



2020 Annual Report

Overview

The Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute (VHPI) has greatly expanded its outreach activities and sphere of influence over the course of 2020. While we began the year with an ambitious policy agenda focused on a plethora of topics — from improving veteran mental healthcare to fully staffing the VA — we significantly recalibrated our vision as soon as COVID-19 landed on American shores.

Veterans face uniquely susceptibility to this virus, largely because they are, on the whole, older than the civilian population. Many also suffer chronic, co-occurring conditions that result from U.S. military service, including lung damage wrought by Agent Orange and Burn Pits. Veterans have also face major societal and economic impacts from the virus.

We've kept our day-to-day work alive through this pandemic but also focused aggressively on highlighting these dangers to policymakers and the public. We've also investigated how the VA has responded to this virus – including through their so-called “Fourth Mission” to assist civilians in times of national emergency – and systematically compared and contrasted the VA's pandemic response to the for-profit, private sector system.

Through this work we've told the stories of vulnerable veterans and proposed solutions to critical problems. Our work has documented the need for an expansion of veterans' healthcare to an ever-expanding group of veterans, policymakers, and advocates.

Expanding our Reach

Radio Presence

VHPI has a dedicated monthly panel on WVON1690 Chicago during the America's Heroes Group program with Cliff Kelley. The historic station reaches primarily Black listeners, allowing VHPI to interact with veterans of color that have been typically underserved by traditional veteran organizations. The show is syndicated on iHeartRadio and broadcast through the show's social media platforms. As we head towards 2021, we've identified other potential radio and podcast partners, including NPR affiliates in states with high veteran populations, WDEV Radio, and Sirius XM's “Big Picture” show.

Email List Syndication

VHPI's ‘Driving the Week’ newsletter is utilized by members of Congress and their staff, leaders and advocates at large veteran service organizations, healthcare providers, healthcare reform advocates, and veterans across the U.S. Through our unique partnership with the AFL-CIO's Union Veterans Council, our weekly tip sheet-style news breakdown is distributed to more than 30,000 veterans and union members across the country.

Going Local on Veterans' Health Issues

VHPI has conducted outreach where veterans are often underserved and misunderstood. Smaller communities across the country don't often have the resources to report on veterans' unique mental and physical health issues. In many communities during the pandemic, local healthcare providers have been overtaxed - and in some cases, been forced to close. Additionally, COVID-19 has put increased pressure on county veteran service officers who are being asked to provide more veterans with resources and advice. We've held briefings for the media and county-level veteran service officers on COVID-19's unique challenges to veteran populations. We have produced state level fact sheets on veterans' health issues and COVID-19 and expanded our distribution of the Reporter's and Congressional Guides to Veterans' Health Care.

Connecting New Audiences with Veterans' Stories

Although much of our work is lauded behind closed doors - from major research institutions to former VA Secretaries and senior departmental officials relying on VHPI's work and expertise - our policy analysts and fellows have published their work and appeared in a plethora of outlets throughout 2020. Those publications include [The Atlantic](#), [The American Prospect](#), The Federal Practitioner, The Chicago Crusader, [Battle Borne](#), Connecting Vets, WMFE Florida Radio, The American Prospect, The Washington Monthly, [The New Republic](#), a slate of regional newspapers, [The Detroit News](#), The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Battle Borne, Military.com, MDedge, California Firing Line magazine, among others.

Showcasing our Expertise

VHPI-Sponsored Forums

The global pandemic has allowed VHPI to launch new initiatives, particularly in the collaborative environment of Zoom. Amid the shutdowns in April, VHPI held its first forum examining COVID-19's impact on veterans. Some of the most well-respected and knowledgeable leaders in healthcare and veterans' advocacy have joined our forums. In addition to the hundreds of participants in the Zoom meetings, these events are live streamed to VHPI's YouTube channel. We plan to continue these forums into 2020. The topics of VHPI's previous forums included:

How Chronic Staffing Shortages Impact Veterans' Healthcare at the VA

VHPI Senior Policy Analyst Suzanne Gordon and VHPI Fellow Jasper Craven discussed their exclusive VHPI report on the VA's long-standing issues with adequate staffing.

The VA's Fourth Mission: How Our Veterans' Healthcare System Can Serve All Americans, Now and After Covid-19

Philip Longman, a *Washington Monthly* Editor and former VA Commission on Care member, and former VA official Stephen Trynosky discussed how the VA's 4th Mission as America's backup healthcare system during national emergencies can evolve so that it not only serves more veterans in times of strife but also their families and, when appropriate, non-VA patients.

Women Veterans' Health

VHPI hosted a discussion with VFW's Tammy Barlet, PVA's Maureen Elias, DAV's Joy Ilem, The American Legion's Katie Purswell, and The Center for a New American Security's Kayla Williams to consider how women's care can be improved in the VA and the private sector.

Friendly Fire

Suzanne Gordon moderated a panel with Swords to Plowshares' Michael Blecker and Maureen Siedor, along with veterans Kristofer Goldsmith and Daniel Sjursen, on the impact of military discharges that punish veterans by denying them critical services and benefits.

Fulfilling the VA's Mission

The VA still fails to reach all the veterans it could serve and cannot deliver care to their families. This in spite of the fact that a veteran's healthcare impacts — and is impacted by — their family. In this forum, a panel of experts discussed the various proposals and methods that could help expand access to the VA and finally fulfill the department's foundational promise, derived from President Lincoln, to care for the veteran and their dependents. Suzanne Gordon moderated the panel with Rick Weidman, co-founder of Vietnam Veterans of America; Carl A. Castro, Ph.D., University of Southern California, Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work; and Kathryn Van Haste, Office of U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders.

Disparities in Care for Veterans of Color

We have long known that people of color do not enjoy the same access to healthcare — nor are they treated equitably by healthcare providers — as white Americans. Studies also show non-VA providers are often unfamiliar with the unique needs of veterans and ill-equipped to address the fallout of military service. During the Coronavirus pandemic, we've seen people of color hit hardest due to these entrenched issues. While inside the VA these same healthcare disparities are far reduced, particularly when it concerns fatalities from COVID-19, issues remain. In this forum we spoke about how to solve these issues and what can we learn about reducing disparities in care for veterans when we compare the VA to the private sector during a global health crisis. The panel included Melissa Bryant, veterans' advocate and formerly the Director of the National Legislative Division at the American Legion and IAVA's Chief Policy Officer; Lindsay Church, co-founder and executive director of Minority Veterans of America; Suzanne Gordon, journalist and author of the books *Wounds of War* and *The Battle for Veterans' Healthcare*; and Harold Kudler, Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Duke University and former national Mental Health policy lead in the Department of Veterans Affairs' central office.

PREVENTS Task Force

Russell B. Lemle, Ph.D., one of VHPI's senior policy analysts, was a mental health expert called upon by the White House for the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS). Lemle's expertise, particularly on lethal means safety and suicide prevention, contributed to some of the historic breakthroughs contained in the final report.

Testifying before Congress

On behalf of VHPI, Lemle was also called to testify before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs. He provided a critical analysis of existing suicide prevention programs and provided needed guidance as lawmakers considered how to further make an impact of preventing veteran suicide. VHPI joined other leading veteran advocacy organizations at the table, including Disabled American Veterans, Minority Veteran of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Paralyzed Veterans of America. Lemle's testimony, in part, spurred an article by The New York Times titled "[*Focusing on Firearms Proves Contentious in Struggle to Reduce Veterans' Suicides*](#) (10/15/2020). Lemle's expertise is routinely

sought by members of Congress, and through his activities, VHPI has entrée with many Congressional staffers.

Building Partnerships to Strengthen Veterans' Healthcare

In addition to partnerships with veterans and frontline healthcare worker organizations, VHPI has also developed working relationships with leading policy think tanks, including the Center for American Progress, The Center for Collaborative Democracy, and the Center for New American Security. Progressive veteran organizations like Veterans for Peace and Common Defense also look to VHPI for analysis and reporting on the most critical veterans' health care issues today.

Providing the Foundation for Better Veterans' Healthcare

Strengthening Mental Health Efforts

VHPI's policy analysts and the distinguished healthcare providers on our advisory board have created a white paper that acts as the foundation for thinking about future mental health care programs and policies for veterans. A blog post written by Suzanne Gordon and former VA Mental Health consultant Harold Kudler about threats to critical programs at the Uniformed Services University resulted in expanded Congressional interest in making sure the Center for Deployment Psychology and the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress are not shuttered.

Bridging Community Divides

VHPI's Senior Policy Analyst Suzanne Gordon has worked with Rotary Clubs International to produce a Rotary Guidebook on how Rotarians can partner with the VA to better serve individual veterans. VHPI also produced a companion video that explains the need for a better understanding of veterans' unique healthcare needs by non-veterans. By working with this philanthropic organization – a legacy group with an unparalleled commitment to service within their communities across the country – VHPI has helped ensure that volunteer programs are effective and respectful of veterans' needs and experiences.

Expanding Care for Veterans and Their Families

When COVID-19 first shut down the United States, VHPI called for an expansion of veterans' healthcare to more veterans in a widely discussed op-ed. Additionally, because so many private and non-profit healthcare providers were taxed to their limit, we called for a halt to any VA facility closures while the VA acted in its role as America's emergency healthcare system. And we released a massive investigation, first published in the [American Prospect](#) and then released as a [more detailed VHPI report](#), into the VA's vacancy crisis. Shortly after this work, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie made it a top priority to quickly hire thousands of staffers.

VHPI also joined other advocacy organizations in urging the VA to stop turning away thousands of veterans who need care simply because of their discharge status. We submitted an original public comment on Regulations.gov with a list of recommendations for the VA to consider while moving forward. We also made the case that veterans' families - who have a tremendous impact on a veterans' health and wellbeing - also receive emergency care at the Veterans Health Administration during the coronavirus pandemic.