



House Panel Subpoenas VA for Documents Related to Denver-area Hospital and Art Expenditures

On Wednesday, the House Veterans Affairs Committee issued a subpoena to the Department of Veterans Affairs for the purposes of investigating the ballooning budget of a Denver-area VA hospital currently under construction, as well as the recently revealed art and interior design expenditures at numerous VA facilities nationwide.

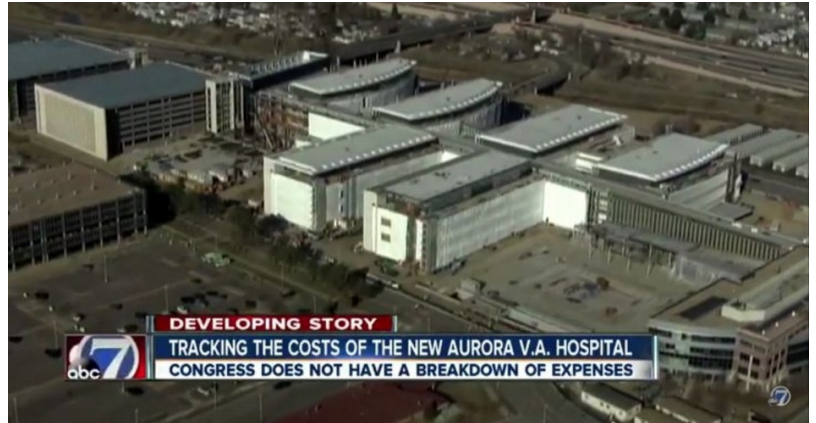
Wednesday's subpoena marks the fourth issued by the House panel since 2014, following revelations of the VA wait-time scandal. At that time, reports indicated that a Phoenix facility had been altering its scheduling books and that at least 40 veterans had died while awaiting care. Reports later revealed similar issues with lengthy waiting times in at least 10 states. Investigation into the Veterans Affairs wait-time scandal has revealed a number of startling revelations, including evidence of fraud and regulatory violations related to scheduling issues at over 50 VA medical facilities.

The scandal has prompted investigations into the VA's handling of its funding, many of which have found that the VA was not only guilty of lengthy wait times and falsified reports, but for abuse of taxpayer dollars. Despite continued investigations into the VA, transparency continues to be a problem.

The chairman of the veterans panel, Representative Jeff Miller (R-Fla.), said it was "unfortunate that VA's continued lack of transparency has led us to this decision" to issue the subpoena, but that lawmakers were without options. "We will not accept VA trying to pull the wool over the eyes of this committee and the American people for poor decision-making and waste of funds," Miller said.

A July oversight report into the Veterans Affairs administration by independent taxpayer watchdog group Open the Books and COX Media Washington, D.C., entitled "The VA Scandal Two Years Later," revealed that the VA spent \$20 million on artwork and sculptures and added nearly 40,000 new jobs, though just one in 11 were medical positions, all while thousands of veterans died awaiting medical care. Of the \$20 million, \$16 million was spent during President Obama's two terms.

The seven-page [report](#), based on data obtained through Freedom of Information requests, analyzed the spending that took place at the VA during the same time period in which the VA has been accused of doctoring patient waiting times and allowing veterans to perish while they awaited care. The report





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reveals that an exorbitant amount of money was spent on artwork and sculptures, including at facilities wherein the patients were blind.

In an [editorial](#) for *Forbes*, Adam Andrzejewski, founder and CEO of Open the Books, drew attention to the report's findings:

In the now-infamous VA scandal of 2012-2015, the nation was appalled to learn that 1,000 veterans died while waiting to see a doctor. Tragically, many calls to the suicide assistance hotline were answered by voicemail. The health claim appeals process was known as "the hamster wheel" and the appointment books were cooked in seven of every ten clinics."

Yet, in the midst of these horrific failings the VA managed to spend \$20 million on high-end art over the last ten years — with \$16 million spent during the Obama years.

Items purchased by the VA included two sculptures costing \$670,000, which were placed at the new Palo Alto Polytrauma and Blind Rehabilitation Center.

"Blind veterans can't see fancy sculptures, and all veterans would be happier if they could just see a doctor," Andrzejewski opines.

Meanwhile, nearly 500,000 veterans continue to experience wait times of more than 30 days, according to the oversight report.

Miller states that he has been seeking access to documents related to the art purchases for over a year.

VA spokeswoman Walinda West said in a statement that while department officials "must be stewards of taxpayer dollars, we also know that providing comprehensive health care for patients goes beyond just offering the most advanced medical treatments. Artwork is one of the many facets that create a healing environment for our nation's veterans."

Additionally, the House committee has attempted to obtain documents related to the construction of a VA hospital in Denver for months, to no avail, after it was revealed that the hospital's cost had tripled to \$1.7 billion.

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs met with the construction team at Kiewit-Turner to discuss plans to build a VA hospital in Aurora, Colorado. The two sides agreed on a cost of \$604 million, a number that has long since been abandoned, and the project completion date was supposed to be reached in 2014. Completion of the project is now expected in 2018.

Fox News reports that the VA had provided Congress with a summary related to its inquiry, but not the actual documents.

The VA has defended its failure to turn over the documents, claiming it would hurt future internal investigations.

But while the VA has not been forthcoming with the details, an investigation by the *Denver Post* last year points to mismanagement as the cause for the inflated cost.

After examining hundreds of court documents and interviewing dozens of officials involved in the hospital deal, as well as congressional testimony, the *Denver Post* [reported](#):

The VA could not hold up its end of the deal and control its designers, who initially operated under a contract that left the construction price blank. It later battled KT [Kiewit-Turner] in court for 17 months and lost. The agency stonewalled elected officials as costs, delays and questions mounted,



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and its own investigative staff did nothing.

VA officials pressed ahead with the project despite repeated warnings — internal and external — about the project's high risk of busting its budget.

Congress, too, shares blame. Colorado's delegation was largely ineffective — and often impotent — in keeping the project on track. The most they did was ensure, early in the process, that the VA would build the hospital as a stand-alone complex even though a less expensive option existed.

Representative Mike Coffman, representing Colorado's Fourth Congressional District, [believes](#) that there is corruption involved in the botched project and that the subpoena may help to expose criminal wrongdoing. "We're asked to appropriate this money and we're asked to account to taxpayers of the United States," he said. "There's no credible explanation how a billions of dollars taxpayer money wasted without a single individual being fired. How does that happen?"



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