



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on May 21, 2015

House Speaker Notes Little Progress at VA One Year After Scandal

On Wednesday, House Speaker John Boehner (shown, R-Ohio) criticized the Veterans Affairs leadership for failing to take action to improve veterans care despite the fallout from last year's scandal that prompted then-Secretary Eric Shinseki to resign.



The Department of Veterans Affairs has been under harsh scrutiny since last year after reports exposed that the Phoenix facility had been altering its scheduling books and that at least 40 veterans had died while awaiting care. The *Washington Times* reported, "Whistleblowers at other facilities then came forward with similar reports of secret wait lists and poor scheduling, some of which have been substantiated by an internal audit."

Further reports revealed that even after whistleblowers had brought these major issues to the attention of VA officials, the warnings were not heeded, and the problems went unaddressed.

Former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki resigned amidst the national scandal, and was replaced by Bob McDonald, who promised sweeping reforms at the VA that have yet to be seen. He announced that he wanted to make ["every employee a whistleblower"](#) and create a fresh culture that "celebrates them." But one year later, it appears very little has been done to address the problems at the VA.

"Just one person has been fired. One," Boehner said in a scathing House floor speech. "What the hell happened to the rest of them?"

VA Secretary Robert McDonald had stated during a February TV interview that 60 people connected to the scandal had been fired, a number that was later revised to 14. However, the *New York Times* reported that based on documents provided to Congress, only one person had actually been terminated — Phoenix VA hospital director Sharon Helman.

Another person retired under pressure, while a third person's "termination" is pending," reports Fox News.

Others involved have reportedly been punished, but Boehner has compared those punishments to nothing more than a "slap on the wrist," as some workers were transferred and others received paid leave.

"All of them went on collecting checks from taxpayers," he said.

And while those involved in the scandal have escaped virtually without punishment, those who dared to



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bring VA's issues to the attention of the public continue to be punished.

Reports indicate that those in the Department of Veterans Affairs who blew the whistle on all the issues at VA hospitals have since been experiencing retaliation. Special Counsel Carolyn Lerner recently confirmed this in testimony during a House Veterans Affairs subcommittee hearing, reports *The Blaze*.

According to Lerner, many of the whistleblowers are veterans themselves who have been seeking care at the VA.

"In several cases, the medical records of whistleblowers have been accessed and information in those records has apparently been used to attempt to discredit the whistleblowers," she said.

The Blaze writes that accusations of VA officials illegally scrutinizing their employees' records date back to 2010, when the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* reported that a VA official was convinced that her superiors went through her records, which prompted them to later make comments regarding her psychological care. Results from that report revealed over 14,000 privacy violations at that Pittsburgh center.

Reports of whistleblower retaliation have been prevalent following the VA scandal.

In a press release issued in July 2014, the U.S. Office of the Special Counsel (OSC) indicated that it has received numerous complaints of retaliation from employees at VA facilities in 18 states — Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming — and Puerto Rico, but did not identify the facilities, which resulted in an ongoing investigation.

What's more is that despite the fallout from last year's scandal, not much has changed at the VA. According to Boehner, the number of patients facing long waits is about the same as it was last year, and the number of patients waiting more than 90 days has actually doubled.

An April Associated Press report indicates that from August 1 to February 28, approximately 894,000 VA appointments failed to meet the VA's goal of an appointment within 30 days while 232,000 appointments had delays of over 60 days. According to the report, the number of medical appointments delayed 30 to 90 days has largely remained the same. Data show approximately one in 36 patient visits involves a delay of at least one month.

The AP report also observes that, based on examinations of six months of appointment data at 940 individual VA facilities, there are "stark differences between the haves and have-nots."

For example, more veterans at a VA outpatient clinic in Jacksonville, Florida, experienced delays than veterans in the entire states of New York and Pennsylvania combined.

Fox News reports, "The VA's problems are so deep that — despite a new law that overhauled the agency and authorized \$16 billion in new spending over three years — it can't even build a hospital, Boehner said, referring to a half-finished project in Denver that is \$1 billion over budget."

But as noted by Dr. Jason Fodeman — assistant professor of medicine at the University of Arizona — in an article for *The Hill*, the problem with the VA was not the money:

The problems were due to inefficiency and culture. In fact, these problems are not strictly limited to the VA, rather they are inherent in government bureaucracy — whether it is the U.S. Postal Service or the IRS or the DMV.

The "corrosive culture"... is also a dangerous side effect of bureaucracy. There are fundamental



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differences between a government bureaucracy and a business. Incentives push businesses to improve operations, grow, and strive to better serve the customer. They need to do this to survive. If not the customer will go elsewhere and the company will go out of business.

A bureaucracy operates on a different playing field. It generally does not need to become more efficient or offer its customers a better product. It does not need to serve its customers, but rather it serves itself. Furthermore when bureaucracies fail they are typically rewarded with more money as the VA was in the recently passed legislation. Yet, more money cannot fix this culture and protect patients in government health systems. Only freedom and choice can.

Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that the federal government will acknowledge this reality. It will simply continue to offer as a remedy more legislation and more money, or rather, the American peoples' money.

In fact, House Speaker Boehner said that more legislation will be necessary to hold the VA accountable, adding, "But only the administration can change the culture from within."

Photo of House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio): AP Images



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