in Worcester.

Ryan Lilly, director of the VA New England Healthcare System, said the announcement comes after years of hard work and planning to meet the needs of veterans in and around Worcester County.

John Collins, chief executive officer and director of VA Central Western Massachusetts, says combining primary care and medical specialties in one facility will improve access and the coordination of care.

“This large-scale, state-of-the-art veteran health care and education facility will support a growing veteran population and train future providers to ensure exceptional health care for those who served,” Collins said in a statement. “The new clinic, by combining primary care and numerous medical specialties in one facility, will improve the coordination of care and access for

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the veterans we serve in Worcester County and the surrounding region, which has long experienced the largest growth needs."

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3.2 - The Republican: UMass Medical School building new $75M community-based VA outpatient clinic, to open in 2021 in Worcester (30 September, Melissa Hanson, 932k uvm; Springfield, MA)

A new state-of-the-art community-based outpatient clinic for veterans is planned to open in 2021 at UMass Medical School in Worcester, officials announced Monday.

The clinic is planned to combine primary care and several medical specialties all in one facility, according to VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System and UMass Medical School.

A project totaling between $70 and $75 million, the facility will be located on the Route 9 corridor of the UMass campus in Worcester, overlooking Lake Quinsigamond. The medical school will construct the building and the VA will rent two floors in a longterm lease, officials said.

The clinic is planned to occupy 53,000 square feet on the first two levels of the new, four-story clinical building. That building is a total of 100,000 square feet, according to a news release.

UMass Medical School Chancellor Michael F. Collins said he has been pushing for the clinic for more than five years, after seeing a report that indicated veterans in Central Massachusetts did not have enough services in the region.

Collins, working with the federal government in attempts to plan to the clinic, was told "no" several times, he recalled after a Monday press conference.

"I just wasn't going to take no for answer," Collins said.

It's also personal for Collins, who mentors a few young men in the military and whose father was treated at the VA.

The clinic will have a major impact on Central Massachusetts veterans and their families, as they will no longer have to make an hour-long drive to Boston or Northampton for medical care.

Inside the clinic, there will be 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms designed for patient-aligned care teams. There will also be specialty care, like radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy, a clinical lab and a pharmacy, officials said.

At the clinic, there will be 270 parking spaces dedicated for VA patients and staff, the news release read.

"This large-scale, state-of-the-art Veteran health care and education facility will support a growing Veteran population and train future providers to ensure exceptional health care for those who served," said John P. Collins, the chief executive officer and director of VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System. "The new clinic, by combining primary care and numerous medical specialties in one facility, will improve the coordination of care and access for

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the Veterans we serve in Worcester County and the surrounding region, which has long experienced the largest growth needs."

In fiscal 2019, the current Worcester community-based outpatient clinic completed more than 36,000 appointments with more than 9,000 veteran patients.

Medical students will be able to practice and learn at the facility.

"Many medical schools do not have the privilege or luxury of being tightly linked with a veterans affairs hospital or clinic. And, yet, if you ask providers who have had that experience they will tell you there is no greater experience that they have ever had than being able to serve in that capacity by caring for our veterans," said Anne Larkin, the senior associate dean for educational affairs at UMass Medical School and a Navy veteran, whose roles included ship surgeon on the U.S.S. George Washington, an aircraft carrier.

Site preparation will begin late this year and the project is planned to be completed in mid-2021 as a LEED Silver certified building.

This new building will replace the VA's current facility on Lincoln Street, officials said.

A specialty clinic at 377 Plantation St., which opened in 2016 to treat patients requiring podiatry, audiology and optometry services, will remain at its current site.

Officials say plans for the clinic are because of collaboration by the VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System, UMass Medical School, Congressman James McGovern, current and former governors Charlie Baker and Deval Patrick and the state legislature.

"Strengthening and expanding access to healthcare for our veterans is one of the most important ways our nation can honor their service," said McGovern, a Worcester Democrat. "When I talk with veterans at meetings and town halls, this is the kind of facility they want. It is going to make a world of difference for folks in central Massachusetts who can now get more of the care they need right here in Worcester."

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3.3 - Telegram & Gazette: Veterans Administration to occupy new clinic on UMass Medical School campus (30 September, Brad Petrishen, 408k uvm; Worchester, MA)

The Veterans Administration Monday announced the completion of a long-desired deal that will see a new, larger facility built for veterans' care on the campus of University of Massachusetts Medical School.

"This is a day of celebration," U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, said at a news conference announcing the more than $70 million, 100,000-square-foot building, slightly more than half of which will be occupied by the VA.

The path to a facility to replace the VA's roughly 25,000 square-foot clinic at 605 Lincoln St. has been a rough one. Numerous politicians, including McGovern and then-Gov. Deval Patrick, trumpeted a much-hoped-for 100,000-square-foot clinic to be built at UMass at a Veterans Day press conference in 2014, but the plan was scrapped by the federal government in 2015.

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Administrators at the time cited legal issues as the reason – the plan was announced as a first-of-its kind partnership between the VA and UMass – but said they would forge ahead with plans to site a smaller, 40,000-square-foot facility at either UMass or 222 Brooks St.

As announced Monday, the VA will get 53,000 square feet in the new building, which UMass will build for $70 million to $75 million and lease to the VA. The new space will bring the total square footage for the VA in Worcester to 66,000 - more than double the amount local veterans had at this time in 2014.

The positive change is one of several at the VA of Central Western Massachusetts in the past five years under Director John P. Collins, who retired Monday after assuming the post in 2014.

“Your presence will be missed,” Francisco Urena, state secretary for Veterans’ Services, told Collins, who said afterward that more veterans are signing up for services for the first time here than any other location in New England.

Monday’s announcement furthers a partnership UMass and the VA have been building for years.

The VA in 2016 cut the ribbon on a 13,000-square-foot specialty care annex at UMass Medical School that brought audiology services to Worcester for the first time. That complex, which also offers podiatry and optometry, will remain at 377 Plantation St., officials said.

The new facility, projected to open in 2021 at 403 Belmont St., will offer 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, a clinical lab, a pharmacy and specialty care such as radiology, echocardiology and physical/occupational therapy.

There will be 270 parking spaces dedicated for VA patients and staff.

“The new clinic, by combining primary care and numerous medical specialties in one facility, will improve the coordination of care and access for the veterans we serve in Worcester County and the surrounding region, which has long experienced the largest growth needs,” John Collins said in prepared remarks.

VA leaders termed the announcement as a “critical step” for its presence in New England that will “greatly improve future delivery of care” for veterans in the region.

Speakers Monday noted that the development, especially after the setback in 2015, was far from a sure thing.

John Collins and multiple others thanked UMass Medical School’s chancellor, Dr. Michael F. Collins, for never giving up on the goal.

“This was going to happen,” Michael Collins said after the conference. “I wasn’t going to stop until it happened.”

The chancellor said the amount of space the VA will have in the new clinic is about the same as it would have had under the original 2014 plan.

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A mentor for several veterans, he said he felt passionately about improving the local care afforded those who serve the country.

The T&G in 2014 reported that the VA Central Western Massachusetts system had some of the longest wait times in the country, at which time officials pledged to improve.

Since then, the VA has opened the 377 Plantation St. facility and leased a second, 15,000-square foot office at UMass. The second space, which offered mental health services, will be incorporated into the new building.

The T&G in 2015 reported wait times were improving, while the system in 2016 announced it had received the government's highest internal quality rating.

According to the VA's website, the average wait time for a non-emergency appointment at 605 Lincoln St. is currently nine days.

That's among the best rates in the state, as wait times at other offices range from seven days in Framingham to 29 days in New Bedford.

John Collins said Monday that the VA of Central Western Massachusetts has added 20% more staff in the past five years, including managers who have improved scheduling practices.

While concerns about having to drive long distances for specialty care have in the past led some veterans to skip signing up at all, John Collins said improvements in the breadth of services offered in Worcester are bearing fruit.

Over the past five years, he said, the VA of Central Western Massachusetts had the highest percentage of growth of new veteran patients of any VA system in New England.

The system is also in the midst of about $60 million in renovations to its main facilities in Northampton, he said, and has added more resources tailored to female veterans and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I'm very proud of the staff," said the Shrewsbury resident and Army veteran, adding that he looks forward to using the VA system in his retirement.

The VA of Central Western Massachusetts offers primary, specialty and mental health care for veterans in Worcester, Hampden, Berkshire, Franklin and Hampshire counties. Its Worcester clinic completed more than 36,000 appointments with 9,000 veterans in fiscal 2019.

Michael Collins said having so many veterans coming to the UMass campus for services will do two main things: afford veterans better, more convenient care, and enhance the educational experience for medical students.

Medical schools and VA facilities have partnered throughout the country for decades, Michael Collins said, and medical students who do rounds with veterans learn a great deal.

Having the affiliation with the VA is a major improvement for UMass, he and other speakers said Monday, as it will lead to a better education for the many future doctors and nurses it trains.

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"(This impact) is simply enormous," said Anne Larkin, a Navy veteran who serves as UMass Medical School's senior associate dean for educational affairs.

Many local officials, including City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr., turned out for Monday's event, as did former VA officials who worked on the project for years, including Dr. Michael Mayo-Smith, who retired as head of the VA's New England office more than a year ago.

Site preparation for construction of the new clinic will begin later this year, officials said, and the LEED silver-certified building is expected to be completed in mid-2021.

The VA will occupy the first two floors of the four-story structure, Michael Collins said. Plans for the top two floors are not finalized.

Leaving its temporary headquarters at 403 Belmont St. will be Massachusetts Department of Transportation District 3, which is moving to a new facility on Plantation Street.

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4. DOD Cooperation / Electronic Health Records / MISSION Act Implementation

4.1 - Politico: **DOJ cracks down on $2.1B genetic testing scam** (30 September, Mohana Ravindranath, 14.4M uvm; Arlington, VA)

[…]

OSEHRA ON ITS LAST LEGS? — The Open Source Electronic Health Record Alliance will continue its operations in October, despite failing to generate adequate funds from the VA, the group said last week.

OSEHRA, a nonprofit established to improve and distribute the source code for VA's VistA EHR, hs struggled to sustain its operations, especially as the VA embarks on its massive Cerner implementation to replace VistA.

"In early August, we informed the community that unless we receive additional funding from VA, we would be forced to close down our operation," the group said to the open source community members this week. Still, "we are hopeful that we will be able to obtain the required funds by the end of the month."

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4.2 - WEAU (NBC-13, Video): **Mission Act to forgive medical debt, expand health coverage** (30 September, Denton Postlewait, 204k uvm; Eau Claire, WI)

CHIPPEWA FALLS, Wis. (WEAU) - Along with the debt forgiveness, the policy would allow veterans to get care from providers outside VA facilities.

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This means veterans can get the care they need, even if a VA hospital doesn't offer it.

"I think it's going to be more beneficial and help more veterans than the previous plan," said Chippewa County Veteran Services director, Travis Ludvigson.

Under a recently implemented policy by the Department of Veteran Affairs, eligible veterans could start receiving care from providers outside VA hospitals.

However, veterans still need to work with their local VA office.

“The biggest thing is, coordinate it with the VA,” said Ludvigson. “The mistake that was made in the past as well was a veteran would go and get service, but it wasn't authorized.”

Once approved, a veteran could receive specialty treatment closer to home.

“Anything specialty wise they would have to go to Minneapolis or go the other direction towards Tomah,” said Ludvigson. “That's a long drive for a lot of our veterans, especially the elderly or disabled.”

The Mission Act does what the old "Choice Plan" was intended to do.

“What the mission act did was open up additional areas that allowed veterans get access to non-VA care,” said Ludvigson. “They grandfathered in those individuals in the choice program and expanded it to six categories that they can utilize to get access to able to go into civilian healthcare.”

Those categories offer a wider range of coverage for veterans

“The VA can show that it is in the best interest of the veteran to continue the care with that individual, rather than starting over with a VA healthcare provider,” said Ludvigson.

A federal court ordered the VA to reimburse veterans for all expenses at facilities outside the VA system, a problem that stemmed from an issue with the choice plan.

“There was a third party involved in the scheduling and billing,” said Ludvigson. “There was a disconnect a lot of the time in communication, bills were not being paid to these facilities, the vets were then in turn getting charged those bills and sent to collections. So it became a big mess.”

Ludvigson says the biggest part is the low cost for veterans in the VA healthcare system

“The way that this program is set up, in some circumstances a veteran has co-pay for going for their service and that is all they have to pay,” said Ludvigson.

Ludvigson says he believes this policy is better because it fits veteran's specific needs.

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4.3 - Federal Computer Week: Can a joint DOD-VA oversight body catch up with health record deployment? (30 September, Adam Mazmanian, 45k uvm; Vienna, VA)

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Last Thursday marked the one-year anniversary of a joint statement signed by Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie and then-Defense Secretary James Mattis to establish a governance process for the joint implementation of Cerner electronic health record software.

The statement promised "an organizational structure that supports the delivery of a single, seamlessly integrated EHR that maximizes commercial health record interoperability" and "a detailed implementation timeline."

That organization has a proposed name and structure, but it hasn't really taken shape. Dubbed the FEHRM, for Federal Electronic Health Record Management, the organization has a director and deputy director but has yet to finalize a charter or get staffed up.

At a hearing last week, Rep. Jim Banks (R-Ind.), the ranking member of House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, said the moment may have passed for the FEHRM to provide leadership for the integration of the systems at VA and DOD.

"I think we must be realistic about what is achievable at this point. We need to turn the page on the idea of the FEHRM standing up the new EHRs. The critical decision-making window is closing. The FEHRM can still be helpful as a governance body to sustain the EHRs, but we have to calibrate expectations accordingly," Banks said.

The DOD is already rolling out the commercial software in a second round of go-live activations while VA is still waiting on an initial capability to go live in October of 2020. The VA is planning to spend at least $16 billion on its Cerner contract and associated infrastructure updates. DOD has more than $5 billion in contract spending; it's not clear how its infrastructure and program costs shake out.

Subcommittee Chair Rep. Susie Lee (D-Nev.) is still looking for the FEHRM to serve in an oversight and decision-making role as the twin projects move forward.

"This is an issue I've been pounding on," Lee told FCW in a Sept. 20 telephone interview. "We've been promised again and again that this entity will be created and have some teeth."

Lee and Banks are both backing an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, considered must-pass legislation expected to be signed into law by the end of 2019. The amendment characterizes the purpose of the FEHRM to include decision-making "on functional, technical and programmatic activities to promote interoperability" and requires the DOD and VA to provide funds, staff and authority to the oversight body.

The amendment was included in the House version of the NDAA, but it still has to survive a conference committee designed to align the House and Senate bills.

"I'm optimistic this amendment is going to get into the NDAA and pass," Lee said, "and we'll have some guidelines."

John Windom, who heads the health record modernization program office at VA, told Banks at last week's hearing that congressional oversight is helping to drive interagency decision-making at the level of joint governance boards, even without the FEHRM in place.

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"I can tell you we had 27 joint decisions that needed to be made approximately two and a half months ago, and we're sitting at a point with -- all but eight have been made," Windom said.

The DOD and VA vision for the FEHRM may be a little different from that of lawmakers. At a June 12 hearing of the same modernization subcommittee, William Tinston, the program executive officer for Defense Healthcare Management Systems, said that DOD and VA determined together that "the optimal and lowest risk alternative is to re-charter the DoD/VA [Interagency Program Office]" into the FEHRM. That rechartered body "will provide a more comprehensive, agile, and coordinated management authority to execute requirements necessary for a single, seamless integrated EHR."

DOD and VA have offered their input to the House and Senate defense committees with regard to the FEHRM language, but it remains to be seen what if anything comes out of conference.

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5. Suicide Prevention

5.1 - Portland Press Herald: **Our View: Rise in suicide among veterans proves vexing** (30 September, Editorial Board, 725k uvm; Portland, ME)

It should be shocking that 48 Maine military veterans died by suicide in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Sadly, it is not.

It's not surprising because, despite a dip to 30 in 2016, Maine has suffered an average of 43 such deaths a year since 2010, every one a tragedy. It's not surprising because despite the attention the rise in veteran suicides nationwide has brought to the issue, the number has continued to increase through the last decade.

Most of all, it's not surprising because veterans not only deal with factors unique to themselves — the aftereffects of service and a familiarity with firearms chief among them — they are also influenced by the same factors that are contributing to the rise of suicide among all Americans.

As the report states, more than 45,000 Americans died by suicide in 2017, an average of about 124 a day, up from 86 in 2005. Maine has experienced that same upward trend. Suicide is the 10th-leading cause of death in the state, and Maine's suicide rate is well above both the national and New England rates.

The experience with veteran suicide tells us that it will be difficult to reverse that trend. As the problem escalated and drew attention, the VA took it on. But the department has been overwhelmed by the size and scope of the problem, causing a recent change in tactics.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order in March allowing other government agencies as well local governments and advocacy and social service organizations to get more involved.

"The department has adopted a comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention, using bundled strategies that cut across various sectors — faith communities, employers,

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schools and health care organizations, for example — to reach veterans where they live and thrive," VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said in the report.

In one move, the department is taking nationwide an Arizona-based program that looks at the many contributing factors of suicide and steers help toward veterans that fit the bill, taking into account not only health but also barriers to service.

In Maine, the state Bureau of Veterans' Services is considering the use of voluntary gun safety plans to reduce suicide, a spokeswoman told WGME-TV last week. In 2017, 75 percent of veteran suicides in Maine were by firearm, as opposed to 55 percent overall, a difference that is nearly mirrored nationwide.

Earlier this year, the Legislature passed a "yellow flag" law that will allow for the mandatory confiscation of firearms belonging to people deemed by police and a medical professional to be a threat to themselves, which could help prevent Mainers from taking their own lives in a fleeting moment of crisis.

But perhaps the biggest hurdle in preventing suicide comes from the stigma that surrounds it. People in mental health crisis often do not want to come forward — and that goes double in the can-do, no-excuses culture of the military.

There are many other parts to solving this problem, including increasing access to health care, preventing access to lethal means, and building strong communities and local economies.

But first and foremost, people suffering a mental health crisis have to know they are not alone, and that they can feel comfortable coming forward.

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5.2 - WTSP (CBS-10, Video): 'Be There' program geared toward veterans in crisis (30 September, Jenny Dean, 554k uvm; Saint Petersburg, FL)

TAMPA, Fla. — It's the last day of September, which is also suicide prevention month. Suicide is a public health issue that affects all Americans, especially veterans. The Veterans Administration is doing what it can to teach everyone how to 'be there' with a new campaign.

Dr. Matt Miller is the acting director of Suicide Prevention for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. He says everyone can help. "Our greatest resource for veterans are those who are listening right now. In many ways, those who surround the veterans.

That's why the Veterans Administration launched a campaign called #BeThere for veterans. It encourages everyone to simply be willing to be there for a veteran who might be going through a difficult time. Miller says that starts with asking questions. "Asking questions openly about suicide, about how an individual is doing, about how an individual is feeling, about what's going on with them can be a really important first step," said Miller.

Miller says there are many websites sponsored by the V-A that can help guide you through these conversations and hopefully help you know exactly how to 'Be There.' "So we offer

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training on the topic. Anyone can view our free training and join the 20 thousand or so individuals who already have."

Psycharmor.org and Bethereforveterans.net are two websites with tons of information.

Finally, veterans are encouraged to reach out to other veterans. There's a connection there that others may not have. "You cannot underestimate the power of the peer and veteran to veteran contact. Consider reestablishing contact, checking in on how people are doing."

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5.3 - WIBW (CBS-13, Video): Former MO Sec. of State inspires fellow veteran to pursue healing from PTSD (28 September, Marleah Campbell, 311k uvm; Topeka, KS)

LAWRENCE, Kan. (WIBW) - Chuck Fox retired from a 20-year Air Force career in 2008. When he returned to civilian life, he noticed something was off.

"I was in what I felt like what was one of the darkest holes I had ever been in in my life, and I didn't know how I was going to get out of there," Fox said Friday at the VA's Community Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Summit at the Dole Institute of Politics. "I didn't really know what was wrong. I wasn't functioning well at work, all my energy was focused at work and I had no energy for my family. I lost interest in a lot of things that I used to really enjoy."

Last October, Fox caught notice of another veteran: former Missouri Secretary of State Jason Kander, who dropped out in the home stretch of the race for Kansas City mayor to heal his psychological wounds from war.

"I made the announcement that I was stepping back from public life in order to go finally get treatment after, at that point, almost 11 years since my combat deployment to Afghanistan, and got treatment for post-traumatic stress," Kander said. "It really made a huge difference in my life. Really my message to everyone is post-traumatic growth is achievable and worth pursuing."

That message stuck with Fox, who then sought treatment for his own PTSD.

"When Jason made his announcement, I knew it was okay," Fox said. "It's a challenge and it's not easy, but it's well worth your time."

"Confronting trauma, confronting post-traumatic stress is not easy," Kander said. "But it's incredibly worth it."

"It was like a 500 pound weight being lifted off your shoulders," Fox said of his life since seeking treatment. "It's just like I've been given a second chance in life."

The Veterans Crisis Line number is 1-800-273-8255.

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5.4 - Maine Public: Federal Data: 48 Maine Veterans Died By Suicide In 2017 (30 September, Patty Wight, 49k uvm; Lewiston, ME)

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Forty-eight veterans died by suicide in Maine in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs — a number that has held relatively steady for the past several years.

The suicide prevention coordinator for Veterans Affairs in Maine, Tracy Charette, says a crisis line specifically for veterans is available, as is a warm line for family and friends seeking resources.

“What it speaks to is continuing to put our efforts into understanding it, addressing it as a community. That has been a big focus as we turn towards a public health model,” she says. “The big thing to recognize is that there’s help available. And things can and will get better.”

The number of veteran suicides in Maine has hovered in the upper 40s for the past several years, with the exception of 2016, when there were 29 deaths.

According to the VA report, 75 percent of veteran suicides involve firearms.

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6. Women Veterans / Homelessness / Benefits / Cemeteries

6.1 - CNN (Video): Trump moved by wounded veteran's performance (30 September, Betsy Klein, 131M uvm; Atlanta, GA)

It wasn't the 21-gun salute, a speech, or the pomp and circumstance that made Monday's Armed Forces Welcome Ceremony memorable, but rather, a musical performance by Army Captain Luis Avila.

At the conclusion of a swearing-in ceremony for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, Avila, a wounded veteran, sang "God Bless America."

He sat in a motorized wheelchair facing the guests of honor, including Milley, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Vice President Mike Pence and President Donald Trump.

Avila was severely wounded by an improvised explosive device (IED) in Afghanistan in 2011. He lost his left leg, suffered two strokes and two heart attacks, as well as anoxic brain damage that has left him paralyzed, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Music therapy has been "a crucial rehabilitation tool" for Avila's healing process, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Avila's stunning performance and resilience left the nation's top military officials visibly moved. Trump moved his head, bounced his knee, and sang the words along with Avila as he sang the first verse. The entire crowd joined in for the second chorus. As he finished the song, Trump rushed arms open to embrace Avila and his wife, Claudia.

Avila later presented Trump, Pence and other officials with a challenge coin.

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During remarks earlier in the ceremony, Dunford referenced Avila and his fellow wounded warriors.

"At the end of this ceremony, you will hear Army Cpt. Luis Avila sing a tribute to America. Captain Avila was seriously wounded in action and today, represents all of the wounded warriors and killed in action of our military. Both our friends and enemies alike should know that we who wear the uniform of the United States of America, the cloth of our nation, we are all Captain Avilas," Dunford said.

"And we are all willing to lay it on the line every day to risk grievous injury or death to preserve this experiment in liberty that we call America and pass it on to the next generation," Dunford added.

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6.2 - FOX News: Funeral service for veteran with no immediate family expected to draw crowd (30 September, Bradford Betz, 73.9M uvm; New York, NY)

A Florida funeral service for a veteran who had no immediate family members is nonetheless expected to draw a crowd .

Naples resident Edward Pearson, a U.S. Army veteran who served from 1962 to 1964, died last month at the age of 80, according to the funeral home.

The funeral home wrote that Pearson has “no immediate family” and invited the public to attend his Tuesday burial service with military honors at Sarasota National Cemetery.

Michael Hoyt, the funeral director of Legacy Options in Naples, told Tampa Bay’s Fox 13, “We wanted to get the message out to the community to let people know that.”

Pearson’s story was shared thousands of times on social media, according to the station. “It kind of went crazy all at once,” Hoyt said.

Only two people – Hoyt and another veteran – had planned to go to Pearson’s burial service. Now, the cemetery is anticipating hundreds of strangers to arrive.

“We do have things set in place to accommodate parking and the overflow of people who show up,” said Ed Lyons, a veteran and assistant director of the cemetery.

“It tugs at your heart because the things that veterans do for our country, what they sacrifice,” Lyons said. “You don’t want to think of anyone being alone or laid to rest without anyone being there to honor them.”

Earlier this month, a similar set of circumstances played out after hundreds of people – including members of the Air Force and the Patriot Guard – packed into a cemetery to honor a veteran whom they'd never met.

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6.3 - Miami Herald (Video): This veteran had no family to bury him. He won't be laid to rest alone (30 September, Mark Young, 7M uvm; Miami, FL)

It was a small obituary for Edward K. Pearson, 80, that appeared in a local newspaper recently.

It simply said he was going to be interred at Sarasota National Cemetery on Tuesday and that, "This veteran has no immediate family and all are welcome to attend."

The obituary soon hit social media and the response has been overwhelming as hundreds of people who have never met Pearson are pledging to attend the veteran's funeral.

"I've certainly never seen anything like this," said Legacy Options funeral director Michael Hoyt. "It's good to know people are coming to support this veteran who has served and probably don't even know him."

Hoyt said the funeral home has received calls from all over the from people who want to attend, including from one person from Canada. Others have called just to offer emotional support.

Pearson served in the U.S. Army from 1962-1964 and was honorably discharged. According to public records, he went on to become an engineer and worked for Marriott Hotel Services Inc.

Hoyt said no family ever claimed the remains, but that ultimately a good friend of his made the arrangements for the Sarasota National Cemetery knowing that Pearson was a veteran.

Services begin at 12:30 p.m. on Tuesday and Pearson will be interred with full military honors and will likely be sent off with many strangers taking the time to pay their respects.

The cemetery is located at 9810 SR 72 in Sarasota.

Part of what made Pearson's obituary viral was a tweet sent out by CNN's Jake Tapper and the news that a veteran was about to be laid to rest with no one in attendance soon sprawled across the nation.

Pearson will no doubt be laid to rest on behalf of a grateful community and on behalf of a grateful nation.

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6.4 - Connecting Vets: Congresswoman introduces bill to end 'epidemic' of harassment, sexual assault at VA (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)

After a veteran and senior policy advisor on the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force said she was sexually assaulted at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center, a congresswoman has filed a bill to combat the issue.

Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., on Monday introduced the Stop Harassment and Sexual Assault at VA Act, which would create a department-wide policy to stop "this epidemic of rampant" harassment and sexual assault Brownley says "too often occurs" at VA facilities nationwide.

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Last week, (b) (6) a Naval intelligence officer now serving in the Reserves, said she was assaulted Sept. 20 in the atrium of the VA by a man she suspected was another veteran who slammed his body against hers, pressed himself against her and said "You look like you could use a good time."

(b) (6) was waiting for a doctor's appointment and said she was carrying a draft of legislation to help combat sexual assault and harassment in her purse when she was attacked.

Brownley, who chairs the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force launched in March, said she has "continuously" heard from veterans about the prevalence of assault and harassment at VA.

"Shockingly, studies show that at least one in four women veterans experience sexual and gender-based harassment at VA facilities," she said. Most recently, we learned about a case in California, where a VA doctor was convicted of sexually assaulting five patients. Two weeks ago, a member of my own staff was recently assaulted at the VA in Washington, DC while waiting for her appointment."

Earlier this year, Brownley said she urged VA to address the issue but "it has become abundantly clear that VA's internal policies are wholly inadequate and ineffective.

"For far too long, women veterans have been treated as an invisible minority and their concerns have not been heard. I want to say to them: we see you, we hear you, and we are working hard to ensure that you have safe, welcoming, and unfettered access to the benefits that you have rightfully earned."

The bill not only requires a department-wide policy, it also requires VA to hold mandatory annual training for employees.

(b) (6) said multiple people, including VA staff, witnessed her assault "out in the open" but most "said nothing." She said she reported her assault to multiple VA staffers, but it was not until she spoke to her doctor that the police were called.

The bill would "ensure that VA takes action to respond to harassment and sexual assault when it occurs," Brownley said. ". It will ensure that VA employees and contractors report instances of harassment or sexual assault that they witness at facilities so these instances can be properly addressed. It will ensure that there are designated points-of-contact at each VA facility to receive these reports."

The bill also requires VA to provide an annual report to Congress on harassment and assault of veterans and others at VA facilities and requires the department to ensure that veterans receive information and education on sexual harassment and assault, including how to report incidents.

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6.5 - Military Times: Veterans benefits will see a cost-of-living bump this year, but how much? (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)

Veterans will see a cost-of-living increase in their benefits payouts later this year, but it likely won't be as big as the last one they received.

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Last week, President Donald Trump signed into law the annual Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, which guarantees that a host of veterans benefits will see the same annual boost as Social Security recipients.

Veterans benefits covered include disability compensation, compensation for dependents, clothing allowances, and dependency and indemnity compensation checks.

The measure is typically just a formality — it passed Congress again this year with no opposition — but is required annual work for lawmakers because federal statute does not link annual COLA increases for the two separate payouts. Legislative efforts in recent years to make the increases automatic for veterans have proven unsuccessful.

Navy veteran Elaine Lauria, D-Va., sponsored the measure and called it an important way for lawmakers to honor their commitment to individuals who served honorably in the armed forces.

"Providing quality benefits to our veterans and their dependents can change lives," she said.

The official cost-of-living boost for social security beneficiaries won't be announced until next month, but multiple analysts have said they expect it to be below the 2.8 percent adjustment awarded last January.

The annual COLA calculation is based on a series of economic indicators, including the private sector wage growth. In the last decade, Social Security recipients (and individuals receiving veterans benefits) have gone without an annual increase three times. It has only gone about 2 percent twice in that span.

Frequently, lawmakers don't finalize the link between the veterans cost-of-living increase and the Social Security one until later in the fall, after the figure has been announced. Because of the timing of check distribution and the federal calendar, the increases in veterans benefits will be reflected in individuals December payouts.

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6.6 - Press-Telegram: How Rock For Vets uses music to help veterans through the tough times (30 September, Harry Saltzgaver, 117k uvm; Long Beach, CA)

Countless studies have shown the healing power of music.

So when Frank and Katherine McIlquham and their friends started Rock For Vets in 2012, they knew they could make a difference in helping wounded veterans.

"I got together with Jerry Salas," Frank McIlquham said. "He's with the band El Chicano, and he's a Vietnam vet. We started a music program for the vets at the VA Hospital."

Veterans wandered into the music room and picked up an instrument, some for the first time, he said. After some quiet encouragement and a lesson or two, the veterans started playing together.

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“Some of these guys were suffering a lot some with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder),” McIlquham said. “The guys from Afghanistan, there was a lot of survivors’ remorse. We’d be sort of quasi-counselors in between their sessions.”

As the program grew, there was some friction with hospital administration, and Rock For Vets started looking for a new home. In 2015, they hooked up with Tim Cable, the manager of the Scottish Rite Event Center near downtown. The center became Rock For Vets’ rehearsal hall and home. Mcilquham said they met there almost every Monday night.

“It’s a lot more than music now,” McIlquham said. “We help with finding jobs, family, stuff like that. And it’s all free for the vets, including the music equipment and instruments.”

Some 300 veterans have gone through programs with the organization.

Rock For Vets puts together combos to perform around Long Beach, including an annual Memorial Day fundraiser at the Signal Hill Applebee’s. The group performs eight or nine times a year for various events, and the combo often includes female veterans “along with the old guys.”

Free to veterans doesn’t mean there is no cost, though. In addition to the Memorial Day event and smaller donation drives, the big annual party is the Rollin’ With The Rat Pack casino night.

High rollers are expected Saturday, Oct. 5, at the Scottish Rite Event Center for an evening of Vegas-style games, live entertainment, adult libations and gourmet food. There will be raffles, a silent auction and a best-dressed contest for those in Rat Pack Vegas attire.

Tickets are $100 per person and include two drinks and starter chips. They can be purchased in advance at the website, musicistheremedy.org, or at the door the night of the event. The Scottish Rite Event Center is at 855 Elm Ave., and there is free parking.

For more information, email katherine@musicistheremedy.org or call 866-597-1116.

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7. Other

7.1 - Forbes: Christmas Comes In September, Not December, For Federal Contractors (30 September, Adam Andrzejewski, 63.7M uvm; New York, NY)

The largest federal agencies just completed a billion-dollar, year-end spending binge that likely exceeded $100 billion. Much of the excessive spending was waste. And every dime was borrowed, which added to our nation’s $22.6 trillion national debt.

It was the largest extravaganza of taxpayer abuse in U.S. government history. It just ended on September 30th – the feds fiscal year-end.

Agencies worry that spending less than their budget permits might prompt Congress to appropriate less money in the next fiscal year. To avoid this, federal agencies embark on an annual spending spree to avoid the impression they can operate on less. This “use-it-or-lose-it” spending phenomenon happens every year.

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Last year, $97 billion was spent in a mad rush. In the final week, our auditors at OpenTheBooks.com found $53 billion in federal contracts went out the door including $12,000 foosball tables and millions spent on lobster tail and snow crab.

While the final tally of spending for September 2019 will not be available for 90 days, we found similar spending patterns already emerging this year. Here are some current examples gleaned from a small sample of federal data that is currently available:

- Wine, beer, and whiskey: $11,000 on 'alcohol' already disclosed | $310,000 last year. Yes, the year-end spending binge is a big party on your dime. The State Department likes to restock the liquor cabinet and take the edge off of international diplomacy by purchasing beer, wine, and whiskey.
- Loading the gun locker: $17,000 on rounds of .223 ammunition. Veterans Affairs (VA) just purchased more rounds for their “military police long gun program” (AR-15-style weaponry). Last year, more than $800 million loaded the gun locker for fifteen agencies – including the Small Business Administration, Environmental Protection Agency and the Office of Personnel Management.
- Passenger vehicles: $59 million spent on 'passenger motor vehicles' already disclosed | $300 million last year. This year, already, the State Department purchased $33 million worth of passenger vehicles to update their fleet. That’s literally driving up taxpayer costs. In addition, nearly $1 million has already been spent on 'motorcycles, motor scooters, and bicycles' by the Department of Interior. Last year, $10 million went out the door. This does not include $135,000 on snow mobiles and $650,000 on golf carts.
- Office furniture: $39 million on 'office furniture' already disclosed | $490 million last year. Homeland Security just placed orders for $8 million in furniture. Justice bought $2 million. Commerce, Health & Human Services, State, and General Services were all over $1 million each.

It’s a big problem when the federal agencies can barely spend all the money that Congress throws at them.

There’s no clearer example of bloat in the Pentagon’s military budget than use-it-or-lose-it year-end spending. Last year, in our OpenTheBooks Oversight Report, Use-It-Or-Lose-It-Spending FY2018, we found the Department of Defense (DOD) spent $61.2 billion on contracting in September. During the entire previous year, DOD only spent $244.8 billion on contracting (FY2017).

That’s no way to run the world’s finest military.

The year-end ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ spending spree has grown sharply in recent years: from $69.6 billion (FY2015) to over $100 billion. There’s so much government spending at stake that it distorts our national economy. Both Bloomberg and ZeroHedge recently warned investors not to react to “surprise” upside economic growth indicators. The culprit? The September federal spending binge.

In the scramble to spend everything, federal agencies often break the rules that are supposed to restrain them and spend millions of taxpayer dollars anyway.

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In 2017, a local VA hospital purchased a $2.3 million surgery robot at year-end. The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that it was the 84th surgery robot at the hospital and a duplicate of an existing one. Furthermore, there was no planning, review, or proper approval – which delayed installation and use of the robot for six-months.

Were they building a surgery robot army?

Thankfully, a "Grinch" has emerged on Capitol Hill – U.S. Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA) – to combat the $100 billion in mad-dash federal year-end spending. Ernst recently introduced legislation (S.1238) that cracks down on "Christmas in September." It's a simple bill that would revolutionize federal procurement by limiting agency spending in the final two months of the year to an average of the previous ten months.

It's about time that Washington DC got serious about stopping waste, fraud, corruption and taxpayer abuse.

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7.2 - KHOU (CBS-11): Katy woman accused of defrauding VA of more than $600K (30 September, Chloe Alexander, 1.1M uvm; Houston, TX)

KATY, Texas — A Katy woman has been charged for allegedly defrauding the Department of Veterans Affairs of more than $600,000.

A federal grand jury indicted Tammy Wilson, 49, on mail fraud, health care fraud and making a false statement relating to health care matters.

According to the charges, Wilson is a widow of a military veteran. Her husband allegedly died of service-related injuries, after which she is eligible to participate in the Civilian Health and Mental Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs Program (CHAMPVA). The program allows the VA to reimburse for eligible out-of-pocket prescription expense.

The U.S. Attorney's Office said from 2013 to 2017, Wilson submitted falsified prescription summaries to CHAMPVA. She claimed to have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for prescription medications, so under the program, the VA reimbursed her more than $640,000 for those claims.

However, the indictment alleges the pharmacies never dispensed the prescriptions as she had claimed.

Wilson is considered the biggest recipient of CHAMPVA funds in the world, according to the charges.

If convicted, she faced up to 20 years in federal prison and possible $250,000 maximum fine.

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1. Top Stories

1.1 - U.S. News & World Report (AP): Veterans Clinic Planned for UMass Medical School Campus (30 September, 23.3M uvm; Washington, DC)
The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus. The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

Hyperlink to Above

1.2 - Federal News Network: Why VA is scrapping a successful pilot in favor of Cerner's scheduling system (30 September, Nicole Ogrysko, 238k uvm; Washington, DC)
The Department of Veterans Affairs will implement a new, commercial, off-the-shelf patient scheduling system by 2025, two years later than VA originally advertised to Congress. VA has chosen to implement a scheduling solution from Cerner, the same contractor that's spearheading its electronic health record modernization efforts, which the department said will mirror a similar, successful pilot it launched several years ago.

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2. Improving Customer Service

2.1 - Connecting Vets: Two veterans, Navy spouse allegedly pretended to be disabled, defrauded VA for $820,000 (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)
Three people from Maryland -- two of them veterans -- have been indicted on federal charges for allegedly stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in Department of Veterans Affairs benefits. Angela Marie Farr, 33, and Michael Vincent Pace, 39, both of Leonardtown, and Mary Francis Biggs, 62, of Lexington Park, were charged with conspiracy and theft of government property, the DoJ announced last week.

Hyperlink to Above

2.2 - WTAE (ABC-4, Video): VA anti-smoking policy draws heat from veterans, VA employees (30 September, Paul Van Osdol, 2.1M uvm; Pittsburgh, PA)
A new anti-smoking policy at Veterans Administration facilities in Pittsburgh has area veterans and VA employees fired up. The policy takes effect Tuesday. The VA says all tobacco products will be prohibited at their campuses, outpatient clinics and Vet Centers. "It's a pretty bad situation and there are a lot of concerns," said Warren Park, a spokesman for the American Federation of Government Employees and the American Legion.

Hyperlink to Above

2.3 - Military Times: Will climate change hurt VA hospitals and programs? (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)
A pair of Democratic senators want Veterans Affairs officials to start better preparing for climate change, noting that extreme weather events have already disrupted operations at a host of

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department sites. “VA, like all federal agencies, has finite resources and must balance competing budget priorities. However, those priorities must include adapting VA infrastructure and operations to climate risks,” Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Brian Schatz of Hawaii wrote in a letter to VA leadership today.

Hyperlink to Above

2.4 - KMOV (CBS-4, Video): Veteran fired for VA files suit alleging racial, disability discrimination (30 September, 904k uvm; Saint Louis, MO)
Eric Carter spent years fighting for his country. Monday, the Vietnam veteran is taking the next step in his two-year fight for equality. Carter claims the VA medical center in St. Louis forced him out of a job, despite him working for them for nearly 10 years. He said they pushed him out due to his agoraphobia, an illness which gives him anxiety around large crowds.

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2.5 - KNBC (NBC-4): Former VA Employee Pleads Guilty to Gas and Vehicle Thefts (30 September, 837k uvm; Los Angeles, CA)
An Inglewood man pleaded guilty Monday to stealing a government vehicle and illegally charging more than $15,000 on federal government gas cards for fuel he then sold to friends at a discount while he was employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Kyle Sidney Freedman Flournoy, 35, entered his plea in Los Angeles federal court to a single count of conspiracy to steal government property…

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2.6 - WJHG (NBC-7, Video): The VA thought one local veteran was dead; he's still alive (30 September, Olivia Michael, 318k uvm; Panama City, FL)
In July, Richard Johnson passed away at the age of 57... or at least that's what the Department of Veterans Affairs believed. "I was declared deceased without a death certificate. I don't know how that happens but that's what happened," said Army Veteran Richard Johnson. The truth is, Johnson is very much alive, but for about a month, he was dead in the eyes of the VA.

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2.7 - Government Executive: Lawmakers Look to Ban 'Bribes' Federal Unions Use to Recruit New Members (30 September, Eric Katz, 250k uvm; Washington, DC)
House Republicans are looking to prevent federal employee unions from offering prospective new members incentive payments to join, equating the discounted rates to a “bribe.” The VA Workplace Integrity Act (H.R. 4503) would apply only to the Veterans Affairs Department, preventing its secretary from entering into a collective bargaining agreement that offers “financial incentives to prospective members.”

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2.8 - WJHL (CBS-11, Video): VA smoking ban begins Tuesday. Medical Center Director said efforts directed to help vets, staff quit smoking. (30 September, Jessica Fuller, 92k uvm; Johnson City, TN)
Tuesday, Mountain Home Veterans Affairs will join 4,000 other facilities across the country and ban smoking from all campuses. All types of smoking and vaping will be prohibited on campus

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including cigarettes, pipes, cigars and any type of electronic cigarette on campus. The ban does not include smokeless tobacco.

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2.9 - Parkersburg News and Sentinel: Fifth person identified in VA med center deaths (1 October, Jess Mancini, 83k uvm; Parkersburg, WV)
A fifth veteran who died under suspicious circumstances last year at the Veterans Administration hospital in Clarksburg was identified by USA Today. William Alfred "Sport" Holloway, 96, of Fairmont died on April 8, 2018, while at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center, the newspaper said.

Hyperlink to Above

2.10 - The Register-Herald: VA inspector general says VA medical centers failed to perform required opioid checks (30 September, Jessica Farrish, 69k uvm; Beckley, WV)
The Veterans Administration Medical Center in Beckley is among those in the nation which failed to perform required opioid database checks for patients who were being prescribed opioids, a study by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Attorney General found in a report released in September.

Hyperlink to Above

2.11 - Muskogee Phoenix: VA hospital addresses inspector general's findings (28 September, Chesley Oxendine, 14k uvm; Muskogee, OK)
A report published this past week by Office of the Inspector General about the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System makes multiple recommendations for improvement — Director Mark Morgan hopes to have addressed all of them by December. "We've already started the performance improvement as early as December (2018)-January time frame, well before the report was released," Morgan said.

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2.12 - Business NH Magazine: Manchester VA Director Accepts Post in Connecticut (30 September, 3k uvm; Manchester, NH)
Manchester VA Medical Center Director Alfred Montoya has been named the new director of VA Connecticut Healthcare System. In his new role, Montoya will oversee the delivery of health care to approximately 59,000 Veterans throughout Connecticut and southern New England beginning Oct. 13.

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2.13 - New England Public Radio (Audio): VA Officials To Take 'Soft Approach' As Smoking Ban Begins (30 September, Kari Njiiri, Springfield, MA)
All Veterans Administration health facilities nationwide will officially become smoke-free as of October 1. VA officials in Massachusetts, however, say the policy will not be strictly enforced — for now. Cigarettes have been a big part of military culture since World War I. But faced with rising tobacco-related health care costs, the military has tried to discourage smoking.

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2.14 - FEDweek: VA Understaffing Leading to Burnout, Higher Attrition, Panel Told (30 September, Glen Allen, VA)
Persistent understaffing at VA is raising issues with patient care at its medical centers and contributing to burnout among employees in other short-staffed occupations that in turn leads to higher attrition and still more severe shortfalls, GAO has said. In testimony before a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing, the GAO cited "large staffing shortages" at medical centers in positions including physicians, registered nurses…

Hyperlink to Above

2.15 - The Times-Picayune: Veterans Affairs Medical Center to enforce stricter, nationwide smoking ban Tuesday (30 September, Emily Woodruff, New Orleans, LA)
At the main entrance of the New Orleans Veterans Affairs Medical Center, a large white easel with the words "No Smoking" sits about 50 feet from a long line of benches where several veterans are perched with cigarettes. Starting October 1, those veterans will be asked to move completely off campus to smoke.

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2.16 - KFBB (ABC-5): Drive-Thru Flu Clinic at Fort Harrison VA Medical Center (30 September, Black Eagle, MT)
The Montana VA will hold their 9th annual drive-thru flu clinic and health festival for Veterans on October 1st, from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in Parking lot A at the Fort Harrison VA Medical Center. Flu shots are free for enrolled Veterans. The County Health Department will also be available from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to provide flu vaccines for family members. Health insurance will be accepted, or cash options are available.

Hyperlink to Above'

3. Business Transformation

3.1 - WBZ (CBS-4, Video): New 'State-Of-The-Art' Veterans Clinic To Be Built In Worcester (30 September, 1.3M uvm; Boston, MA)
The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus. The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

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3.2 - The Republican: UMass Medical School building new $75M community-based VA outpatient clinic, to open in 2021 in Worcester (30 September, Melissa Hanson, 932k uvm; Springfield, MA)
A new state-of-the-art community-based outpatient clinic for veterans is planned to open in 2021 at UMass Medical School in Worcester, officials announced Monday. The clinic is planned to combine primary care and several medical specialties all in one facility, according to VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System and UMass Medical School.

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3.3 - Telegram & Gazette: **Veterans Administration to occupy new clinic on UMass Medical School campus** (30 September, Brad Petrishen, 408k uvm; Worchester, MA)
The Veterans Administration Monday announced the completion of a long-desired deal that will see a new, larger facility built for veterans' care on the campus of University of Massachusetts Medical School. "This is a day of celebration," U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, said at a news conference announcing the more than $70 million, 100,000-square-foot building, slightly more than half of which will be occupied by the VA.

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4. DOD Cooperation / Electronic Health Records / MISSION Act Implementation

4.1 - Politico: **DOJ cracks down on $2.1B genetic testing scam** (30 September, Mohana Ravindranath, 14.4M uvm; Arlington, VA)
The Open Source Electronic Health Record Alliance will continue its operations in October, despite failing to generate adequate funds from the VA, the group said last week. OSEHRA, a nonprofit established to improve and distribute the source code for VA's VistA EHR, hs struggled to sustain its operations, especially as the VA embarks on its massive Cerner implementation to replace VistA.

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4.2 - WEAU (NBC-13, Video): **Mission Act to forgive medical debt, expand health coverage** (30 September, Denton Postlewait, 204k uvm; Eau Claire, WI)
Along with the debt forgiveness, the policy would allow veterans to get care from providers outside VA facilities. This means veterans can get the care they need, even if a VA hospital doesn't offer it. "I think it's going to be more beneficial and help more veterans than the previous plan," said Chippewa County Veteran Services director, Travis Ludvigson.

Hyperlink to Above

4.3 - Federal Computer Week: **Can a joint DOD-VA oversight body catch up with health record deployment?** (30 September, Adam Mazmanian, 45k uvm; Vienna, VA)
Last Thursday marked the one-year anniversary of a joint statement signed by Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie and then-Defense Secretary James Mattis to establish a governance process for the joint implementation of Cerner electronic health record software. The statement promised "an organizational structure that supports the delivery of a single, seamlessly integrated EHR that maximizes commercial health record interoperability" and "a detailed implementation timeline."

Hyperlink to Above

5. Suicide Prevention

5.1 - Portland Press Herald: **Our View: Rise in suicide among veterans proves vexing** (30 September, Editorial Board, 725k uvm; Portland, ME)
It should be shocking that 48 Maine military veterans died by suicide in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Sadly, it is not. It's not surprising

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because, despite a dip to 30 in 2016, Maine has suffered an average of 43 such deaths a year since 2010, every one a tragedy.

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5.2 - WTSP (CBS-10, Video): 'Be There' program geared toward veterans in crisis (30 September, Jenny Dean, 554k uvm; Saint Petersburg, FL)
It's the last day of September, which is also suicide prevention month. Suicide is a public health issue that affects all Americans, especially veterans. The Veterans Administration is doing what it can to teach everyone how to 'be there' with a new campaign. Dr. Matt Miller is the acting director of Suicide Prevention for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.

Hyperlink to Above

5.3 - WIBW (CBS-13, Video): Former MO Sec. of State inspires fellow veteran to pursue healing from PTSD (28 September, Marleah Campbell, 311k uvm; Topeka, KS)
Chuck Fox retired from a 20-year Air Force career in 2008. When he returned to civilian life, he noticed something was off. "I was in what I felt like what was one of the darkest holes I had ever been in in my life, and I didn't know how I was going to get out of there," Fox said Friday at the VA's Community Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Summit at the Dole Institute of Politics.

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5.4 - Maine Public: Federal Data: 48 Maine Veterans Died By Suicide In 2017 (30 September, Patty Wight, 49k uvm; Lewiston, ME)
Forty-eight veterans died by suicide in Maine in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs — a number that has held relatively steady for the past several years. The suicide prevention coordinator for Veterans Affairs in Maine, Tracy Charette, says a crisis line specifically for veterans is available, as is a warm line for family and friends seeking resources.

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6. Women Veterans / Homelessness / Benefits / Cemeteries

6.1 - CNN (Video): Trump moved by wounded veteran's performance (30 September, Betsy Klein, 131M uvm; Atlanta, GA)
It wasn't the 21-gun salute, a speech, or the pomp and circumstance that made Monday's Armed Forces Welcome Ceremony memorable, but rather, a musical performance by Army Captain Luis Avila. At the conclusion of a swearing-in ceremony for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, Avila, a wounded veteran, sang "God Bless America."

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6.2 - FOX News: Funeral service for veteran with no immediate family expected to draw crowd (30 September, Bradford Betz, 73.9M uvm; New York, NY)
A Florida funeral service for a veteran who had no immediate family members is nonetheless expected to draw a crowd. Naples resident Edward Pearson, a U.S. Army veteran who served from 1962 to 1964, died last month at the age of 80, according to the funeral home. The funeral

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home wrote that Pearson has “no immediate family” and invited the public to attend his Tuesday burial service with military honors at Sarasota National Cemetery.

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6.3 - Miami Herald (Video): This veteran had no family to bury him. He won’t be laid to rest alone (30 September, Mark Young, 7M uvm; Miami, FL)
It was a small obituary for Edward K. Pearson, 80, that appeared in a local newspaper recently. It simply said he was going to be interred at Sarasota National Cemetery on Tuesday and that, “This veteran has no immediate family and all are welcome to attend.” The obituary soon hit social media and the response has been overwhelming as hundreds of people who have never met Pearson are pledging to attend the veteran’s funeral.

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6.4 - Connecting Vets: Congresswoman introduces bill to end 'epidemic' of harassment, sexual assault at VA (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)
After a veteran and senior policy advisor on the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force said she was sexually assaulted at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center, a congresswoman has filed a bill to combat the issue. Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., on Monday introduced the Stop Harassment and Sexual Assault at VA Act, which would create a department-wide policy to stop "this epidemic of rampant" harassment and sexual assault Brownley says "too often occurs" at VA facilities nationwide.

Hyperlink to Above

6.5 - Military Times: Veterans benefits will see a cost-of-living bump this year, but how much? (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)
Veterans will see a cost-of-living increase in their benefits payouts later this year, but it likely won’t be as big as the last one they received. Last week, President Donald Trump signed into law the annual Veterans’ Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, which guarantees that a host of veterans benefits will see the same annual boost as Social Security recipients.

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6.6 - Press-Telegram: How Rock For Vets uses music to help veterans through the tough times (30 September, Harry Saltzgaver, 117k uvm; Long Beach, CA)
Countless studies have shown the healing power of music. So when Frank and Katherine McIlquham and their friends started Rock For Vets in 2012, they knew they could make a difference in helping wounded veterans. “I got together with Jerry Salas,” Frank McIlquham said. “He’s with the band El Chicano, and he’s a Vietnam vet. We started a music program for the vets at the VA Hospital.”

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7. Other

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1. Top Stories

1.1 - U.S. News & World Report (AP): Veterans Clinic Planned for UMass Medical School Campus (30 September, 23.3M uvm; Washington, DC)

WORCESTER, MASS. (AP) — The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus.

The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

It will replace a VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System facility on Lincoln Street in Worcester.

Ryan Lilly, director of the VA New England Healthcare System, said the announcement comes after years of hard work and planning to meet the needs of veterans in and around Worcester County.

John Collins, chief executive officer and director of VA Central Western Massachusetts, says combining primary care and medical specialties in one facility will improve access and the coordination of care.

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1.2 - Federal News Network: Why VA is scrapping a successful pilot in favor of Cerner's scheduling system (30 September, Nicole Ogrysko, 238k uvm; Washington, DC)

The Department of Veterans Affairs will implement a new, commercial, off-the-shelf patient scheduling system by 2025, two years later than VA originally advertised to Congress.

VA has chosen to implement a scheduling solution from Cerner, the same contractor that's spearheading its electronic health record modernization efforts, which the department said will mirror a similar, successful pilot it launched several years ago.

For VA, the decision to implement Cerner's scheduling solution just made financial and practical sense, especially as the department works to implement an electronic record that's interoperable across multiple spaces.

"Interoperability objectives … are more readily achieved by being on the same common solution. There is a cost to integrating platforms," John Windom, executive director of VA's Office of Electronic Health Record Modernization (OEHRM), said last week at a hearing on VA's scheduling system plans. "We paid for the Cerner licenses as part of the EHR contract. It made business sense to not duplicate that payment by installing another system."

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But Congress is still concerned VA is scrapping a successful scheduling pilot, which saw improved processing times, less overtime and less turnover among the department's patient appointment schedulers.

VA piloted the Medical Appointment Scheduling System (MASS), a commercial solution from Epic, at its medical facility in Columbus, Ohio, back in 2015.

That same facility in Columbus will pilot the new Cerner scheduling system. VA said it chose that site because its contract with Epic for the MASS pilot ends in June 2020, and the department needs to find and implement a new solution by that point.

"We have to integrate into an existing solution and minimize the disruption that takes place to our care provisions," Windom said. "This is a measure that minimizes that disruption."

Still, leadership on the House Veterans Affairs Technology Modernization Subcommittee said they had "serious reservations" about VA's "mid-flight" approach.

"Common business and management practice would dictate that VA would conduct an apples-to-apples comparison of off-the-shelf solutions, especially given the investment of resources and apparent success of the MASS pilot program," Susie Lee (D-Nevada), chairman of the House subcommittee, said. "Second, I wonder why none of this would have been done before proceeding with the Cerner scheduling solution implementation. It just seems a little backward to me."

VA has a long, storied history with this particular project. The department determined back in 2000 it needed to replace its aging Veterans Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA) scheduling system with a commercial product. VA spent $127 million over nine years to develop a replacement, but the project failed and the department had to start over.

It launched the VistA scheduling enhancement in 2014, which was supposed to be an interim upgrade until VA could find a more permanent replacement. But the department's effectively managed the project to make sure users' needs were met, the VA inspector general said.

A year later, VA awarded an indefinite-delivery, indefinite quantity contract for MASS for $624 million. That project was later downgraded to a pilot.

VA acknowledged the MASS pilot, which the department estimated it spent about $20 million on over the past few years, went well. The Cerner scheduling system, the department said, would achieve similar results.

The department, meanwhile, is still reviewing the estimated implementation costs for the new scheduling system. It will likely need to reallocate funds that have been set aside for later in the EHR modernization project lifecycle, but a specific plan hasn't been determined.

VA, however, was confident it could take the lessons it learned from the MASS pilot and apply them to Cerner's new scheduling solution.

"We have learned that it's critical to have the software implemented right," Michael Davies, senior adviser to the assistant deputy undersecretary for health access at the Veterans Health Administration, said. "We have teams doing site assessments, talking to the people that did the MASS contract in Columbus, the old contractor and connecting them with the new contractor to

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take advantage of the work that's already been done. Secondly, [for] the training of the schedulers, we're incorporating VA schedulers into the training going forward, because we learned how important it is to implement the new system in the VA environment."

Where's the FEHRM?
Subcommittee members seemed to accept the inevitably of VA's move to a Cerner scheduling system.

Rep. Jim Banks (R-Ind.), the subcommittee's ranking member, turned his attention to VA's broader EHR modernization efforts. He continued to raise his concerns about VA's cost estimates for the project, which he said haven't seemed to change as much as he'd think they would.

"OEHRM seems to have reacted to the subcommittee's oversight by zealously defending its funding," he said. "The cost estimate is still very much a black box. It is clear that the actual spending rate is trending further below the original projection. While that seems positive at first glance, OEHRM seems to have achieved it by shifting more costs on to other organizations within VA, and I intend to monitor that very closely."

It's been a year since both the Defense Department and the VA signed a joint memo of understanding recognizing the two agencies' common goal to achieve interoperable health records. Both departments were supposed to recharter their Interagency Program Office and rename it as the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization Office (FEHRM).

Banks and other lawmakers see this entity as critical, as both departments need to ensure their two EHRs are synchronized as they deploy them over the next decade. DoD and VA announced plans to established the FEHRM back in June but didn't give a timeline for the new office.

To date, the FEHRM isn't up and running, Banks said.

Windom said both departments are working together, even though they haven't stood up the official joint governance entity just yet. The two agencies had 27 joint decisions to make over the last two-to-three months, and DoD and VA made all but eight of them.

"That progress is fantastic," Windom said. "This is just the challenge of integrating two major agencies with differing methodologies in many cases. We have been moving progressively in the right direction. The FEHRM has been involved in that process in facilitating those. The evolution that you wanted to see I think is happening. It never happens as fast as you'd like, but I think it's happening."

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2. Improving Customer Service

2.1 - Connecting Vets: Two veterans, Navy spouse allegedly pretended to be disabled, defrauded VA for $820,000 (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)

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Three people from Maryland -- two of them veterans -- have been indicted on federal charges for allegedly stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in Department of Veterans Affairs benefits.

Angela Marie Farr, 33, and Michael Vincent Pace, 39, both of Leonardtown, and Mary Francis Biggs, 62, of Lexington Park, were charged with conspiracy and theft of government property, the DoJ announced last week. Farr also was charged with "aggravated identity theft and Social Security fraud."

U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland Robert K. Hur, along with the FBI, VA and Social Security Administration announced the indictments Thursday.

According to the indictment, Farr organized a conspiracy where she sent false and fraudulent documents to VA claiming that her then-husband, Pace, and her father, were homebound and needed full-time help and disability benefits.

Farr's mother, Biggs, allegedly conspired with her to file the documents on behalf of her father. When Farr so exaggerated her father's disabilities that the VA determined he couldn't handle his own finances, the VA appointed Biggs his fiduciary -- or a person authorized to act on his behalf and receive his benefits.

But this wasn't the first time Farr allegedly committed VA fraud.

Farr is a Navy veteran who served from 2005-07. In 2009, Farr received a service-connected disability rating of 70 percent based on allegedly fake documents, which said she experienced post-traumatic stress disorder from an incident in which she said she was raped by a fellow service member.

But Farr allegedly told local law enforcement she made up the rape.

Farr also allegedly told the VA she experienced a traumatic brain injury during an on-duty car accident, "which was also determined to be a fabrication," according to the indictment.

Based on the false documents, the VA increased Farr's service-connected disability rating to 100 percent and she received about $390,000 in VA benefits she was not entitled to.

Farr is further accused of stealing the identity of a VA doctor when she submitted allegedly forged documents to the VA supposedly authored by that doctor. She also allegedly received about $35,000 in Social Security disability insurance benefits for her faked disabilities and has been charged with social security fraud.

Pace is an Army veteran and served from 2001-02, 2005-06 and in the Army National Guard in 2007.

Pace and Farr were married from 2008 until their divorce in 2017, the indictment says.

Pace was rated 100 percent disabled by VA based on allegedly faked medical documents submitted to VA.

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Though he claimed to be profoundly disabled, Pace also allegedly received a caregiver assistance stipend from VA of more than $2,500 each month for allegedly caring for Farr. As a result, Farr received about $274,000 in VA benefits he was not entitled to.

Biggs, the wife of a Navy veteran who served 1974-997, helped Farr fake her husband's 100-percent disability rating, the indictment says. As a result, Biggs and her husband received about $156,000 in disability benefits they were not entitled to.

Biggs further allegedly conspired with Farr to hide from VA the fact that her husband was able to work and was actively employed.

Farr, Pace and Bigg's husband all allegedly claimed to be wheelchair-bound and require in-home nursing for everyday tasks. But during that same time, the indictment says Farr operated a social media marketing company in Maryland, Pace raised three children and regularly exercised at a CrossFit gym and Bigg's husband was a division head at the Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division in Maryland.

If convicted, Farr faces a mandatory minimum two years in federal prison and a maximum 10 years. Biggs and Pace face a maximum sentence of 10 years.

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2.2 - WTAE (ABC-4, Video): VA anti-smoking policy draws heat from veterans, VA employees (30 September, Paul Van Osdol, 2.1M uvm; Pittsburgh, PA)

A new anti-smoking policy at Veterans Administration facilities in Pittsburgh has area veterans and VA employees fired up.

The policy takes effect Tuesday. The VA says all tobacco products will be prohibited at their campuses, outpatient clinics and Vet Centers.

"It's a pretty bad situation and there are a lot of concerns," said Warren Park, a spokesman for the American Federation of Government Employees and the American Legion.

Park said he is particularly concerned about veterans with addiction or mental health issues being forced out of treatment because they cannot quit smoking.

"We have approximately 20 veterans a day committing suicide, and I would rather keep these guys from committing suicide," he said. "I'd give them a pack of cigarettes and work on that (smoking) problem later on down the line."

Action News Investigates obtained a copy of the VA anti-smoking policy. It says patients who violate the policy could be discharged from care and even face a federal court citation.

"There's going to be retaliation. A lot of these guys will be thrown out of the system. A lot of these guys will be leaving the system," Park said.

A VA spokesperson did not respond to multiple requests for comment about the smoking policy.

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The union representing VA employees has filed a grievance about the new policy, but that will not prevent it from taking effect on Tuesday.

UPDATE: The following statement by VA spokeswoman Christina Mandreucci was sent to Pittsburgh's Action News 4 on Monday night.

More than 4,000 non-VA health care facilities across the nation are already smoke free, and smoke-free policies begin to take effect at all VA health care facilities Oct. 1.

By Jan. 2020, these commonsense policies will be fully implemented for employees, patients, visitors, contractors, volunteers and vendors at all Veterans Health Administration facilities.

Three other national unions have already agreed to abide by these policies, which are being implemented regardless of AFGE's cooperation.

VA has extensive resources and programs to assist Veterans in their smoke-free journey. They can be found at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/.

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2.3 - Military Times: Will climate change hurt VA hospitals and programs? (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)

A pair of Democratic senators want Veterans Affairs officials to start better preparing for climate change, noting that extreme weather events have already disrupted operations at a host of department sites.

“VA, like all federal agencies, has finite resources and must balance competing budget priorities. However, those priorities must include adapting VA infrastructure and operations to climate risks,” Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Brian Schatz of Hawaii wrote in a letter to VA leadership today.

“Strengthening VA’s resilience to climate change is consistent with the agency’s mission to deliver timely, high-quality care and benefits to America’s veterans.”

The lawmakers are asking for a comprehensive evaluation of the department’s climate change preparation plans in the last five years, when officials in the last administration released reports on threats posed by future climate patterns to all government agencies.

They noted that VA has released several updates on efforts to operate environmentally-friendly facilities, but did not include how altered weather patterns and extreme storms could hurt existing locations.

“Natural disasters and extreme weather events have adversely affected VA infrastructure and operations at facilities across the country in recent years, including in Louisiana, Texas, New York, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Puerto Rico,” the letter stated.

Most of those referenced events are short-term closures of VA health facilities in the lead-up and aftermath of severe storms. Several Florida and North Carolina sites have had to

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temporarily close for repairs due to wind and water damage the senators argue are connected to global climate pattern changes.

In addition, VA officials were faced with significant supply and staffing issues in the wake of the category 4 hurricane that hit Puerto Rico in 2017.

Schatz, who is ranking member on the Senate Appropriations Committee's veterans panel, and Warren, who is running for president on a platform that includes more aggressive climate change policies, want to know how much those types of weather issues are being taken into account in new construction and how much past damage from storms has totaled in each of the last few fiscal years.

Similar requests have been made of Department of Defense planners and officials at other federal agencies as President Donald Trump's administration has worked to reverse or revoke a number of executive orders related to the issue, arguing they amounted to redundant or unapplicable work for the agencies.

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2.4 - KMOV (CBS-4, Video): Veteran fired for VA files suit alleging racial, disability discrimination (30 September, 904k uvm; Saint Louis, MO)

ST. LOUIS (KMOV.com) -- Eric Carter spent years fighting for his country. Monday, the Vietnam veteran is taking the next step in his two-year fight for equality.

Carter claims the VA medical center in St. Louis forced him out of a job, despite him working for them for nearly 10 years. He said they pushed him out due to his agoraphobia, an illness which gives him anxiety around large crowds.

"I feel like they thought if they forced me out I would just leave," Carter said. "I believe it's just harassment."

For eight years, Carter worked as the night-shift custodian with no issues, he said.

Then in July of 2016, he was given a letter asking him to switch buildings and move to a day shift.

Carter's doctor at the VA said he should only work the night shift due to his condition and when he explained this to his department head, he got nowhere.

"My doctor recommended I stay on the third shift, he in turn said 'I don't care what your doctor said,'" Carter recalled.

Rather than quit, Carter continued to show up for the scheduled night shifts he had worked for eight years.

"All I wanted to do was work," he said.

However, Carter said his boss sent him home each time he reported for work, meaning he wouldn't paid either.

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“He’ll tell the supervisor, ‘If he comes here send him home,’” said Carter of his department head. “‘If he doesn’t want to leave have VA police escort him off the premises.’”

Following a News 4 report in December of 2017, Carter was allowed to work one night shift, but that didn’t last long.

Six months later, Carter received a letter terminating his employment.

The letter cited unauthorized absences, failure to follow procedures and violation of uniform policies, all of which Carter denies.

Carter said he did not go AWOL on the days in question, but requested to take medical leave.

“Any time that I call in, it's for legit reasons,” he said.

Days ago, Carter and his attorney filed a 17-page lawsuit against the VA, claiming racial and disability discrimination. He said he’s hoping to get answers on why he was fired.

“All I wanted them to do at the time was to work my job the best that I could,” he said. “It’s the department that’s supposed to help you, and what they’re doing to me is totally wrong.”

News 4 reached out to the VA for comment, but have received no response.

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2.5 - KNBC (NBC-4): Former VA Employee Pleads Guilty to Gas and Vehicle Thefts (30 September, 837k uvm; Los Angeles, CA)

An Inglewood man pleaded guilty Monday to stealing a government vehicle and illegally charging more than $15,000 on federal government gas cards for fuel he then sold to friends at a discount while he was employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Kyle Sidney Freedman Flournoy, 35, entered his plea in Los Angeles federal court to a single count of conspiracy to steal government property, which carries a possible five-year maximum prison sentence. U.S. District Judge Virginia A. Phillips set a Dec. 16 sentencing hearing.

Flournoy stole a VA vehicle and rented it out to associates -- including gang members -- for $30 in 2013, court documents state.

He also admitted unlawfully using 11 different federal government gas cards over the course of several weeks to charge more than $15,000 in gasoline.

Flournoy gave the fuel to others who paid him 60 cents on the dollar, according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office.

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2.6 - WJHG (NBC-7, Video): The VA thought one local veteran was dead; he's still alive
(30 September, Olivia Michael, 318k uvm; Panama City, FL)

LYNN HAVEN, Fla. (WJHG/WECP) - In July, Richard Johnson passed away at the age of 57... or at least that's what the Department of Veterans Affairs believed.

"I was declared deceased without a death certificate. I don't know how that happens but that's what happened," said Army Veteran Richard Johnson.

The truth is, Johnson is very much alive, but for about a month, he was dead in the eyes of the VA.

"My wife was diagnosed with colorectal cancer. She battled that fight for just over three years and she finally succumbed to the cancer on July 7th of 2019," said Johnson.

That's when condolence letters arrived from the VA, but they were addressed to the wrong person.

Johnson said, "One was addressed to my wife, Martha, who's already deceased and one was addressed to the estate of Richard Johnson--myself."

His children also received letters about their father's death.

"I got this letter in the mail this weekend that says 'Dear Miss Thomas, we at the Defense, Finance and Accounting Service Cleveland Center are sincerely sorry to learn of the death of your father,'" said his daughter Jamie Thomas as she read from a letter she received.

Johnson called the VA about once a week to check his status in their system with no luck. To them he was considered dead; erased from existence.

"I did not receive my disability entitlement for September so I called once again, explained to them that I have no other income, this is my income. I get paid disability, and I get paid my retirement," he said.

Unsure if he'd receive back-pay for September, Johnson tried to refinance a loan at his local bank only to learn it too had marked him in the system as being dead.

"The social security office was also showing me as deceased, so not only was I deceased in the VA, now I'm deceased in Bank of America, I'm deceased in Social Security," said Johnson.

It took about a month before the mistake was corrected, but Johnson is still waiting for his checks. Meanwhile, bills are piling up, and this mistake it taking its toll.

Johnson said, "I believe I ought to be compensated for the many hours that I've spent trying to fix my situation and driving to these different locations and having to prove that I'm not dead."

The VA sent us a statement saying, “Any time a Veteran or family member has concerns, we reach out to them directly, just as we have done with the Veteran in this case. The error made in this instance is in the process of being resolved and the Veteran will be receiving his payment soon. VA has apologized to the Veteran for this mistake and any inconvenience it may have caused.”

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But for Johnson, the damage is already done.

"I'm not the deceased person here. Sorry...," he said tearfully. "I'm just trying to finalize my wife's affairs the best I can and now I have to finalize my affairs and it's not fair."

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2.7 - Government Executive: Lawmakers Look to Ban 'Bribes' Federal Unions Use to Recruit New Members (30 September, Eric Katz, 250k uvm; Washington, DC)

House Republicans are looking to prevent federal employee unions from offering prospective new members incentive payments to join, equating the discounted rates to a “bribe.”

The VA Workplace Integrity Act (H.R. 4503) would apply only to the Veterans Affairs Department, preventing its secretary from entering into a collective bargaining agreement that offers “financial incentives to prospective members.” The American Federation of Government Employees, however, which represents most VA employees, said the program that prompted the bill is merely a discount it sometimes offers to solicit new members.

The incentives typically come in the form of a check from the union local in the new employee’s workplace, said Andrew Huddleston, an AFGE spokesman, referring to the payments as a rebate program. AFGE runs the initiative at agencies across government on an intermittent basis as determined by its specific councils. The rebate comes from their dues payment once all their union paperwork is completed.

“They’ve got a characterization here that is sort of strange to me,” Huddleston said.

Rep. Neal Dunn, R-Fla., who introduced the bill, said the rebates create an undue influence that pressures new employees to join the union.

“Manipulating new federal employees at the VA to join a union with a $100 bribe as they walk in the door is unethical,” Dunn said. “Federal employees should have the freedom to choose whether or not they join a union and participate in union activities on their own accord.”

Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., the top Republican on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, where VA employees first voiced concerns about the incentive payments, called the offering of $100 rebates of dues during employee orientation a “shocking” practice that amounted to “financial manipulation to strong-arm” employees. Dunn last week wrote a letter to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie asking for more information about the practice and for a general counsel ruling on its legality.

Huddleston said the rebates were intended only to make membership more accessible to employees who may otherwise face a financial burden in paying their dues. He equated the practice to an organization like the AARP offering a temporary 20% discount on its dues to recruit new members. He also accused lawmakers of deflecting from a more pressing issue of vacancies at VA, which currently total about 49,000.

J. David Cox, AFGE national president, said committee Republicans were wasting time.

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"Every American who buys groceries, makes a big purchase, or joins an organization with monthly fees understands how discounts and rebates work," Cox said. "When so much important work needs to be done for our nation's veterans, this type of nakedly political activity is a truly shameful distraction."

He added that doing "actual, substantive oversight work" and tackling the vacancies issue would "actually help some of our nation's veterans."

The VA inspector general issued a report on Monday that found 96% of Veterans Health Administration facilities maintain at least one "severe occupational staffing shortage," with a lack of qualified applicants and non-competitive salary as the two most common reasons for the shortfalls.

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2.8 - WJHL (CBS-11, Video): VA smoking ban begins Tuesday. Medical Center Director said efforts directed to help vets, staff quit smoking. (30 September, Jessica Fuller, 92k uvm; Johnson City, TN)

Tuesday, Mountain Home Veterans Affairs will join 4,000 other facilities across the country and ban smoking from all campuses.

All types of smoking and vaping will be prohibited on campus including cigarettes, pipes, cigars and any type of electronic cigarette on campus. The ban does not include smokeless tobacco.

Mountain Home Medical Center Director Dean Borsos said part of the goal is to point veterans, VA faculty and staff toward quitting smoking by offering different smoking cessation programs and support.

"We'll encourage them to participate in other activities, increasing their exercise levels, other things that would help lead them to a healthier lifestyle," he said Monday.

The move also aims to reduce secondhand and thirdhand smoke on the VA campus, according to the VA website.

Thirdhand smoke, according to Mayo Clinic, is leftover nicotine and other chemicals on indoor surfaces left by tobacco smoke. Thirdhand smoke tends to cling to furniture, clothes, drapes, walls, bedding, carpet, dust and vehicles after smoking has stopped, Mayo Clinic says, and can lead to tobacco-related health problems for children and non-smoking adults.

The VA will be closing previously-designated smoking areas, Borsos said, and smoking won't be allowed anywhere on campus, including parking lots.

He said veterans, faculty and staff will have access to ongoing support to quit smoking, and that's at the backbone of the move to ban smoking on campus.

"We're hoping that with the right caring and nurturing of people who are currently having issues, we can help them quit," he said, adding,
"One day, folks will look back and this won't be an afterthought, that everybody will believe that having a smoke-free campus is the right way to do it."

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2.9 - Parkersburg News and Sentinel: Fifth person identified in VA med center deaths (1 October, Jess Mancini, 83k uvm; Parkersburg, WV)

A fifth veteran who died under suspicious circumstances last year at the Veterans Administration hospital in Clarksburg was identified by USA Today.

William Alfred "Sport" Holloway, 96, of Fairmont died on April 8, 2018, while at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center, the newspaper said.

An investigation is underway at the medical center where authorities are investigating the deaths of possibly 10 veterans who died around the same time under similar suspicious circumstances of hypoglycemia, or severe low blood sugar. The deaths were first reported in August.

Holloway's family was contacted by Veterans Administration investigators in the fall last year for permission to exhume the body, USA Today said. The autopsy showed he had hypoglycemic events, but the family believed Holloway, who was a diabetic and was on insulin, died of sepsis, the newspaper said.

"There is no natural cause that would explain this profound degree of (persistent) hypoglycemia," the autopsy said, according to the newspaper. The low blood sugar "is strongly suspicious" because he was given an unprescribed dose of insulin, but the autopsy said the cause of death was undetermined, the newspaper said.

Members of the Holloway family couldn't be reached for comment by The Parkersburg News and Sentinel. Attorneys representing the families of other veterans were unfamiliar with Holloway.

Michael Nacincik, the public affairs officer for the Department of Veterans Affairs, referred The News and Sentinel to the statements released in August by the Inspector General and the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of West Virginia.

Holloway served in the United States Army.

The first disclosure there were a number of veterans dying under suspicious circumstances at the medical center was in a notice of claim to the Veterans Administration filed by Melanie Proctor of Ellenboro for the April 9, 2018, death of her father, Felix K. McDermott, 82. The notice said investigators believe nine or 10 other veterans may have died under similar suspicious means and they had a person of interest in the deaths.

An autopsy performed on McDermott showed he died from hypoglycemia from an unprescribed injection of insulin. The medical examiner determine the death was a homicide.

Archie Dail Edgell, 84, who lived most of his life in Doddridge County, died on March 26, 2018. George Nelson Shaw Jr., 81, died April 10, 2018, also from hypoglycemia. John Hallman, 87, died on June 13, 2018.

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The deaths are under investigation by the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of West Virginia, the FBI and the independent Office of the Inspector General in the Veterans Administration. Dr. Glenn Snider, director of the medical center, said the person of interest is no longer at the facility.

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2.10 - The Register-Herald: VA inspector general says VA medical centers failed to perform required opioid checks (30 September, Jessica Farrish, 69k uvm; Beckley, WV)

The Veterans Administration Medical Center in Beckley is among those in the nation which failed to perform required opioid database checks for patients who were being prescribed opioids, a study by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of the Attorney General found in a report released in September.

The report found that in six VA facilities from April 1, 2017, to March 31, 2018, VA clinicians failed 73 percent of the time to enter a patient's name into an electronic database that tracks controlled substance prescriptions.

The goal of the program is to reduce prescription drug abuse and diversion, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported.

In Beckley, clinicians did not check the database in 53 percent of the cases, compared to 93 percent at a VA in Texas and 43 percent at a VA in Dayton, Ohio.

The audit estimated that about 19 percent of VA patients were placed at risk of having care coordination and management problems because clinicians did not run a query with a state database to discover if a veteran had obtained a controlled substance prescription from a non-VA pharmacy.

The report stated that the Veterans Health Administration lacks an "effective control system to monitor and evaluate" the performance of the drug monitoring program queries as part of the Opioid Safety Initiative, which the VA had launched in 2013 to help the VA manage pain in veterans while limiting the risks associated with opioids.

U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin expressed frustration with the report's findings and suggested that more stringent oversight is needed by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

"The VA is the first line of defense when it comes to protecting, preventing and treating our veterans who are struggling with opioid use disorder," Manchin said. "That's why it's an outrage that a VA facility in West Virginia was found by the VA's OIG to have not consistently used the Prescription Drug Monitoring Program databases, which are there to save lives and are designed to make sure doctors do not overprescribe opioids to a patient.

"I have continuously asked the Secretary of the VA if this system was working and he repeatedly assured me that it's effective," added Manchin. "The bottom line is that the VA has failed to fully train providers and enforce policies that Congress has created to prevent the spread of the opioid crisis.

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"Apparently, as a member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, we need to increase our oversight to ensure that the VA can do its job."

The VA OIG report showed that some local policies differed from national policy, contributing to a breakdown in the Opioid Safety Initiative. A second contributing factor was inadequate training and communication breakdowns.

In light of the study, the VA OIG recommended that VA clinicians increase their use of state prescription drug monitoring programs and that there should be increased oversight of VA health care facilities.

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2.11 - Muskogee Phoenix: VA hospital addresses inspector general's findings (28 September, Chesley Oxendine, 14k uvm; Muskogee, OK)

A report published this past week by Office of the Inspector General about the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System makes multiple recommendations for improvement — Director Mark Morgan hopes to have addressed all of them by December.

"We've already started the performance improvement as early as December (2018)-January time frame, well before the report was released," Morgan said. "We're quite optimistic by December of this year we'll have six months of meeting of the standard that we can submit to the OIG for review."

The inspection focused on eight areas of care: leadership and organization risks; quality, safety and value; medical staff privileging; environment of care; medication management; mental health; geriatric care; and women's health. Findings were drawn from what inspectors found during an unannounced visit on Dec. 10, 2018.

Inspectors found problems with medical staff privileging, environment of care, mental health, geriatric care, and women's health. Included in OIG's report were 11 recommendations addressing those five areas of concern.

"I see these recommendations as opportunities for us to stay focused and improve," Morgan said.

The first three recommendations address medical staff privileging, which the OIG identifies as issues related to the evaluation of practitioners working under the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System umbrella. The Veteran's Health Administration specifically "requires ongoing monitoring of privileged practitioners."

While "the OIG found there was general compliance with requirements for privileging," there was "evidence that solo practitioners were not evaluated by providers with similar training." The OIG also found "time limits were not delineated in the focused professional practice evaluation process, and providers were not notified of FPPEs for cause."

"Activities such as periodic chart review, direct observation, monitoring of diagnostic and treatment techniques, or discussion with other individuals involved in the care of patients can be included into the ongoing monitoring process," the VA's OIG team states in the report. "Data

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must be service and practitioner specific, reliable, easily retrievable, timely, justifiable, comparable, and risk adjusted where appropriate."

The OIG report also identifies problems with reporting and communication in addition to ensuring practitioners were evaluated by providers with similar training.

"We had some weaknesses in the timeliness and documentation and back and forth," Morgan said. "We already have three corrective actions underway in improving our practice evaluations."

The environment of care recommendation comes from an instance in which the OIG inspection turned up corrugated cardboard boxes shelved with clean and sterile supplies in five patient units, the report states.

"We've done some additional training on that," Morgan said. "We also saw this as an opportunity to reach out and confirm with the commission the standards on shipping packaging. We don't know where that box was before it got there, so that's why we removed the cardboard packaging."

The OIG's inspection of the system's mental health care — specifically with regard to victims of military sexual trauma — fell short in three areas, according to the report.

"The OIG noted concerns with the lack of (1) communication of MST services and initiatives to facility leadership, (2) tracking and monitoring MST-related data, and (3) completion of training by providers that warranted recommendations for improvement," the report reads.

Morgan said corrective actions were underway for all three recommendations. He said his staff is on tract to meet the October target date for completion of the corrective steps taken in compliance with recommendations included in the the OIG's report.

Two weaknesses identified by OIG regarding the provision of geriatric care include educating patients about their medications -- specifically in relation to antidepressants -- and keeping accurate patient health records to avoid unwanted medication interactions or similar problems.

Morgan said those two issues were being corrected as well.

The OIG made issued two final recommendations related to women's care in the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health System: ensuring that the Women Veterans Health Committee includes all required members, and that the committee reports quarterly to the Medical Executive Committee.

Morgan said these recommendations were considered especially important in light of an 8.8 percent increase in the number of women who receive care from the system as veterans.

"They identified a weakness in making sure the team's reporting structure was clearly laid out," Morgan said. "Great find, a great catch -- it was a weakness in terms of the oversight and proper reporting, and we're already making corrective actions."

Morgan said his team welcomed the recommendations and the report as an additional "checkpoint" for improving their standard of care.

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"We take their input very seriously and see that as a potential opportunity to improve," Morgan said. "As a director of those facilities, this is an additional tool for me for making sure we're on track."

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2.12 - Business NH Magazine: Manchester VA Director Accepts Post in Connecticut (30 September, 3k uvm; Manchester, NH)

Manchester VA Medical Center Director Alfred Montoya has been named the new director of VA Connecticut Healthcare System. In his new role, Montoya will oversee the delivery of health care to approximately 59,000 Veterans throughout Connecticut and southern New England beginning Oct. 13.

Montoya was appointed to lead the Manchester facility following whistleblower complaints detailed in a special investigation by the Boston Globe. Business NH Magazine examined the turnaround under his leadership. (https://www.businessnhmagazine.com/article/new-leadership-gets-manchester-va-on-track)

Montoya joined the VA in 2009 and served in various leadership positions of increasing responsibility including Assistant Director, VA Connecticut HCS; Director, White River Junction VA Medical Center, and Manchester VA Medical Center. Montoya is also an Assistant Professor of Medicine at the Geisel School of Medicine, Dartmouth College.

U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) called Montoya's work in NH extraordinary service. "It can't be overstated how instrumental Director Montoya has been to changing the culture of the Manchester and White River Junction facilities, and improving care to the men and women who have served our country," says Shaheen.

In Manchester, he took over as director under very difficult circumstances, yet was able to immediately begin implementing successful reforms to operations and treatment delivery. While I'm greatly disappointed that he will no longer be leading the Manchester VA, I know his leadership and experience will improve care for veterans wherever he is called to serve. Director Montoya is an exemplary public servant and I wish him the very best in his next endeavor."

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2.13 - New England Public Radio (Audio): VA Officials To Take 'Soft Approach' As Smoking Ban Begins (30 September, Kari Njiiri, Springfield, MA)

All Veterans Administration health facilities nationwide will officially become smoke-free as of October 1. VA officials in Massachusetts, however, say the policy will not be strictly enforced — for now.

Cigarettes have been a big part of military culture since World War I. But faced with rising tobacco-related health care costs, the military has tried to discourage smoking.

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Andrew McMahon is acting director of the VA health care system in central and western Massachusetts. He said about 13 percent of the 8,000 veterans who use the main medical center in Northampton are smokers, and frequently visit the designated smoking shelters.

Andrew McMahon, VA: We have decided up here to keep our smoking shelters operational and approach the veterans in there – not with our police handing out tickets for smoking, but we're going to have our nurses and other liaisons from our staff just trying to encourage veterans to take advantage of our smoking cessation programs, and some of our other more healthy activities, like QiGong or yoga and mindfulness.

Kari Njiiri, NEPR: How are you going to convince them to do that?

This is a soft closing for us, so we're going to do our best to convince them. Of course, that's not going to work for everybody. But there is going to be a time at some future date where the smoking shelters will no longer exist, and we will just try to enforce – in an as nice and soft a way as we can – no smoking on the grounds.

This ban also applies to employees.

It does. So we have four unions on this campus. Three of them have agreed to the smoking ban, and one of them we are still in negotiation with. So they will really take effect in the end of December, we believe, as a target date for that negotiation.

So the ban for employees is going to be different. It's not going to commence on October 1?

We are not going to enforce it for anybody until the end of December. We are just trying to encourage people not to smoke in that time as we transition.

For both employees, as well as veterans?

That's correct.

What's been the reaction from folk?

Well, to me personally, they just ask how I think it's going to go. But I know there's some some grumbling there, and some people are going to be very hard to convince to adhere to the rule of "no smoking" on the campus.

And that's why we're really trying to take an outreach and soft approach. Our police are not going to be the ones engaging in the outreach; it's going to be clinical people. And we're going to really just try, from that approach, to be as cooperative and engaging as we can with these gentlemen and ladies.

Yeah, because this is quite a change of culture, no?

It is. It's a big change for us. And it's going to be a big effort on our part to see this through to a successful point, we believe.

What happens come January 1, and you still find people smoking? I mean, how long will the soft approach continue?

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I think that this is going to take years to change a culture. I envision the soft approach for as long as we are going to target this population, and reduce the smoking population in veterans.

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2.14 - FEDweek: VA Understaffing Leading to Burnout, Higher Attrition, Panel Told (30 September, Glen Allen, VA)

Persistent understaffing at VA is raising issues with patient care at its medical centers and contributing to burnout among employees in other short-staffed occupations that in turn leads to higher attrition and still more severe shortfalls, GAO has said.

In testimony before a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing, the GAO cited "large staffing shortages" at medical centers in positions including physicians, registered nurses, physician assistants, psychologists, and physical therapists, and "high attrition, increased workload, and burnout" among HR positions, for example.

It said that VA suffers a vacancy rate of about 11 percent in its Veterans Health Administration, including vacancies of more than 24,000 medical and dental positions alone. Department-wide, the latest vacancy figure is 49,000.

GAO said that the problems in part reflect the government's general challenges to recruit, retain, and develop workers, including "outmoded position classification and pay systems, ineffective recruiting and hiring processes and challenges in dealing with poor performers." However, others relate to VA's own problems such as a lack of a "modern and effective performance management system." It added that many recommendations of prior reports still have not been carried out, including that the VA develop a process to accurately count all physicians providing care at each VA medical center.

Meanwhile, the VA inspector general testified that the department has "chronic healthcare professional shortages since at least 2015," with 138 of 140 facilities reporting they have shortages in the medical officer occupational series and 108 in the nurse occupational series. Noncompetitive salaries are a "particular issue" which the VA is attempting to address with incentive and student debt repayment programs, but there is high turnover among high-performance staff with "follow-on impacts, as remaining staff became burned out from working overtime to cover existing vacancies."

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2.15 - The Times-Picayune: Veterans Affairs Medical Center to enforce stricter, nationwide smoking ban Tuesday (30 September, Emily Woodruff, New Orleans, LA)

At the main entrance of the New Orleans Veterans Affairs Medical Center, a large white easel with the words "No Smoking" sits about 50 feet from a long line of benches where several veterans are perched with cigarettes.

Starting October 1, those veterans will be asked to move completely off campus to smoke. A nationwide smoking ban will be implemented at all veteran's affairs facilities, including the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, which includes eight clinics serving 23

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parishes. Smoking has not been permitted at the new VA in New Orleans since it opened in 2016, but tighter regulations mean veterans waiting to be picked up will have to take their cigarettes elsewhere.

Will Whitcomb, 55, is one of those veterans. Waiting for a cab on Monday, his raised his eyebrows at the news that smoking wouldn't be allowed on the benches. After serving in the military for 11 years and touring in Iraq, he said that he wishes he could quit, but smoking offers a reprieve.

"It's kind of a crutch," said Whitcomb, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. "It keeps my mind occupied."

The ban represents a culture shift in the VA system, which has allowed for "smoking shelters" where patients could light up inside many hospitals.

"I remember when I started in the VA and they used to sell cigarettes in the retail store," said Fernando Rivera, the director of Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System, who started working at the VA in the 1980s.

Rivera said the ban is not so much about policing and penalizing veterans and VA employees, but rather changing behavior and culture over time.

"When we stopped selling cigarettes a long time ago there was a tremendous outcry," he recalled. "Now, there would be an outcry if we sold them."

According to Sonia Duffy, a professor at Ohio State University's College of Nursing and researcher at the Department of Veterans Affairs Ann Arbor Healthcare System, smoking bans do work.

"It's a good thing," she said. "I think veterans will benefit. Every time you institute another layer of a smoking ban, you do see more people quitting."

While the New Orleans hospital may have an easier time enforcing the ban because the new building has never had the climate-controlled smoking shacks, veterans do smoke directly outside the building and in their cars on the campus. A few have used e-cigarettes in the building.

"We'll have people who hide cigarettes, who are nervous about coming to the hospital," said Rivera. "It will require constant vigilance, reporting and educating. But our [ban] will be more of a reminder."

A history of tobacco promotion

Cigarettes were included with military rations until 1975.

"We used to have a butt can in the barracks," said Stephen Rizzo, a Vietnam veteran who was drafted in 1967. "There was no such thing as a no-smoking area," said the 71-year-old as he took a drag from a cigarette outside the VA hospital on Monday.

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Rizzo didn't know about the impending ban. "It's a good idea," he said. "That's their privilege to [enforce] that. But I saw a whole lot of cigarette butts on the ground here, so I thought it was OK," he said, pointing to a patch of grass outside the VA entrance.

Veterans have a higher incidence of smoking than the general population. Compared to those who have never served in the military, veterans smoke at double the rate—29% compared to 14%, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Smoking has profound effects on health. Over 80% of lung cancer patients are current or former smokers. Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S.

"Smoking just affects you systemically," said Duffy. "It can give you more hip fractures; it can give you bladder cancer."

But for people like Rizzo and Whitcomb, the ban highlights the need for a smoking alternative for veterans accustomed to the habit.

Whitcomb, who was also a fireman for 15 years, thinks the ban is the right thing to do. But he and other veterans point to a long history of smoking culture within the military as a roadblock for many patients who are accustomed to being able to walk outside to seek the relief of a cigarette.

Rizzo was a trucker after serving in the military. He would go through two or three packs a day to keep calm. "It's nerve-wracking driving down the street pulling a forty-foot trailer," he said. "I can't do without it."

The VA offers free smoking cessation programs to veterans and employees, but both Rizzo and Whitcomb said nicotine patches were not a substitute that worked for them. Whitcomb tried an e-cigarette a few months ago, but it didn't stick.

To change behavior, Rivera said the VA plans on pushing education more than penalizing.

"You can catch more flies with honey," he said. "My mother smoked three packs per day. I know how difficult it is to change that behavior. But it was the best thing to do for patients and staff."

The ban covers the grounds, parking lots and visiting cars. It extends to cigars, pipes and e-cigarettes and other vaping devices.

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2.16 - KFBB (ABC-5): Drive-Thru Flu Clinic at Fort Harrison VA Medical Center (30 September, Black Eagle, MT)

FORT HARRISON – The Montana VA will hold their 9th annual drive-thru flu clinic and health festival for Veterans on October 1st, from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in Parking lot A at the Fort Harrison VA Medical Center.

Flu shots are free for enrolled Veterans. The County Health Department will also be available from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to provide flu vaccines for family members. Health insurance will be accepted, or cash options are available.

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Health and wellness information will be available as part of the Fall Health Fest. Veterans and their family will be able to ask Montana VA health care professionals techniques on feeling better so they can enjoy the things they love for years to come.

“They have given us great feedback, that it's a lot more convenient,” says Katie Temple, a registered nurse.“They don't have to find a parking spot; they don't have to walk into the clinic and wait a few minutes for a nurse to give it. They can actually just get their flu shot and get some great health information and be on their way.”

Temple says between employee’s, family members and Veterans, they gave out 842 flu shots last year and are hoping to beat that this year as they have every year. She says they have many veterans who mark their calendar for the annual event.

For Veterans wanting a flu shot, but aren't able to attend the drive-thru clinic, they are asked to please contact their local VA clinic to inquire about dates and times that flu shots will be available. The Billings VA location will also be doing a walk-in clinic for Veterans.

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3. Business Transformation

3.1 - WBZ (CBS-4, Video): New ‘State-Of-The-Art’ Veterans Clinic To Be Built In Worcester (30 September, 1.3M uvm; Boston, MA)

WORCESTER (CBS/AP) — The University of Massachusetts Medical School and the Veterans Administration have announced plans to build a 53,000-square foot veterans outpatient clinic on campus.

The clinic in Worcester expected to open in 2021 will include 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy facilities, a clinical lab and a pharmacy.

It will replace a VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System facility on Lincoln Street in Worcester.

Ryan Lilly, director of the VA New England Healthcare System, said the announcement comes after years of hard work and planning to meet the needs of veterans in and around Worcester County.

John Collins, chief executive officer and director of VA Central Western Massachusetts, says combining primary care and medical specialties in one facility will improve access and the coordination of care.

“This large-scale, state-of-the-art veteran health care and education facility will support a growing veteran population and train future providers to ensure exceptional health care for those who served,” Collins said in a statement. “The new clinic, by combining primary care and numerous medical specialties in one facility, will improve the coordination of care and access for

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the veterans we serve in Worcester County and the surrounding region, which has long experienced the largest growth needs."

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3.2 - The Republican: UMass Medical School building new $75M community-based VA outpatient clinic, to open in 2021 in Worcester (30 September, Melissa Hanson, 932k uvm; Springfield, MA)

A new state-of-the-art community-based outpatient clinic for veterans is planned to open in 2021 at UMass Medical School in Worcester, officials announced Monday.

The clinic is planned to combine primary care and several medical specialties all in one facility, according to VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System and UMass Medical School.

A project totaling between $70 and $75 million, the facility will be located on the Route 9 corridor of the UMass campus in Worcester, overlooking Lake Quinsigamond. The medical school will construct the building and the VA will rent two floors in a longterm lease, officials said.

The clinic is planned to occupy 53,000 square feet on the first two levels of the new, four-story clinical building. That building is a total of 100,000 square feet, according to a news release.

UMass Medical School Chancellor Michael F. Collins said he has been pushing for the clinic for more than five years, after seeing a report that indicated veterans in Central Massachusetts did not have enough services in the region.

Collins, working with the federal government in attempts to plan to the clinic, was told "no" several times, he recalled after a Monday press conference.

"I just wasn't going to take no for answer," Collins said.

It's also personal for Collins, who mentors a few young men in the military and whose father was treated at the VA.

The clinic will have a major impact on Central Massachusetts veterans and their families, as they will no longer have to make an hour-long drive to Boston or Northampton for medical care.

Inside the clinic, there will be 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms designed for patient-aligned care teams. There will also be specialty care, like radiology, echocardiology, physical and occupational therapy, a clinical lab and a pharmacy, officials said.

At the clinic, there will be 270 parking spaces dedicated for VA patients and staff, the news release read.

"This large-scale, state-of-the-art Veteran health care and education facility will support a growing Veteran population and train future providers to ensure exceptional health care for those who served," said John P. Collins, the chief executive officer and director of VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System. "The new clinic, by combining primary care and numerous medical specialties in one facility, will improve the coordination of care and access for

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the Veterans we serve in Worcester County and the surrounding region, which has long experienced the largest growth needs."

In fiscal 2019, the current Worcester community-based outpatient clinic completed more than 36,000 appointments with more than 9,000 veteran patients.

Medical students will be able to practice and learn at the facility.

"Many medical schools do not have the privilege or luxury of being tightly linked with a veterans affairs hospital or clinic. And, yet, if you ask providers who have had that experience they will tell you there is no greater experience that they have ever had than being able to serve in that capacity by caring for our veterans," said Anne Larkin, the senior associate dean for educational affairs at UMass Medical School and a Navy veteran, whose roles included ship surgeon on the U.S.S. George Washington, an aircraft carrier.

Site preparation will begin late this year and the project is planned to be completed in mid-2021 as a LEED Silver certified building.

This new building will replace the VA's current facility on Lincoln Street, officials said.

A specialty clinic at 377 Plantation St., which opened in 2016 to treat patients requiring podiatry, audiology and optometry services, will remain at its current site.

Officials say plans for the clinic are because of collaboration by the VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System, UMass Medical School, Congressman James McGovern, current and former governors Charlie Baker and Deval Patrick and the state legislature.

"Strengthening and expanding access to healthcare for our veterans is one of the most important ways our nation can honor their service," said McGovern, a Worcester Democrat. "When I talk with veterans at meetings and town halls, this is the kind of facility they want. It is going to make a world of difference for folks in central Massachusetts who can now get more of the care they need right here in Worcester."

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3.3 - Telegram & Gazette: Veterans Administration to occupy new clinic on UMass Medical School campus (30 September, Brad Petrishen, 408k uvm; Worchester, MA)

The Veterans Administration Monday announced the completion of a long-desired deal that will see a new, larger facility built for veterans' care on the campus of University of Massachusetts Medical School.

"This is a day of celebration," U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, said at a news conference announcing the more than $70 million, 100,000-square-foot building, slightly more than half of which will be occupied by the VA.

The path to a facility to replace the VA's roughly 25,000 square-foot clinic at 605 Lincoln St. has been a rough one. Numerous politicians, including McGovern and then-Gov. Deval Patrick, trumpeted a much-hoped-for 100,000-square-foot clinic to be built at UMass at a Veterans Day press conference in 2014, but the plan was scrapped by the federal government in 2015.

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Administrators at the time cited legal issues as the reason – the plan was announced as a first-of-its kind partnership between the VA and UMass – but said they would forge ahead with plans to site a smaller, 40,000-square-foot facility at either UMass or 222 Brooks St.

As announced Monday, the VA will get 53,000 square feet in the new building, which UMass will build for $70 million to $75 million and lease to the VA. The new space will bring the total square footage for the VA in Worcester to 66,000 - more than double the amount local veterans had at this time in 2014.

The positive change is one of several at the VA of Central Western Massachusetts in the past five years under Director John P. Collins, who retired Monday after assuming the post in 2014.

“Your presence will be missed,” Francisco Urena, state secretary for Veterans’ Services, told Collins, who said afterward that more veterans are signing up for services for the first time here than any other location in New England.

Monday’s announcement furthers a partnership UMass and the VA have been building for years.

The VA in 2016 cut the ribbon on a 13,000-square-foot specialty care annex at UMass Medical School that brought audiology services to Worcester for the first time. That complex, which also offers podiatry and optometry, will remain at 377 Plantation St., officials said.

The new facility, projected to open in 2021 at 403 Belmont St., will offer 65 exam, consultation and procedure rooms, a clinical lab, a pharmacy and specialty care such as radiology, echocardiology and physical/occupational therapy.

There will be 270 parking spaces dedicated for VA patients and staff.

“The new clinic, by combining primary care and numerous medical specialties in one facility, will improve the coordination of care and access for the veterans we serve in Worcester County and the surrounding region, which has long experienced the largest growth needs,” John Collins said in prepared remarks.

VA leaders termed the announcement as a “critical step” for its presence in New England that will “greatly improve future delivery of care” for veterans in the region.

Speakers Monday noted that the development, especially after the setback in 2015, was far from a sure thing.

John Collins and multiple others thanked UMass Medical School’s chancellor, Dr. Michael F. Collins, for never giving up on the goal.

“This was going to happen,” Michael Collins said after the conference. “I wasn’t going to stop until it happened.”

The chancellor said the amount of space the VA will have in the new clinic is about the same as it would have had under the original 2014 plan.

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A mentor for several veterans, he said he felt passionately about improving the local care afforded those who serve the country.

The T&G in 2014 reported that the VA Central Western Massachusetts system had some of the longest wait times in the country, at which time officials pledged to improve.

Since then, the VA has opened the 377 Plantation St. facility and leased a second, 15,000-square foot office at UMass. The second space, which offered mental health services, will be incorporated into the new building.

The T&G in 2015 reported wait times were improving, while the system in 2016 announced it had received the government's highest internal quality rating.

According to the VA's website, the average wait time for a non-emergency appointment at 605 Lincoln St. is currently nine days.

That's among the best rates in the state, as wait times at other offices range from seven days in Framingham to 29 days in New Bedford.

John Collins said Monday that the VA of Central Western Massachusetts has added 20% more staff in the past five years, including managers who have improved scheduling practices.

While concerns about having to drive long distances for specialty care have in the past led some veterans to skip signing up at all, John Collins said improvements in the breadth of services offered in Worcester are bearing fruit.

Over the past five years, he said, the VA of Central Western Massachusetts had the highest percentage of growth of new veteran patients of any VA system in New England.

The system is also in the midst of about $60 million in renovations to its main facilities in Northampton, he said, and has added more resources tailored to female veterans and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I'm very proud of the staff," said the Shrewsbury resident and Army veteran, adding that he looks forward to using the VA system in his retirement.

The VA of Central Western Massachusetts offers primary, specialty and mental health care for veterans in Worcester, Hampden, Berkshire, Franklin and Hampshire counties. Its Worcester clinic completed more than 36,000 appointments with 9,000 veterans in fiscal 2019.

Michael Collins said having so many veterans coming to the UMass campus for services will do two main things: afford veterans better, more convenient care, and enhance the educational experience for medical students.

Medical schools and VA facilities have partnered throughout the country for decades, Michael Collins said, and medical students who do rounds with veterans learn a great deal.

Having the affiliation with the VA is a major improvement for UMass, he and other speakers said Monday, as it will lead to a better education for the many future doctors and nurses it trains.

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"(This impact) is simply enormous," said Anne Larkin, a Navy veteran who serves as UMass Medical School's senior associate dean for educational affairs.

Many local officials, including City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr., turned out for Monday's event, as did former VA officials who worked on the project for years, including Dr. Michael Mayo-Smith, who retired as head of the VA's New England office more than a year ago.

Site preparation for construction of the new clinic will begin later this year, officials said, and the LEED silver-certified building is expected to be completed in mid-2021.

The VA will occupy the first two floors of the four-story structure, Michael Collins said. Plans for the top two floors are not finalized.

Leaving its temporary headquarters at 403 Belmont St. will be Massachusetts Department of Transportation District 3, which is moving to a new facility on Plantation Street.

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4. DOD Cooperation / Electronic Health Records / MISSION Act Implementation

4.1 - Politico: **DOJ cracks down on $2.1B genetic testing scam** (30 September, Mohana Ravindranath, 14.4M uvm; Arlington, VA)

[…]

OSEHRA ON ITS LAST LEGS? — The Open Source Electronic Health Record Alliance will continue its operations in October, despite failing to generate adequate funds from the VA, the group said last week.

OSEHRA, a nonprofit established to improve and distribute the source code for VA's VistA EHR, hs struggled to sustain its operations, especially as the VA embarks on its massive Cerner implementation to replace VistA.

"In early August, we informed the community that unless we receive additional funding from VA, we would be forced to close down our operation," the group said to the open source community members this week. Still, "we are hopeful that we will be able to obtain the required funds by the end of the month."

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4.2 - WEAU (NBC-13, Video): **Mission Act to forgive medical debt, expand health coverage** (30 September, Denton Postlewait, 204k uvm; Eau Claire, WI)

CHIPPEWA FALLS, Wis. (WEAU) - Along with the debt forgiveness, the policy would allow veterans to get care from providers outside VA facilities.

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This means veterans can get the care they need, even if a VA hospital doesn't offer it.

"I think it's going to be more beneficial and help more veterans than the previous plan," said Chippewa County Veteran Services director, Travis Ludvigson.

Under a recently implemented policy by the Department of Veteran Affairs, eligible veterans could start receiving care from providers outside VA hospitals.

However, veterans still need to work with their local VA office.

“The biggest thing is, coordinate it with the VA,” said Ludvigson. “The mistake that was made in the past as well was a veteran would go and get service, but it wasn't authorized.”

Once approved, a veteran could receive specialty treatment closer to home.

“Anything specialty wise they would have to go to Minneapolis or go the other direction towards Tomah,” said Ludvigson. “That's a long drive for a lot of our veterans, especially the elderly or disabled.”

The Mission Act does what the old "Choice Plan" was intended to do.

“What the mission act did was open up additional areas that allowed veterans get access to non-VA care,” said Ludvigson. “They grandfathered in those individuals in the choice program and expanded it to six categories that they can utilize to get access to able to go into civilian healthcare.”

Those categories offer a wider range of coverage for veterans

“The VA can show that it is in the best interest of the veteran to continue the care with that individual, rather than starting over with a VA healthcare provider,” said Ludvigson.

A federal court ordered the VA to reimburse veterans for all expenses at facilities outside the VA system, a problem that stemmed from an issue with the choice plan.

“There was a third party involved in the scheduling and billing,” said Ludvigson. “There was a disconnect a lot of the time in communication, bills were not being paid to these facilities, the vets were then in turn getting charged those bills and sent to collections. So it became a big mess.”

Ludvigson says the biggest part is the low cost for veterans in the VA healthcare system

“The way that this program is set up, in some circumstances a veteran has co-pay for going for their service and that is all they have to pay,” said Ludvigson.

Ludvigson says he believes this policy is better because it fits veteran's specific needs.

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4.3 - Federal Computer Week: Can a joint DOD-VA oversight body catch up with health record deployment? (30 September, Adam Mazmanian, 45k uvm; Vienna, VA)

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Last Thursday marked the one-year anniversary of a joint statement signed by Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie and then-Defense Secretary James Mattis to establish a governance process for the joint implementation of Cerner electronic health record software.

The statement promised "an organizational structure that supports the delivery of a single, seamlessly integrated EHR that maximizes commercial health record interoperability" and "a detailed implementation timeline."

That organization has a proposed name and structure, but it hasn't really taken shape. Dubbed the FEHRM, for Federal Electronic Health Record Management, the organization has a director and deputy director but has yet to finalize a charter or get staffed up.

At a hearing last week, Rep. Jim Banks (R-Ind.), the ranking member of House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, said the moment may have passed for the FEHRM to provide leadership for the integration of the systems at VA and DOD.

"I think we must be realistic about what is achievable at this point. We need to turn the page on the idea of the FEHRM standing up the new EHRs. The critical decision-making window is closing. The FEHRM can still be helpful as a governance body to sustain the EHRs, but we have to calibrate expectations accordingly," Banks said.

The DOD is already rolling out the commercial software in a second round of go-live activations while VA is still waiting on an initial capability to go live in October of 2020. The VA is planning to spend at least $16 billion on its Cerner contract and associated infrastructure updates. DOD has more than $5 billion in contract spending; it's not clear how its infrastructure and program costs shake out.

Subcommittee Chair Rep. Susie Lee (D-Nev.) is still looking for the FEHRM to serve in an oversight and decision-making role as the twin projects move forward.

"This is an issue I've been pounding on," Lee told FCW in a Sept. 20 telephone interview. "We've been promised again and again that this entity will be created and have some teeth."

Lee and Banks are both backing an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, considered must-pass legislation expected to be signed into law by the end of 2019. The amendment characterizes the purpose of the FEHRM to include decision-making "on functional, technical and programmatic activities to promote interoperability" and requires the DOD and VA to provide funds, staff and authority to the oversight body.

The amendment was included in the House version of the NDAA, but it still has to survive a conference committee designed to align the House and Senate bills.

"I'm optimistic this amendment is going to get into the NDAA and pass," Lee said, "and we'll have some guidelines."

John Windom, who heads the health record modernization program office at VA, told Banks at last week's hearing that congressional oversight is helping to drive interagency decision-making at the level of joint governance boards, even without the FEHRM in place.

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"I can tell you we had 27 joint decisions that needed to be made approximately two and a half months ago, and we're sitting at a point with -- all but eight have been made," Windom said.

The DOD and VA vision for the FEHRM may be a little different from that of lawmakers. At a June 12 hearing of the same modernization subcommittee, William Tinston, the program executive officer for Defense Healthcare Management Systems, said that DOD and VA determined together that "the optimal and lowest risk alternative is to re-charter the DoD/VA [Interagency Program Office]" into the FEHRM. That rechartered body "will provide a more comprehensive, agile, and coordinated management authority to execute requirements necessary for a single, seamless integrated EHR."

DOD and VA have offered their input to the House and Senate defense committees with regard to the FEHRM language, but it remains to be seen what if anything comes out of conference.

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5. Suicide Prevention

5.1 - Portland Press Herald: Our View: Rise in suicide among veterans proves vexing (30 September, Editorial Board, 725k uvm; Portland, ME)

It should be shocking that 48 Maine military veterans died by suicide in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. Sadly, it is not.

It's not surprising because, despite a dip to 30 in 2016, Maine has suffered an average of 43 such deaths a year since 2010, every one a tragedy. It's not surprising because despite the attention the rise in veteran suicides nationwide has brought to the issue, the number has continued to increase through the last decade.

Most of all, it's not surprising because veterans not only deal with factors unique to themselves — the aftereffects of service and a familiarity with firearms chief among them — they are also influenced by the same factors that are contributing to the rise of suicide among all Americans.

As the report states, more than 45,000 Americans died by suicide in 2017, an average of about 124 a day, up from 86 in 2005. Maine has experienced that same upward trend. Suicide is the 10th-leading cause of death in the state, and Maine's suicide rate is well above both the national and New England rates.

The experience with veteran suicide tells us that it will be difficult to reverse that trend. As the problem escalated and drew attention, the VA took it on. But the department has been overwhelmed by the size and scope of the problem, causing a recent change in tactics.

President Donald Trump signed an executive order in March allowing other government agencies as well local governments and advocacy and social service organizations to get more involved.

"The department has adopted a comprehensive public health approach to suicide prevention, using bundled strategies that cut across various sectors — faith communities, employers,

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schools and health care organizations, for example — to reach veterans where they live and thrive," VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said in the report.

In one move, the department is taking nationwide an Arizona-based program that looks at the many contributing factors of suicide and steers help toward veterans that fit the bill, taking into account not only health but also barriers to service.

In Maine, the state Bureau of Veterans' Services is considering the use of voluntary gun safety plans to reduce suicide, a spokeswoman told WGME-TV last week. In 2017, 75 percent of veteran suicides in Maine were by firearm, as opposed to 55 percent overall, a difference that is nearly mirrored nationwide.

Earlier this year, the Legislature passed a "yellow flag" law that will allow for the mandatory confiscation of firearms belonging to people deemed by police and a medical professional to be a threat to themselves, which could help prevent Mainers from taking their own lives in a fleeting moment of crisis.

But perhaps the biggest hurdle in preventing suicide comes from the stigma that surrounds it. People in mental health crisis often do not want to come forward — and that goes double in the can-do, no-excuses culture of the military.

There are many other parts to solving this problem, including increasing access to health care, preventing access to lethal means, and building strong communities and local economies.

But first and foremost, people suffering a mental health crisis have to know they are not alone, and that they can feel comfortable coming forward.

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5.2 - WTSP (CBS-10, Video): 'Be There' program geared toward veterans in crisis (30 September, Jenny Dean, 554k uvm; Saint Petersburg, FL)

TAMPA, Fla. — It's the last day of September, which is also suicide prevention month. Suicide is a public health issue that affects all Americans, especially veterans. The Veterans Administration is doing what it can to teach everyone how to 'be there' with a new campaign.

Dr. Matt Miller is the acting director of Suicide Prevention for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. He says everyone can help. "Our greatest resource for veterans are those who are listening right now. In many ways, those who surround the veterans.

That's why the Veterans Administration launched a campaign called #BeThere for veterans. It encourages everyone to simply be willing to be there for a veteran who might be going through a difficult time. Miller says that starts with asking questions. "Asking questions openly about suicide, about how an individual is doing, about how an individual is feeling, about what's going on with them can be a really important first step," said Miller.

Miller says there are many websites sponsored by the V-A that can help guide you through these conversations and hopefully help you know exactly how to 'Be There.' "So we offer

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training on the topic. Anyone can view our free training and join the 20 thousand or so individuals who already have."

Psycharmor.org and Bethereforveterans.net are two websites with tons of information.

Finally, veterans are encouraged to reach out to other veterans. There's a connection there that others may not have. "You cannot underestimate the power of the peer and veteran to veteran contact. Consider reestablishing contact, checking in on how people are doing."

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5.3 - WIBW (CBS-13, Video): Former MO Sec. of State inspires fellow veteran to pursue healing from PTSD (28 September, Marleah Campbell, 311k uvm; Topeka, KS)

LAWRENCE, Kan. (WIBW) - Chuck Fox retired from a 20-year Air Force career in 2008. When he returned to civilian life, he noticed something was off.

"I was in what I felt like what was one of the darkest holes I had ever been in in my life, and I didn't know how I was going to get out of there," Fox said Friday at the VA's Community Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Summit at the Dole Institute of Politics. "I didn't really know what was wrong. I wasn't functioning well at work, all my energy was focused at work and I had no energy for my family. I lost interest in a lot of things that I used to really enjoy."

Last October, Fox caught notice of another veteran: former Missouri Secretary of State Jason Kander, who dropped out in the home stretch of the race for Kansas City mayor to heal his psychological wounds from war.

"I made the announcement that I was stepping back from public life in order to go finally get treatment after, at that point, almost 11 years since my combat deployment to Afghanistan, and got treatment for post-traumatic stress," Kander said. "It really made a huge difference in my life. Really my message to everyone is post-traumatic growth is achievable and worth pursuing."

That message stuck with Fox, who then sought treatment for his own PTSD.

"When Jason made his announcement, I knew it was okay," Fox said. "It's a challenge and it's not easy, but it's well worth your time."

"Confronting trauma, confronting post-traumatic stress is not easy," Kander said. "But it's incredibly worth it."

"It was like a 500 pound weight being lifted off your shoulders," Fox said of his life since seeking treatment. "It's just like I've been given a second chance in life."

The Veterans Crisis Line number is 1-800-273-8255.

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5.4 - Maine Public: Federal Data: 48 Maine Veterans Died By Suicide In 2017 (30 September, Patty Wight, 49k uvm; Lewiston, ME)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Forty-eight veterans died by suicide in Maine in 2017, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs — a number that has held relatively steady for the past several years.

The suicide prevention coordinator for Veterans Affairs in Maine, Tracy Charette, says a crisis line specifically for veterans is available, as is a warm line for family and friends seeking resources.

“What it speaks to is continuing to put our efforts into understanding it, addressing it as a community. That has been a big focus as we turn towards a public health model,” she says. “The big thing to recognize is that there’s help available. And things can and will get better.”

The number of veteran suicides in Maine has hovered in the upper 40s for the past several years, with the exception of 2016, when there were 29 deaths.

According to the VA report, 75 percent of veteran suicides involve firearms.

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6. Women Veterans / Homelessness / Benefits / Cemeteries

6.1 - CNN (Video): Trump moved by wounded veteran's performance (30 September, Betsy Klein, 131M uvm; Atlanta, GA)

It wasn't the 21-gun salute, a speech, or the pomp and circumstance that made Monday's Armed Forces Welcome Ceremony memorable, but rather, a musical performance by Army Captain Luis Avila.

At the conclusion of a swearing-in ceremony for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, Avila, a wounded veteran, sang "God Bless America."

He sat in a motorized wheelchair facing the guests of honor, including Milley, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, Defense Secretary Mark Esper, Vice President Mike Pence and President Donald Trump.

Avila was severely wounded by an improvised explosive device (IED) in Afghanistan in 2011. He lost his left leg, suffered two strokes and two heart attacks, as well as anoxic brain damage that has left him paralyzed, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Music therapy has been "a crucial rehabilitation tool" for Avila's healing process, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Avila's stunning performance and resilience left the nation's top military officials visibly moved. Trump moved his head, bounced his knee, and sang the words along with Avila as he sang the first verse. The entire crowd joined in for the second chorus. As he finished the song, Trump rushed arms open to embrace Avila and his wife, Claudia.

Avila later presented Trump, Pence and other officials with a challenge coin.

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During remarks earlier in the ceremony, Dunford referenced Avila and his fellow wounded warriors.

"At the end of this ceremony, you will hear Army Cpt. Luis Avila sing a tribute to America. Captain Avila was seriously wounded in action and today, represents all of the wounded warriors and killed in action of our military. Both our friends and enemies alike should know that we who wear the uniform of the United States of America, the cloth of our nation, we are all Captain Avilas," Dunford said.

"And we are all willing to lay it on the line every day to risk grievous injury or death to preserve this experiment in liberty that we call America and pass it on to the next generation," Dunford added.

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6.2 - FOX News: Funeral service for veteran with no immediate family expected to draw crowd (30 September, Bradford Betz, 73.9M uvm; New York, NY)

A Florida funeral service for a veteran who had no immediate family members is nonetheless expected to draw a crowd .

Naples resident Edward Pearson, a U.S. Army veteran who served from 1962 to 1964, died last month at the age of 80, according to the funeral home.

The funeral home wrote that Pearson has “no immediate family” and invited the public to attend his Tuesday burial service with military honors at Sarasota National Cemetery.

Michael Hoyt, the funeral director of Legacy Options in Naples, told Tampa Bay’s Fox 13, “We wanted to get the message out to the community to let people know that.”

Pearson’s story was shared thousands of times on social media, according to the station. “It kind of went crazy all at once,” Hoyt said.

Only two people – Hoyt and another veteran – had planned to go to Pearson’s burial service. Now, the cemetery is anticipating hundreds of strangers to arrive.

“We do have things set in place to accommodate parking and the overflow of people who show up,” said Ed Lyons, a veteran and assistant director of the cemetery.

“It tugs at your heart because the things that veterans do for our country, what they sacrifice,” Lyons said. “You don’t want to think of anyone being alone or laid to rest without anyone being there to honor them.”

Earlier this month, a similar set of circumstances played out after hundreds of people – including members of the Air Force and the Patriot Guard – packed into a cemetery to honor a veteran whom they'd never met.

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6.3 - Miami Herald (Video): This veteran had no family to bury him. He won't be laid to rest alone (30 September, Mark Young, 7M uvm; Miami, FL)

It was a small obituary for Edward K. Pearson, 80, that appeared in a local newspaper recently.

It simply said he was going to be interred at Sarasota National Cemetery on Tuesday and that, "This veteran has no immediate family and all are welcome to attend."

The obituary soon hit social media and the response has been overwhelming as hundreds of people who have never met Pearson are pledging to attend the veteran's funeral.

"I've certainly never seen anything like this," said Legacy Options funeral director Michael Hoyt. "It's good to know people are coming to support this veteran who has served and probably don't even know him."

Hoyt said the funeral home has received calls from all over the from people who want to attend, including from one person from Canada. Others have called just to offer emotional support.

Pearson served in the U.S. Army from 1962-1964 and was honorably discharged. According to public records, he went on to become an engineer and worked for Marriott Hotel Services Inc.

Hoyt said no family ever claimed the remains, but that ultimately a good friend of his made the arrangements for the Sarasota National Cemetery knowing that Pearson was a veteran.

Services begin at 12:30 p.m. on Tuesday and Pearson will be interred with full military honors and will likely be sent off with many strangers taking the time to pay their respects.

The cemetery is located at 9810 SR 72 in Sarasota.

Part of what made Pearson's obituary viral was a tweet sent out by CNN's Jake Tapper and the news that a veteran was about to be laid to rest with no one in attendance soon sprawled across the nation.

Pearson will no doubt be laid to rest on behalf of a grateful community and on behalf of a grateful nation.

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6.4 - Connecting Vets: Congresswoman introduces bill to end 'epidemic' of harassment, sexual assault at VA (30 September, Abbie Bennett, 5.8M uvm; Washington, DC)

After a veteran and senior policy advisor on the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force said she was sexually assaulted at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center, a congresswoman has filed a bill to combat the issue.

Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., on Monday introduced the Stop Harassment and Sexual Assault at VA Act, which would create a department-wide policy to stop "this epidemic of rampant" harassment and sexual assault Brownley says "too often occurs" at VA facilities nationwide.

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Last week, (b) (6) a Naval intelligence officer now serving in the Reserves, said she was assaulted Sept. 20 in the atrium of the VA by a man she suspected was another veteran who slammed his body against hers, pressed himself against her and said "You look like you could use a good time."

(b) (6) was waiting for a doctor's appointment and said she was carrying a draft of legislation to help combat sexual assault and harassment in her purse when she was attacked.

Brownley, who chairs the Congressional Women Veterans Task Force launched in March, said she has "continuously" heard from veterans about the prevalence of assault and harassment at VA.

"Shockingly, studies show that at least one in four women veterans experience sexual and gender-based harassment at VA facilities," she said. Most recently, we learned about a case in California, where a VA doctor was convicted of sexually assaulting five patients. Two weeks ago, a member of my own staff was recently assaulted at the VA in Washington, DC while waiting for her appointment."

Earlier this year, Brownley said she urged VA to address the issue but "it has become abundantly clear that VA's internal policies are wholly inadequate and ineffective.

"For far too long, women veterans have been treated as an invisible minority and their concerns have not been heard. I want to say to them: we see you, we hear you, and we are working hard to ensure that you have safe, welcoming, and unfettered access to the benefits that you have rightfully earned."

The bill not only requires a department-wide policy, it also requires VA to hold mandatory annual training for employees.

(b) (6) said multiple people, including VA staff, witnessed her assault "out in the open" but most "said nothing." She said she reported her assault to multiple VA staffers, but it was not until she spoke to her doctor that the police were called.

The bill would "ensure that VA takes action to respond to harassment and sexual assault when it occurs," Brownley said. ". It will ensure that VA employees and contractors report instances of harassment or sexual assault that they witness at facilities so these instances can be properly addressed. It will ensure that there are designated points-of-contact at each VA facility to receive these reports."

The bill also requires VA to provide an annual report to Congress on harassment and assault of veterans and others at VA facilities and requires the department to ensure that veterans receive information and education on sexual harassment and assault, including how to report incidents.

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6.5 - Military Times: Veterans benefits will see a cost-of-living bump this year, but how much? (30 September, Leo Shane III, 1.7M uvm; Vienna, VA)

Veterans will see a cost-of-living increase in their benefits payouts later this year, but it likely won't be as big as the last one they received.

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Last week, President Donald Trump signed into law the annual Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, which guarantees that a host of veterans benefits will see the same annual boost as Social Security recipients.

Veterans benefits covered include disability compensation, compensation for dependents, clothing allowances, and dependency and indemnity compensation checks.

The measure is typically just a formality — it passed Congress again this year with no opposition — but is required annual work for lawmakers because federal statute does not link annual COLA increases for the two separate payouts. Legislative efforts in recent years to make the increases automatic for veterans have proven unsuccessful.

Navy veteran Elaine Lauria, D-Va., sponsored the measure and called it an important way for lawmakers to honor their commitment to individuals who served honorably in the armed forces.

"Providing quality benefits to our veterans and their dependents can change lives," she said.

The official cost-of-living boost for social security beneficiaries won't be announced until next month, but multiple analysts have said they expect it to be below the 2.8 percent adjustment awarded last January.

The annual COLA calculation is based on a series of economic indicators, including the private sector wage growth. In the last decade, Social Security recipients (and individuals receiving veterans benefits) have gone without an annual increase three times. It has only gone about 2 percent twice in that span.

Frequently, lawmakers don't finalize the link between the veterans cost-of-living increase and the Social Security one until later in the fall, after the figure has been announced. Because of the timing of check distribution and the federal calendar, the increases in veterans benefits will be reflected in individuals December payouts.

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6.6 - Press-Telegram: How Rock For Vets uses music to help veterans through the tough times (30 September, Harry Saltzgaver, 117k uvm; Long Beach, CA)

Countless studies have shown the healing power of music.

So when Frank and Katherine McIlquham and their friends started Rock For Vets in 2012, they knew they could make a difference in helping wounded veterans.

"I got together with Jerry Salas," Frank McIlquham said. "He's with the band El Chicano, and he's a Vietnam vet. We started a music program for the vets at the VA Hospital."

Veterans wandered into the music room and picked up an instrument, some for the first time, he said. After some quiet encouragement and a lesson or two, the veterans started playing together.

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“Some of these guys were suffering a lot some with PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder),” McIlquham said. “The guys from Afghanistan, there was a lot of survivors’ remorse. We’d be sort of quasi-counselors in between their sessions.”

As the program grew, there was some friction with hospital administration, and Rock For Vets started looking for a new home. In 2015, they hooked up with Tim Cable, the manager of the Scottish Rite Event Center near downtown. The center became Rock For Vets’ rehearsal hall and home. Mcilquham said they met there almost every Monday night.

“It’s a lot more than music now,” McIlquham said. “We help with finding jobs, family, stuff like that. And it’s all free for the vets, including the music equipment and instruments.”

Some 300 veterans have gone through programs with the organization.

Rock For Vets puts together combos to perform around Long Beach, including an annual Memorial Day fundraiser at the Signal Hill Applebee’s. The group performs eight or nine times a year for various events, and the combo often includes female veterans “along with the old guys.”

Free to veterans doesn’t mean there is no cost, though. In addition to the Memorial Day event and smaller donation drives, the big annual party is the Rollin’ With The Rat Pack casino night.

High rollers are expected Saturday, Oct. 5, at the Scottish Rite Event Center for an evening of Vegas-style games, live entertainment, adult libations and gourmet food. There will be raffles, a silent auction and a best-dressed contest for those in Rat Pack Vegas attire.

Tickets are $100 per person and include two drinks and starter chips. They can be purchased in advance at the website, musicistheremedy.org, or at the door the night of the event. The Scottish Rite Event Center is at 855 Elm Ave., and there is free parking.

For more information, email katherine@musicistheremedy.org or call 866-597-1116.

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7. Other

7.1 - Forbes: Christmas Comes In September, Not December, For Federal Contractors (30 September, Adam Andrzejewski, 63.7M uvm; New York, NY)

The largest federal agencies just completed a billion-dollar, year-end spending binge that likely exceeded $100 billion. Much of the excessive spending was waste. And every dime was borrowed, which added to our nation’s $22.6 trillion national debt.

It was the largest extravaganza of taxpayer abuse in U.S. government history. It just ended on September 30th – the feds fiscal year-end.

Agencies worry that spending less than their budget permits might prompt Congress to appropriate less money in the next fiscal year. To avoid this, federal agencies embark on an annual spending spree to avoid the impression they can operate on less. This “use-it-or-lose-it” spending phenomenon happens every year.

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Last year, $97 billion was spent in a mad rush. In the final week, our auditors at OpenTheBooks.com found $53 billion in federal contracts went out the door including $12,000 foosball tables and millions spent on lobster tail and snow crab.

While the final tally of spending for September 2019 will not be available for 90 days, we found similar spending patterns already emerging this year. Here are some current examples gleaned from a small sample of federal data that is currently available:

- Wine, beer, and whiskey: $11,000 on 'alcohol' already disclosed | $310,000 last year. Yes, the year-end spending binge is a big party on your dime. The State Department likes to restock the liquor cabinet and take the edge off of international diplomacy by purchasing beer, wine, and whiskey.
- Loading the gun locker: $17,000 on rounds of .223 ammunition. Veterans Affairs (VA) just purchased more rounds for their “military police long gun program” (AR-15-style weaponry). Last year, more than $800 million loaded the gun locker for fifteen agencies – including the Small Business Administration, Environmental Protection Agency and the Office of Personnel Management.
- Passenger vehicles: $59 million spent on 'passenger motor vehicles' already disclosed | $300 million last year. This year, already, the State Department purchased $33 million worth of passenger vehicles to update their fleet. That’s literally driving up taxpayer costs. In addition, nearly $1 million has already been spent on 'motorcycles, motor scooters, and bicycles' by the Department of Interior. Last year, $10 million went out the door. This does not include $135,000 on snow mobiles and $650,000 on golf carts.
- Office furniture: $39 million on 'office furniture' already disclosed | $490 million last year. Homeland Security just placed orders for $8 million in furniture. Justice bought $2 million. Commerce, Health & Human Services, State, and General Services were all over $1 million each.

It’s a big problem when the federal agencies can barely spend all the money that Congress throws at them.

There’s no clearer example of bloat in the Pentagon’s military budget than use-it-or-lose-it year-end spending. Last year, in our OpenTheBooks Oversight Report, Use-It-Or-Lose-It-Spending FY2018, we found the Department of Defense (DOD) spent $61.2 billion on contracting in September. During the entire previous year, DOD only spent $244.8 billion on contracting (FY2017).

That’s no way to run the world’s finest military.

The year-end ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ spending spree has grown sharply in recent years: from $69.6 billion (FY2015) to over $100 billion. There’s so much government spending at stake that it distorts our national economy. Both Bloomberg and ZeroHedge recently warned investors not to react to “surprise” upside economic growth indicators. The culprit? The September federal spending binge.

In the scramble to spend everything, federal agencies often break the rules that are supposed to restrain them and spend millions of taxpayer dollars anyway.

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In 2017, a local VA hospital purchased a $2.3 million surgery robot at year-end. The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) found that it was the 84th surgery robot at the hospital and a duplicate of an existing one. Furthermore, there was no planning, review, or proper approval – which delayed installation and use of the robot for six-months.

Were they building a surgery robot army?

Thankfully, a "Grinch" has emerged on Capitol Hill – U.S. Senator Joni Ernst (R-IA) – to combat the $100 billion in mad-dash federal year-end spending. Ernst recently introduced legislation (S.1238) that cracks down on "Christmas in September." It's a simple bill that would revolutionize federal procurement by limiting agency spending in the final two months of the year to an average of the previous ten months.

It's about time that Washington DC got serious about stopping waste, fraud, corruption and taxpayer abuse.

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7.2 - KHOU (CBS-11): Katy woman accused of defrauding VA of more than $600K (30 September, Chloe Alexander, 1.1M uvm; Houston, TX)

KATY, Texas — A Katy woman has been charged for allegedly defrauding the Department of Veterans Affairs of more than $600,000.

A federal grand jury indicted Tammy Wilson, 49, on mail fraud, health care fraud and making a false statement relating to health care matters.

According to the charges, Wilson is a widow of a military veteran. Her husband allegedly died of service-related injuries, after which she is eligible to participate in the Civilian Health and Mental Program of the Department of Veteran Affairs Program (CHAMPVA). The program allows the VA to reimburse for eligible out-of-pocket prescription expense.

The U.S. Attorney's Office said from 2013 to 2017, Wilson submitted falsified prescription summaries to CHAMPVA. She claimed to have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for prescription medications, so under the program, the VA reimbursed her more than $640,000 for those claims.

However, the indictment alleges the pharmacies never dispensed the prescriptions as she had claimed.

Wilson is considered the biggest recipient of CHAMPVA funds in the world, according to the charges.

If convicted, she faced up to 20 years in federal prison and possible $250,000 maximum fine.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Bader, Christine E.
Sent: 8 Jan 2020 14:17:20 +0000
To: Byrne, Jim
Subject: Draft IG memo
Attachments: Draft IG memo_ceb.docx

Christine Bader, PhD, RN
Senior Advisor
Office of the Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20420
Office phone: 202-461-(b)(6)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Comment [BCE]: (b)(5)

As you know, Ms. (b) (6) a Professional Staff Member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, alleged that on September 20, 2019, at approximately 11 a.m., she was sexually assaulted by (b)(5)

(b)(5)

(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Byrne, Jim
Sent: 8 Jan 2020 17:25:00 +0000
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC)
Cc: Christine E. Bader ([redacted]@va.gov)
Subject: Draft IG memo
Attachments: Draft IG memo_ceb.docx

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

As you know, Ms. (b) (6) a Professional Staff Member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, alleged that on September 20, 2019, at approximately 11 a.m., she was sexually assaulted by a (b)(5)

(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James
Sent: 13 Jan 2020 22:37:46 +0000
To: Byrne, Jim;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Powers, Pamela
Cc: Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Sir – you're right, but I don't think this will be the last.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-7(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 5:37 PM
To: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Glad to sign when it reaches (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Monday, Jan 13, 2020, 5:18 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Byrne, Jim (b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

When are we sending that (b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 4:33 PM
To: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>; Byrne, Jim <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes

Pam / Jim,

The query below is about a story for Stars & Stripes by a reporter who is putting together about sexual harassment at VA facilities.

Of particular interest is the fact that the reporter has "interviewed (b) (6) presumably about her experience at the D.C. VAMC.

I can discuss further as you direct.

As to the reporter's other questions, we are still working responses.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461(b)(6)
Email:(b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 4:01 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Stars and Stripes

You too! Hope you enjoyed some time off.

Switching topics: I am working on another story that is probably being published later tomorrow regarding sexual harassment at VA facilities.

I spoke to a woman that complained of consistent harassment from male patients at the Frank M. Tejeda VA Outpatient Clinic in San Antonio, Texas. She says male patients will always get the

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door for her and issue some compliments about her looks. She's a patient seeking mental health treatment for PTSD related to sexual trauma and says the men who appear to "just be hanging out" at the San Antonia facility make her skip a lot of appointments. She also said it has been difficult to get a female mental health provider.

I also interviewed (b) (6) which I'm sure you're familiar with that story.

https://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/house-committee-urges-change-after-staff-member-reports-assault-at-va-hospital-in-dc-1.600584

The bottom line of the story will be: While women are overall happy with the VA's services, they are not happy about the culture of harassment. Harassment also appears to largely come from older male patients.

Would it be possible to get answers to these by around 2 p.m. tomorrow?

-Does the VA have a comment about these cases of sexual harassment/assault?

-If a woman experiences a harassment/assault issue at a VA facility, what is their best course of action?

-What has the VA done to ensure a safe environment for women? What else can be done moving forward?

-Are there repercussions for patients who act inappropriately or commit crimes such as sexual assault at a VA facility?

Again, thank you so much for your time.

From: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:42 PM
To: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

No problem. Happy New Year!

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:39 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Stars and Stripes

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Well, never mind then. We were under the impression this was part of the package the the federal funding approved a few weeks ago. Thanks for the hustle though!

From: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:29 PM
To: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Steve, glad to look into this for you. Just making sure you're tracking that the document you're referring to is from last March.

Thanks,
Christina

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:06 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Stars and Stripes

The focus is just something super quick and short, that the VA formally asked for legislation on a smoking ban.

I would also like to triple check I'm reading that correctly, and possibly get a quote I can attribute to the secretary or you.

I'd like to publish around noonish tomorrow if you think that works on your end?

From: Mandreucci, Christina M (b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:02 PM
To: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Hi, Steve – what's the specific focus of your story and deadline?

Thanks,
Christina

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 2:38 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Stars and Stripes

Hey Christina, hope all is well.

Writing a quick story about the VA calling for legislation in the budget to make its facilities 100% smoke free.

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https://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2020VAbudgetVolumeIsupplementalInformationAndAppendices.pdf

If you don't mind confirming just to bring me up to speed: There is a smoking ban, correct? The problem is it doesn't always cover employees?

Rep. Wenstrup proposed a bill last year. Does the VA formally endorse that bill?
https://wenstrup.house.gov/updates/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=403766

Thank you for your time.

Best,

Steve Beynon
Veterans Reporter - Stars and Stripes
202-321-0462
@StevenBeynon

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Byrne, Jim
Sent: 14 Jan 2020 00:24:02 +0000
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC);Hutton, James;Powers, Pamela;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Cc: Cashour, Curtis
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

My email was delayed going out. All good.

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Jan 13, 2020, 6:06 PM
To: Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>, Byrne, Jim (b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Good (b)(5)

VR Bill

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 6:05 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Byrne, Jim <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Pam - Agreed. We'll (b)(5)

James

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Powers, Pamela (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Jan 13, 2020, 6:02 PM
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>, Hutton, James (b)(6) @va.gov>, Byrne, Jim <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

I am not (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Pamela Powers
VA Chief of Staff

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Jan 13, 2020, 5:55 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Byrne, Jim <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

James, I have (b)(5)

(b)(5)

Vr Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 5:42 PM
To: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Adding Bill Hudson….

DEPSEC,

We would like to send this response. Please let us know if this sounds right. It is similar to the approach we are taking in Clarksburg:

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Regarding (b) (6) (b) (6) **allegation in the upcoming Stars & Stripes article**

(b)(5)

For questions on the status of that investigation, we refer you to the independent inspector general. Contacts there are (b)(6) @va.gov and (b)(6) @va.gov

---

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461 (b)(6)
Email (b)(6) @va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 5:37 PM
To: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Glad to sign when it reaches (b)(5)

(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Monday, Jan 13, 2020, 5:18 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

When are we sending that (b)(5)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 4:33 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: FW: Stars and Stripes

Pam / Jim,

The query below is about a story for Stars & Stripes by a reporter who is putting together about sexual harassment at VA facilities.

Of particular interest is the fact that the reporter has "interviewed (b) (6) presumably about her experience at the D.C. VAMC.

I can discuss further as you direct.

As to the reporter's other questions, we are still working responses.

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6)@va.gov

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 4:01 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Stars and Stripes

You too! Hope you enjoyed some time off.

Switching topics: I am working on another story that is probably being published later tomorrow regarding sexual harassment at VA facilities.

I spoke to a woman that complained of consistent harassment from male patients at the Frank M. Tejeda VA Outpatient Clinic in San Antonio, Texas. She says male patients will always get the door for her and issue some compliments about her looks. She's a patient seeking mental health treatment for PTSD related to sexual trauma and says the men who appear to "just be hanging out" at the San Antonia facility make her skip a lot of appointments. She also said it has been difficult to get a female mental health provider.

I also interviewed (b) (6) which I'm sure you're familiar with that story.

https://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/house-committee-urges-change-after-staff-member-reports-assault-at-va-hospital-in-dc-1.600584

The bottom line of the story will be: While women are overall happy with the VA's services, they are not happy about the culture of harassment. Harassment also appears to largely come from older male patients.

Would it be possible to get answers to these by around 2 p.m. tomorrow?

-Does the VA have a comment about these cases of sexual harassment/assault?

-If a woman experiences a harassment/assault issue at a VA facility, what is their best course of action?

-What has the VA done to ensure a safe environment for women? What else can be done moving forward?

-Are there repercussions for patients who act inappropriately or commit crimes such as sexual assault at a VA facility?

Again, thank you so much for your time.

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From: Mandreucci, Christina M. <C(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:42 PM
To: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

No problem. Happy New Year!

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
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Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:29 PM
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Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Steve, glad to look into this for you. Just making sure you're tracking that the document you're referring to is from last March.

Thanks,
Christina

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:06 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M.(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Stars and Stripes

The focus is just something super quick and short, that the VA formally asked for legislation on a smoking ban.

I would also like to triple check I'm reading that correctly, and possibly get a quote I can attribute to the secretary or you.

I'd like to publish around noonish tomorrow if you think that works on your end?

From: Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 3:02 PM

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

To: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Hi, Steve – what's the specific focus of your story and deadline?

Thanks,
Christina

From: Beynon, Steven <Beynon.Steven@stripes.com>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 2:38 PM
To: Mandreucci, Christina M (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Stars and Stripes

Hey Christina, hope all is well.

Writing a quick story about the VA calling for legislation in the budget to make its facilities 100% smoke free.

https://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2020VAbudgetVolumeIsupplementalInformationAndAppendices.pdf

If you don't mind confirming just to bring me up to speed: There is a smoking ban, correct? The problem is it doesn't always cover employees?

Rep. Wenstrup proposed a bill last year. Does the VA formally endorse that bill?
https://wenstrup.house.gov/updates/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=403766

Thank you for your time.

Best,

Steve Beynon
Veterans Reporter - Stars and Stripes
202-321-0462
@StevenBeynon

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Byrne, Jim
Sent: 14 Jan 2020 20:45:26 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela;Hutton, James;Hudson, William A. (OGC);Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Cc: Cashour, Curtis;Bader, Christine E.;Tucker, Brooks;Mandreucci, Christina M.
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Sorry for the late engagement on the below string of emails. This has evolved into a solid statement. thanks

---

From: Powers, Pamela (b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 14, 2020 3:14 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Bader, Christine E. (b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Sorry, I was on the other line. That works great.

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 14, 2020 3:02 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Byrne, Jim (b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <W@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)k@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Bader, Christine E. (b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks (b)(6)@va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. (b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Pam,

Tried to call you.

Brooks is with the Secretary and showed this to him. He suggests something along these lines:

Statement Regarding Washington DC VAMC Sexual Assault Allegations

(b)(5)

James

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email (b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 14, 2020 2:59 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Bader, Christine E. <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Jim, what are your (b)(5)
(b)(5)

From: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 14, 2020 2:47 PM
To: Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Bader, Christine E. <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Pam,

Below is a draft statement for Stars & Stripes. It is designed to be very strong. I realize it is (b)(5)

Statement Regarding Washington DC VAMC Sexual Assault Allegations

(b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(5)

James

James Hutton
Assistant Secretary
Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420
Office: 202-461-(b)(6)
Email: (b)(6)@va.gov
Twitter: @jehutton
VA on Facebook . Twitter . YouTube . Flickr . Blog

From: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 13, 2020 7:22 PM
To: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Powers, Pamela <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Cc: Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Bader, Christine E. <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Stars and Stripes

Nothing from my call with the (b)(5)

(b)(5)

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Monday, Jan 13, 2020, 5:55 PM
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(5)

Vr Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
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202-461-(b)(6)

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Rep. Wenstrup proposed a bill last year. Does the VA formally endorse that bill?
https://wenstrup.house.gov/updates/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=403766

Thank you for your time.

Best,

Steve Beynon
Veterans Reporter - Stars and Stripes
202-321-0462
@StevenBeynon

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Byrne, Jim
Sent: 14 Jan 2020 23:40:21 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela ((b) (6) @va.gov)
Subject: FW: Latest edits
Attachments: Draft to Takano2-jeh.docx

We are chopping on a few more (b)(5)
(b)(5)

From: Byrne, Jim
Sent: Tuesday, January 14, 2020 6:27 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6) @va.gov>; Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC) <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Haverstock, Cathleen (b)(6) @va.gov>; Hipolit, Richard (OGC) (b)(6) @va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6) @va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks @va.gov>
Subject: Latest edits

OGC, thank you for the initial draft. A few more proposed edits. I am not (b)(5)
(b)(5)
Thanks

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter is in further response to your September 20, 2019, letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding an alleged sexual assault in the atrium of the Washington, DC VA Medical Center.

On October 16, 2019, I wrote to you with my sentiments about these serious allegations and described the steps VA is taking to make women Veterans feel more welcome at VA facilities. I also informed you that VA immediately (b)(5) reported Ms. (b) (6) allegations (b)(5) to its independent Office of the Inspector General (OIG) (b)(5) (b)(5) o conduct a thorough criminal investigation, as well as informing the Deputy Attorney General of the United States of this most serious allegation. Since that time, VA has cooperated fully with the O (b)(5) IG and has made repeated (b)(5) requests that Inspector General Michael Missal or his staff (b)(5) share the results o (b)(5) the OIG investigation so we could assess whether any further actions are needed.

Based on our most recent discussions with (b)(5) VA Inspector General Michael Missal and officials in the U.S. Department of Justice (b)(5) we understand that the matter is now closed, and no charges will be filed. We believe that VA is a safe place for all Veterans to enter and receive care and services, but the unsubstantiated claims raised by (b)(5) you and your staff could deter our Veterans from seeking the care they need and deserve. Even prior to this allegation VA was conducting education of staff on the proper handling of all forms of harassment. We will continue these efforts.

We look forward to a statement from you recognizing the closing of this investigation and assuring Veterans that they are safe (b)( ) in VA facilities.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission and our Nation's Veterans.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

cc:

The Honorable Phil Roe

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Ranking Member

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Sent: 15 Jan 2020 02:27:43 +0000
To: McVicker, Carrie A.;Powers, Pamela
Subject: FW: Latest edits
Attachments: Draft to Takano2-jeh.docx

Carrie - can you format the below very first thing in the morning for SECVA review?

Chris

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Tuesday, Jan 14, 2020, 6:26 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Haverstock, Cathy <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hipolit, Richard (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: Latest edits

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
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Washington, DC 20515

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Thank you for your continued support of our mission and our Nation's Veterans.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

cc:

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Ranking Member

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC)
Sent: 15 Jan 2020 12:41:00 +0000
To: Byrne, Jim;Hutton, James;Mandreucci, Christina M.;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC);Haverstock, Cathy;Hipolit, Richard (OGC);Cashour, Curtis;Tucker, Brooks
Subject: RE: Latest edits
Attachments: Draft to Takano2-clean.docx, Draft to Takano2-track all changes.docx, SECVA Signed dated 10-16-2019 VIEWS # 1493001.pdf, 20190920 Ltr. to SECVA from Chairman Takano 1493001.pdf

I made (b)(5) (b)(5)
(b)(5)

VR Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461-(b)(6)

From: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 14, 2020 6:27 PM
To: Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) (b)(6)@va.gov>; Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Haverstock, Cathy <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hipolit, Richard (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis (b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: Latest edits

OGC, thank you for the initial draft. A few more proposed edits. I am not (b)(5)
(b)(5)

Thanks

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

The Honorable Mark Takano
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter is in further response to your September 20, 2019, letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding an alleged sexual assault in the atrium of the Washington, DC VA Medical Center.

On October 16, 2019, I wrote to you with my sentiments about these serious allegations and described the steps VA is taking to make women Veterans feel more welcome at VA facilities. I also informed you that VA immediately reported Ms. (b) (6) allegations to its independent Office of the Inspector General (OIG) to conduct a thorough criminal investigation and informed the Deputy Attorney General of the United States of this most serious allegation. Since that time, VA has cooperated fully with the OIG and has made repeated requests that Inspector General Michael Missal or his staff share the results of the OIG investigation so we could assess whether any further actions are needed.

Based on our most recent discussions with VA Inspector General Missal and officials in the U.S. Department of Justice, we understand that the matter is now closed, and no charges will be filed. We believe that VA is a safe place for all Veterans to enter and receive care and services, but the unsubstantiated claims raised by you and your staff could deter our Veterans from seeking the care they need and deserve. Even prior to this allegation VA was conducting education of staff on the proper handling of all forms of harassment. We will continue these efforts.

We look forward to a statement from you recognizing the closing of this investigation and assuring Veterans that they are safe in VA facilities.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission and our Nation's Veterans.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

cc:

The Honorable Phil Roe
Ranking Member

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

cc:

The Honorable Phil Roe

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Ranking Member

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

October 16, 2019

The Honorable David P. Roe, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Roe:

This is in response to Chairman Takano's September 20, 2019, letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding an alleged sexual assault in the atrium of the Washington, DC VA Medical Center.

These are serious allegations and VA is treating them as such. The Department immediately turned this matter over to its independent Inspector General and the Office of the Deputy Attorney General to conduct a thorough criminal investigation. I have asked the Inspector General to provide me a copy of his findings and notice of any criminal referral to law enforcement. Given the alleged incident occurred almost a month ago and the allegations were made public soon after, I am hopeful those findings can be provided to both of us without delay.

While we await the Inspector General's findings, I can share with you what VA is doing to make women Veterans feel more welcomed. VA recognizes that all Veterans should feel safe and welcomed in VA facilities, and that at times women Veterans have reported harassment by others. VA launched a campaign of education, reporting, and accountability to end harassment of Veterans and to help VA staff and Veterans intervene if harassment occurs. We developed posters, videos, and training materials and implemented the program at all our facilities. I want Veterans to know that VA has been working to ensure all Veterans can engage fully in their own health care in a welcoming and mutually respectful environment. We are proud of our care for women Veterans and are working to increase their trust and knowledge of VA services, so they will continue to choose VA.

Thank you for your continued support of our mission and our Nation's Veterans. A similar letter has been sent to Chairman Takano.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

Robert L. Wilkie

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

October 16, 2019

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Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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Robert L. Wilkie

Robert L. Wilkie

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

DEMOCRATS
MARK TAKANO, CALIFORNIA, CHAIRMAN
JULIA BROWNLEY, CALIFORNIA
KATHLEEN M. RICE, NEW YORK
CONOR LAMB, PENNSYLVANIA
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GILBERT R. CISNEROS, JR., CALIFORNIA
COLLIN C. PETERSON, MINNESOTA
GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLAN, NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
COLIN Z. ALLRED, TEXAS
LAUREN UNDERWOOD, ILLINOIS

RAY KELLEY
STAFF DIRECTOR

U.S. House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS
B-234 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
http://veterans.house.gov

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DAVID P. ROE, TENNESSEE, RANKING
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CHIP ROY, TEXAS
W. GREGORY STEUBE, FLORIDA

JON TOWERS
REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR

September 20, 2019

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On September 20, 2019, at approximately 11 a.m., Ms. (b) (6) a Professional Staff Member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, was sexually assaulted in the atrium of the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center (DC VAMC) while waiting for her medical appointment.

The atrium café workers and employees at the Information Desk witnessed the assault. Instead of taking immediate action to intervene or assist her, they interacted with the assailant after the assault and took no action. The staff at the Information Desk only referred her to the DC VAMC Patient Advocate. The Patient Advocate also failed to act or render any assistance when she reported the assault and made her wait to make her report. The first employee at the Medical Center to act and immediately call the police, was the doctor she was scheduled to see— the fourth individual notified after the incident. While the VA police officer was working on Ms. (b) (6) complaint, the police officer stated that she too had been sexually harassed by individuals at the DC VAMC while in uniform and on duty, and that she was aware of individuals being sexually harassed and assaulted in various locations on the DC VAMC campus.

This letter serves as a notice that the Committee is opening a Congressional investigation into the allegations outlined above, and other incidents of sexual harassment and assault at the DC VAMC. I will also be requesting an investigation by the VA Inspector General into the nature and frequency of instances of sexual harassment and assault, sex and gender-based harassment, and verbal and physical assault occurring at VA facilities throughout the country, and whether VA employees take appropriate actions when these incidents are reported. My staff have received reports that patients, especially women veterans, frequently experience sexual harassment and have been victims of sexual assault at VA medical facilities. These victims also report that actions taken by VA employees to appropriately address these incidents are inconsistent and often unsatisfactory.

Additionally, I request that you immediately take the following actions:

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1. Arrest, or refer to local law enforcement for arrest, the individual accused of sexually assaulting Ms. (b) (6) and investigate her allegations of sexual assault;
2. Remove this individual from DC VA Medical Center property, and prohibit this individual from accessing VA property until conclusion of the criminal investigation and disposition of the case;
3. Request an investigation by the VA Office of Inspector General and other federal law enforcement authorities into incidents of sexual assault and harassment at the DC VA Medical Center;
4. Conduct and mandate bystander intervention training for all employees at the DC VA Medical Center, and mandate reporting of all incidents of sexual harassment and assault;
5. Provide video footage, access to witnesses and other parties involved, police reports, documents, and other materials requested by the Committee on Veterans' Affairs that will aid in the Committee's investigation of incidents of sexual harassment and assault at the DC VAMC.

I also request the following additional actions:

1. Establish a Department-wide anti-harassment and anti-sexual assault policy including elements outlined in the enclosed draft legislation and provide technical assistance to the Committee on the enclosed draft legislation.

No veteran, family member, caregiver, or VA employee should be the victim of sexual assault or harassment at a VA facility. Further, every VA employee should be trained to take immediate action, including intervening to prevent further assault or harassment, contacting law enforcement, and providing aid and assistance to individuals reporting sexual harassment and assault.

Should you have any questions about this request, please contact (b)(6) Committee General Counsel, at (202) 225-(b)(6) or at (b)(6)@mail.house.gov. Thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,

Mark Takano

Mark Takano
Chairman

Enclosures: Discussion Draft, to amend title 38 United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish and implement a comprehensive anti-harassment and anti-sexual assault policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

cc: The Honorable Michael J. Missal
Inspector General
Department of Veterans Affairs

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: McVicker, Carrie A.
Sent: 15 Jan 2020 15:03:06 +0000
To: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Subject: FW: Latest edits
Attachments: Draft to Takano2-jeh 1-15-20.docx
Importance: High

Chris.

Draft attached.

Thanks!

Carrie A. McVicker
Executive Secretary
Office of the Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
(b)(6) @va.gov
(202) 461-(b)(6)

From: (b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, January 15, 2020 9:59 AM
To: McVicker, Carrie A. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Latest edits
Importance: High

Per your request, new finalized letter attached:

From: McVicker, Carrie A. <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, January 15, 2020 9:42 AM
To: (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Latest edits

(b)(6) see attached. Is this the one you used? Looks like they just sent me another version – but could be the same?

Carrie A. McVicker
Executive Secretary
Office of the Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
(b)(6) @va.gov
(202) 461-(b)(6)

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, January 15, 2020 9:36 AM
To: McVicker, Carrie A. (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Latest edits

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Use this version

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Date: Wednesday, Jan 15, 2020, 7:41 AM
To: Byrne, Jim <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hutton, James <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mandreucci, Christina M. <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Haverstock, Cathy <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Hipolit, Richard (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>, Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
Subject: RE: Latest edits

I made (b)(5)
(b)(5)

VR Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.
Acting General Counsel
Department of Veterans Affairs
202-461(b)(6)

From: Byrne, Jim (b)(6)@va.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, January 14, 2020 6:27 PM
To: Hutton, James(b)(6)va.gov>; Hudson, William A. (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; (b)(6)@va.gov>; Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Haverstock, Cathy <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Hipolit, Richard (OGC) <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Cashour, Curtis <(b)(6)@va.gov>; Tucker, Brooks <(b)(6)@va.gov>
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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Thanks

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
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Thank you for your continued support of our mission and our Nation's Veterans.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

cc: The Honorable David P. Roe, M.D.
Ranking Member

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris)
Sent: 15 Jan 2020 15:06:31 +0000
To: Powers, Pamela
Subject: Draft to Takano2-jeh 1-15-20
Attachments: Draft to Takano2-jeh 1-15-20.docx

Pam –

See attached.

This is (b)(5)

Chris

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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To: Byrne, Jim;Hutton, James;Mandreucci, Christina M.;Syrek, Christopher D. (Chris);Mitrano, Catherine (SES) (OGC);Haverstock, Cathy;Hipolit, Richard (OGC);Cashour, Curtis;Tucker, Brooks
Subject: RE: Latest edits
Attachments: Draft to Takano3.docx

Break//

DEPSEC, ALCON:

Would attached version (b)(5)

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Department of Veterans Affairs
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Subject: RE: Latest edits

I made (b)(5)
(b)(5)

VR Bill

William A. Hudson, Jr.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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Robert L. Wilkie

cc:

The Honorable Phil Roe

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Ranking Member

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

9/25/2019

OAWP Report

- Kirk Nicolas
- Shelby – 1-2 wks

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about OAWP Report, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about OAWP Report, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about OAWP Report, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

(b)(6); (b)(5); (b)(7)(A); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

← Atlanta Ants

← DC VAMC sexual assault → (b)(6); (b)(5) ; USAD engaged

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

- Montgomery, AL (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about another VAMC, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC
↳ VISN leader Leslie Wiggins

- Eastern OK (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about another VAMC, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC .

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about another VAMC, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

VISN 10 (b)(6); Non Responsive Record; (b)(5)
Non-Responsive because about another VISN, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about another VISN, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

COS/VAMC director ; (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about another VISN, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

11/15/2019

I.G. mtg. – SECNA, KOS

1. (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

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(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

2. DC VAMC sexual assault investigation

a. (b)(6); (b)(5)

b.

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

3. Security Detail (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about separate OIG investigation

(b)(6); Non Responsive Record; (b)(5)
Non-Responsive because about separate OIG investigation

5. (b)(6); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A); (b)(5)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

I.G. Meeting - 12/16/2019

(1) Des Moines, Iowa - (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about another VAMC, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record
Non-Responsive because about another VAMC, not alleged sex assault at DC VAMC

(2) D.C. VAMC - alleged sexual assault by

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(3) (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
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(4) (b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
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(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record;

(b)(6); (b)(5); Non Responsive Record; (b)(7)(A)
Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

6:00 pm Jan 14, 2020

Call w/ DAG Jeffrey Rosen

USAO - DC decided today to decline charges

- allegation (b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

- (b)(6); (b)(5)

- (b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

SECVA office

1/23/2020

Wilkie, Powers, Hudson

DC VAMC

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); Non Responsive Record; (b)(5); (b)(7)(A)

Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

(b)(6); Non Responsive Record; (b)(5); (b)(7)(A)

Non-Responsive because about criminal investigation relating to a VAMC in a U.S. Southeast state

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

1/14/2020

Missal + Pam

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

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(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(5)

(b)(6)

can Mike Hilmd 202 745

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6)
Sent: Wednesday, March 04, 2020 1:39 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO; (b)(6) VCSCO; (b)(6)
Subject: FW: FYI

Fyi.. trying to locate all email traffic relating to the incident

From: (b)(6)
Sent: Sunday, September 22, 2019 9:26 AM
To: (b)(6) @va.gov>; (b)(6) @va.gov>; (b)(6)
(b)(6) @va.gov> (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: FYI

Hello,

Coffee shop camera is not listed on the main monitor. I will reach out to the officers..

From: (b)(6)
Sent: Friday, September 20, 2019 7:32 PM
To: (b)(6) @va.gov>; (b)(6) @va.gov>; (b)(6)
(b)(6) @va.gov> (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FYI

Va police came by they wanted to view a camera in coffee. I could not find it listed on the security camera screen . just incase they come by and ask again.

(b)(6)
Assistant Canteen Chief
Canteen 688
50 Irving Street NW
Washington DC
202-745-8000 ext. (b)(6)
202-714 (b)(6)

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT
VA-20-0903, VA-20-0907, VA-20-0908, VA-20-0909-A-000319

(b)(6) **VCSCO**

From: (b)(6) VCSCO
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 2:45 PM
To: Czarnecki, Tammy
Cc: (b)(6) VCSCO
Subject: FW: Incident on 9/20

Tammy see note below from my chief. Not sure who set the settings but I will find out and get it fixed. I talked to (b)(6) and he knows the situation. Sorry couldn't be more helpful

R

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 2:26 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov> (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Incident on 9/20

Good Afternoon Mr (b)(6),

Just wanted to update you on the alleged incident that happened on Friday September 20th at the coffee shop register and counter. We were finally able to get in to camera but it was determined that the camera motion enabled feature had not been set properly so It has not been recording. The Police Officer (b)(6) did state that is currently being investigated by OIG and for us to please keep everything confidential. Officer (b)(6) also stated that they were able to see some footage from a lobby camera but it was not enough to confirm the allegations and that the next step would be to interview some potential witnesses.

Since the camera was just installed, we will reach out to installer to get this fixed as soon as possible.

(b)(6)
Asst. Chief
688 Washington DC
202-745-(b)(6)

VCS

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VA-20-0903, VA-20-0907, VA-20-0908, VA-20-0909-A-000320

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6) VCSCO
Sent: Monday, March 02, 2020 4:48 PM
To: (b)(6)
Subject: FW: VCS #688 Service call
Attachments: Illustra-Flex-1MP-and-3MP-Indoor-Dome-User-Guide-b0_a4_en.pdf

From: (b)(6) @jci.com>
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 3:04 PM
To: TycoIS Aurora CMC customer work orders <workorder@tyco.com>
Cc: (b)(6) 3@va.gov>; (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov>; (b)(6) (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] VCS #688 Service call

Please dispatch tech to site. Customer has camera is coffee area of Canteen Services and it is not recording to SD card. According to client
They attempted to pull video today and the camera's SD card is blank. Install tech notified and said the recording settings were programmed.

Attached is manual for steps following on page 50

Camera is
AD Illustra camera with SD card.

VCS Contact on site
(b)(6) 205 79 (b)(6)

Veterans Canteen Service #688 Center NW **DC 20422**	VA Medical 50 Irving Street, **Washington,**	202- 745 (b)(6)

My code
(b)(6)

National Account Manager
Johnson Controls Inc.
480 376 (b)(6) cell
623 444 office
(b)(6) @jci.com

Johnson Controls

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT
VA-20-0903, VA-20-0907, VA-20-0908, VA-20-0909-A-000321

(b)(6) VCSCO

From: (b)(6) VCSCO
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 3:18 PM
To: (b)(6) Czarnecki, Tammy
Cc: VCSCO
Subject: RE: Video

(b)(6)

I got the vendor and my LP folks involved. As this is a new system, there should be no reason why we can't get the data. If we get it, I've instructed them to turn it over to the VA police and notify us.

(b)(

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 2:56 PM
To: Czarnecki, Tammy <(b)(6) @va.gov> (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Video

Ma'am,

I just spoke with the Chief of Police, (b)(6). Chief (b)(6) worked with the Acting, VCS Canteen Manager (b)(6) (b)(6) to obtain footage from the additional cameras discovered in the lobby. There is no other video footage to present as the VCS cameras are inoperable.

(b)(6)

From: Czarnecki, Tammy
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 3:42 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov>; (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Video

Any news on the video footage? The 10th floor is waiting for an answer.

Tammy Czarnecki MSOL, MSN, RN
ADUSH/Admin Operations
iPhone: 202-365 (b)(6)
Office: 202-461-

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

VA-20-0903, VA-20-0907, VA-20-0908, VA-20-0909-A-000322

(b)(6) /CSCO

From: (b)(6) /CSCO
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 6:45 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO
Subject: RE: Video

I left you a voicemail.
The VA police had pulled the SD card out of the camera and stated there was no video on the card.

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) /CSCO (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 5:45 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: FW: Video

Any news here ?

Sent with BlackBerry Work
(www.blackberry.com)

From: (b)(6) @va.gov>
Date: Monday, Sep 23, 2019, 3:56 PM
To: Czarnecki, Tammy <(b)(6) @va.gov>, (b)(6) /CSCO <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: RE: Video

Ma'am,

I just spoke with the Chief of Police, (b)(6). Chief (b)(6) worked with the Acting, VCS Canteen Manager – (b)(6) (b)(6) to obtain footage from the additional cameras discovered in the lobby. There is no other video footage to present as the VCS cameras are inoperable.

(b)(6)

From: Czarnecki, Tammy
Sent: Monday, September 23, 2019 3:42 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO (b)(6) @va.gov> (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: Video

Any news on the video footage? The 10th floor is waiting for an answer.

Tammy Czarnecki MSOL, MSN, RN
ADUSH/ Admin Operations

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT
VA-20-0903, VA-20-0907, VA-20-0908, VA-20-0909-A-000323

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6) VCSCO
Sent: Monday, March 02, 2020 5:11 PM
To: (b)(6)
Subject: FW: 688 DC

From: (b)(6) VCSCO
Sent: Wednesday, September 25, 2019 1:19 PM
To: (b)(6) CSCO <(b)(6) @va.gov>
Cc: (b)(6) @va.gov>
Subject: 688 DC

Hi Mr. (b)(6)

Since (b)(6) was in Baltimore he drove over to 688 to meet with the camera vendor. It seems the wrong POE (Power of Ethernet) switch was installed so the camera did not have power. Also, the police requested our Electronic Journal from Friday so that was given to them.

Sincerely,

(b)(6)
Chief, Internal Audit & Compliance
Veterans Canteen Service
314-845 (b)(6) Office
314-341 Mobile
(b)(6) @va.gov

https://www.shopvcs.com/
https://www.vacanteen.va.gov/

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT
VA-20-0903, VA-20-0907, VA-20-0908, VA-20-0909-A-000324

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6)
Sent: Wednesday, March 04, 2020 2:36 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO; (b)(6) VCSCO; (b)(6)
Cc: (b)(6)
Subject: DC688

Hello,

On Friday September 20, 2019 at 7:32 pm, I received an email from (b)(6) ACC 688. Indicating, the VA police visited the canteen requesting to view camera footage of the Coffee shop.
I informed (b)(6) the camera wasn't listed on the main monitor. However, I would reach out to the officer regarding the request. On Sunday September 22, 2019, I received a telephone call from then Assistant Director, Mr. (b)(6), stating the VA police is requesting access to the camera in the Coffee shop. I inform Mr. (b)(6) I would be at the medical center mid-morning on Monday September 23, 2019 to assist with the request. Upon arriving at the canteen on September 23, I was notified by (b)(6), a team of OIG authorities needed to conduct an interview regarding the alleged incident. I proceeded to the interview and met with OIG officers at or about 10:00am that morning. Later that day (b)(6) mentioned the SD card wasn't in the camera. He then reached out to the VA police to inquire on the whereabout of the SD card. (b)(6) was advised by the police officer, the SD card is blank and the camera wasn't recording. To my recollection, upon completion of the camera installation. The camera was fully operational with very clear and precise viewing of the intended areas to include cash registers and STG display case.

Thank you
(b)(6)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6) FNCVAMC
Sent: Wednesday, March 04, 2020 2:11 PM
To: (b)(6) VCSCO; (b)(6) VCSCO
Subject: Events of September 23, 2019

This statement is to the best of my recollection,

On Monday September 23rd, I was contacted by Mr. (b)(6) and asked if we had a male working in coffee shop who wore a black shirt . I stated we did not have a male who wore black which worked in coffee shop for us. I believe Mr. (b)(6) then asked if we had a camera in coffee shop which I stated yes to. I was then instructed by Mr (b)(6) to review the video on the camera.

Within minutes of his call I was approached by a Hispanic Female Detective who worked for the VA Police at the DCVAMC and asked if she could see video from coffee shop . Upon looking as server in office, I determined that it was not on server and was a remote camera.

I believe at this point I reached out to Dwight (Chief) and asked how to read information on camera. It was stated that the camera recorded locally because cable was unable to be ran from office that long of a distance.

I then told female detective that it recorded locally and we had no way of reading information. VA female detective then stated she had contractor in house who worked on the Johnson Controls camera for them and if I didn't mind could he assist in helping us to view video from camera. I told her I didn't mind since this was a very urgent and important matter.

I then met detective and a white male who worked for VA as contractor in coffee shop, he tried to view video with his laptop but was unable to view video due to no knowledge of ADMIN password. I reached out to (b)(6) again to get POC information on company who installed camera in an effort to get admin password for viewing of video. I then went on handling business as usual.

At some point Female detective asked if I could retrieve SD card for them. I stated as soon I talk to installer and figure out how to get it I would.

After making a few calls to owner, called was returned from female owner or leader on camera install project, she gave me name and number of installer and said to call him

Spoke to installer I believe sometime after 2 or 3 pm and he gave me directions on how to get SD card out of camera

I went to retrieve SD card from camera around 3 or 4 pm once lunch rush was over and noticed that SD card had been removed. I asked coffee shop attendants who had been messing with camera and stated that facilities was looking at the camera and had taken it apart

I then went to VA Police and asked for the detective I had been communicating with all day and stated that someone took SD card out of camera, did they know who did this. They told me at that point that they had someone from facilities remove it so they could read it but found no video on SD card. They then returned SD card to me and I placed it in my desk drawer until someone was able to come and fix camera

Installer was called and asked to send someone to service camera

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

(b)(6)
Canteen Chief
VCS#565 Fayetteville, NC
910-822-(b)(6)ph
910-822- fax

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