

The Tragic Fate of American Veterans Seeking Health Care

Shinseki Resignation: Political Blame Game Misses the Real Scandal. Stop the Cutbacks and Attacks—Money for Health Care, Not War!

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True to the ancient Roman military practice of top commanders, retired four-star general and Veterans Affairs head Erik Shinseki fell on his own sword amidst a years-long scandal in the VA.

Heeding calls by both Republicans and Democrats, he took responsibility for the disaster in veterans' health care, stepped down in defeat and called for new leadership.

A new face will likely push through some changes, get some headlines about measures to reduce wait lists, and quiet some outcry. But the issue of management does not solve the issue of resources—and unless the new VA secretary somehow gets additional VA funding in the many billions of dollars, they'll still be trying to run an overworked, under-supported system.

Waiting to death

The current scandal broke into the open when it was revealed that at least 40 veterans had died while awaiting appointments at the Phoenix VA hospital. Around 1,600 veterans were on a "secret waiting list" in an attempt to cover-up the backlog. VA officials in Phoenix had documents shredded, and ordered their staff to not save appointments for their vets in the computer system. Scores of veterans waited many months just to see a primary care doctor (against VA mandates for timely care), and many died as a result.

And that was just in Phoenix, among the hundreds of VA hospitals and clinics nationwide. All are faced with the same core issues. The disgraceful conduct at the Phoenix VA added to the long list of injustices done to those who were promised so much when the first signed their life away to the U.S. military.



'Don't let me die' – the final plea of veteran Thomas Breen, who succumbed to cancer at the Phoenix VA without ever seeing a doctor once, despite months

of begging.

Don't blame the VA workers—a first-hand look inside

Watching the mainstream media, one would think the explosive exposé of veterans dying on endless waiting lists was the fault of VA hospital workers.

“The VA Medical Clinic here in Albuquerque has saved my life a few times in the over 20 years I have been using their services” wrote Bob Anderson, a decorated Vietnam combat veteran and activist in a recent letter to the editor.

“During this time I have talked to the staff about the problem of appointment delays and they have said many times it is due to the lack of medical doctors and sometimes staff cutbacks in the clinics. There is not enough help to cover the needs.”

I personally have used the VA medical services since my discharge from the Army in 2005. Any veteran who goes to the VA knows the intense frustration that comes with being a patient there. But, like Mr. Anderson, I've felt incredibly cared for by the staff.

Last month I had to take a trip to the emergency room. Upon entering, a nurse immediately ran up to me and took my vitals, and talked to me in the most genuinely caring and reassuring way, lifting so much of the stress. A security guard rushed to find a wheelchair and helped me sit, and stayed near me in case I needed anything. Another nurse at the desk repeatedly updated me on how much longer I would have to wait. While in the hospital room, the janitor on shift—a Vietnam veteran—stayed by my bedside to tell me funny stories. “I'm here for the veterans,” he said. “This is the best job in the world because I get to be here for all of you.” He stayed late after his shift ended, close to midnight, to talk with patients on their gurneys.



Over 500 VA workers rally in 2012 against job downgrades

It took a while to see a doctor, but there was apparently only one on shift; and when he finally got to me, I couldn't have asked for more thorough care.

The radiologist wheeled me into their break room to watch the Stanley Cup playoffs with him while their equipment warmed up, so I wouldn't have to wait alone and bored. Later, the pharmacist sat me down and extensively explained the details of all the medications. How could I be angry with all of the people who helped me so much, both physically and emotionally, through that emergency room visit?

Sure, we can find administrators at various levels who have tried to cover-up the crisis on their plates, through fixing books on appointments and even destroying records. The stress and pressure on these administrators is enormous. But I've found the culture at the VA to be one of community, and a genuine feeling of duty to care for us.

The reality is, those cover-ups have been one way some in the VA have dealt with the increased demand put on them from cutbacks, which creates under-staffed, under-funded clinics. How can a hospital get through a waitlist faster if there are not enough doctors, nurses and VA staff on shift?

Of course, some nefarious wings of the political establishment have tried to use the crisis for their own ends, calling for the privatization of the VA by their business partners; as if corporate, for-profit control has ever helped anybody who wasn't a millionaire.

The problem isn't an individual at the top, or their administrators below. The problem is systemic, flowing from the U.S. government's priority on funding warfare over the actual needs of their constituents.

The assault on the VA and all federal workers

In March 2003, as the Iraq war was beginning—as well as an unlimited faucet of funds for the defense industry—a \$14 billion dollar cut to the VA budget was passed. It would have been a devastating cut even without the impending flood of young Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in serious need of quality care. Right away, the VA implemented hiring freezes and requested emergency funds just to pay its most basic costs, like paying for medical equipment.

But it's not just cuts passed by the Republicans which have led to this crisis. The bipartisan assault under the Obama administration on all federal workers—from the post office to the social security administration—is to blame.

As the president of the American Federation of Government Employees stated recently about the state of the VA over the past four-and-a-half years, "the budget policies of this era are making it all but impossible for this workforce."



Currently, caseloads for psychiatrists and other primary care physicians at the VA surpass 2,000 patients, exceeding the VA-mandated caseload limit by several hundred. There are hundreds of vacancies for doctors and nurses alone that are not being filled, and thousands more vacancies for other workers who are critical to the VA functioning—clerical workers, aids, maintenance staff, etc. And there are millions of unemployed who want those jobs.

When it comes to institutions of the federal government, the politicians' strategy has been to under-staff it, under-fund it, and then say "look, it isn't working, we need to privatize it." That trend extends beyond the VA.

Anytime there are thousands of staff vacancies, it's intentional—a manufactured crisis. It's about cutting cost, not providing care. But the money is there, in large amounts, reserved for the defense industry.

Extend the outcry to all people denied care—the real scandal

There has been so much outcry from the public, pundits, politicians and advocacy groups—and rightfully so—over veterans on long waiting lists. But, for some reason, it isn't a scandal when it happens to broad sections of poor and working class people in the United States.

The whole healthcare system in America is a scandal. Millions of hard-working people, including children, are unable to access the services they need.

It shouldn't be a scandal just when it happens to veterans. It shouldn't be a big deal just when veterans are mistreated and given inadequate health care services. All people—from VA janitors to hotel janitors—should have quality health care without any obstacles.

If the U.S. government wasn't spending \$1 trillion a year (the real military budget) on weapons, mass surveillance and warfare, and instead put a priority on health care, everybody in the United States—veterans, workers, children, unemployed, immigrants, etc.—could have the basic dignity that all human beings, who all get sick, deserve.



Hundreds wait in line early in the morning to gain access to a free health care clinic in Los Angeles, offered just once a year.

Rich politicians in Washington won't solve the crisis by appointing another one of their friends to manage a system that doesn't have the resources to meet our needs.

And the health care as a whole in America won't cease to be a real scandal until all people can get whatever health services they need, free of the fear of being denied, mistreated, or put into bankruptcy.

Mike Prysner is an Iraq war veteran.

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