



# Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute

## Strengthening Care for Veterans and the Nation

### 2021 Annual Report

In its fifth year, The Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute (VHPI) upped its impact and influence to enhance its mission as the only think tank ceaselessly defending and analyzing the critical functions of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). We continue to spread our meaningful insights and analyses in articles published in national media outlets, on radio shows and podcasts, as well as in detailed policy papers and frequent discussions with stakeholders of all stripes.

Over the last two years, VHPI has also focused on detailing how the VA has fulfilled its [Fourth Mission](#) as a backup to the civilian health system in times of national emergency, a role that's been on full display throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Our work here has involved investigative reporting on the ground, policy discussions on Capitol Hill, and probing analysis of peer-reviewed articles. While the toll of veteran suffering during this crisis has been unimaginably tragic, our work has revealed that the VA has done a far better job than any other American health system in treating those exposed to the virus and vaccinating all those who risk becoming infected.

Through this work, VHPI has helped recalibrate public thinking around the VA. Our policy analysts and allies have overcome tired tropes about agency malfunction with concrete evidence showing that VA patients – particularly people of color – fare far better than those in the private sector, be it for COVID-19 or a plethora of other health issues. This has been accomplished by amplifying veteran's voices and publicizing studies showing VA has retained and advanced its leadership in promoting health equity and enhancing patient safety.

Our work has not only documented why the VA should not be privatized also powerfully demonstrated how the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) can be easily expanded to care for more veterans, and also civilians, as part of an urgent need to shore up public health resources to deal with the world's next crisis.

### **Showcasing our Expertise**

#### **VHPI-Sponsored Forums**

During the COVID-19 pandemic VHPI has launched new initiatives, particularly in the collaborative environment of Zoom. 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. The topics of the previous year's forums included:

### **Closing Loopholes in MISSION Act Telehealth**

VHPI Steering Committee members discussed the VA's world-class telehealth programs, which, because of misguided interpretations of access under the VA MISSION Act, have been greatly underutilized during the pandemic. Participants offered positive personal stories of receiving VA's telehealth services and offered policy proposals to ensure more veterans are able to access these valuable services into the future.

### **VA Privatization: Myths and Realities**

VHPI Senior Policy Analyst Suzanne Gordon led a discussion on the ideology and effects of the broader privatization of public services. The forum's guests included Donald Cohen, the founder and executive director of In the Public Interest, a national research and policy center on the privatization of public goods and responsible contracting, and Charlene Harrington, a VHPI Advisory Board member and professor of sociology and nursing at the University of California San Francisco. Harrington is a world-renowned expert on the negative impact of for-profit nursing homes and other long-term care facilities on patient care. This group dispelled the myth that privatization only exists when services are entirely outsourced to the private sector. They explained that privatization also includes the kind of piecemeal outsourcing of services that is occurring inside the VA.

The group also explained how privatization cannibalizes public sector budgets. Panelists pointed to the dramatic escalation in VHA budgets devoted to paying for private sector care – care that is often of inferior quality to that provided by the VA. Guests also provided an in-depth explanation of how privatization has damaged nursing home care and other vital public services.

### **The Perils and Promise of the AIR Commission**

Section 202 of the VA MISSION Act of 2018 establishes an Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission to evaluate all VA facilities' utilization patterns and infrastructure needs, and recommend whether to close, replace, consolidate, expand or repurpose them.

This commission has clearly been provided with a massive mandate, one that will greatly influence the VA's future, for better or worse.

This commission was debated among an expert panel that included Alan Sager, an expert on hospital closures and a professor of health law, policy, and management at Boston University; Edward Machtinger, a VHPI board member, professor of medicine, and director of the Women's HIV Program at the University of California, San Francisco; and Russell Lemle, the former chief psychologist at the San Francisco VA and a VHPI Senior Policy Analyst.

## Veteran Benefits

VHPI Advisory Board member Paul Sullivan led a discussion on VHPI's new focus on the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), which oversees the crucial process that veterans must navigate in order to obtain VHA health care. As Sullivan and other guests explained, VBA services function as not only the gatekeeper for veteran health benefits but also life insurance, burial support, and VA home loans.

## Veterans Healthcare and Medicare for All

As the U.S. grapples with myriad problems in its private healthcare industry, many arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the debate over Medicare for All has never been more relevant.

VHPI held a forum to discuss the efforts to expand Medicare so it covers all Americans, including veterans and their families. The forum examined how current Medicare for All legislation would impact the VA healthcare system and help veterans currently excluded from it.

Our panel of experts included Dr. Rachel Madley, legislative assistant for Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, who has a Ph.D in microbiology and immunology; Naveed Shah, an Army veteran and political director of Common Defense; and Dr. Donald Kollisch, a retired VA primary care clinician and early member of Physicians for a National Health Program.

Among other things, this group analyzed the parallel privatization threats to both the VA and existing traditional Medicare programs for seniors. They also assessed the Biden Administration's progress—or lack of it—in reversing Republican policies that continue to undermine both veterans' healthcare and traditional Medicare.

## Engaging Washington and Beyond

### **Legislation**

VHPI has greatly increased its Congressional outreach and is today regularly contacted for feedback on pressing policies and draft legislation. Among numerous influential initiatives, VHPI officials pushed to close loopholes in telehealth access standards and fiercely advocated for the appointment of a permanent Under Secretary for Health.

One of our Senior Policy Analysts, Russell Lemle, Ph.D., meets monthly on the HVAC Majority Mental Health Portfolio conference call. Another, Suzanne Gordon was asked to join the Medicare for All healthcare reform groups who meet monthly with Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal's office.

Senior lawmakers and VA officials have praised VHPI's sharp policy analysis. Because our organization has deep contacts with VHA patients and frontline staff, Congressional offices have also relied on the organization for alerts around various initiatives, like the failure to include pioneering VA telehealth as access to care and the disastrous roll-out of the Trump-era Human Resources Modernization project.

VHPI officials have also offered formal Congressional testimony, input and policy analyses on topics including VA [infrastructure issues](#), enrollment hurdles, [privatization](#), rural mental health access, and telehealth.

## **Regulations**

VHPI submitted [influential regulatory comments](#) on numerous proposals, including new standards for access to and quality of care in the Veterans Community Care Program. Policy analysts were subsequently invited as two of the five speakers at the Federal Register's public forum on access standards.

## **Building Partnerships to Strengthen Veterans' Healthcare**

In addition to engaging lawmakers, VHPI continues to build informational and strategic partnerships with veterans and frontline healthcare worker organizations, including the Center for American Progress, The Democracy Collaborative, the Center for New American Security, In the Public Interest, The National Nurses United, and the American Federation for Government Employees.

Veteran Service Organizations also look to VHPI for analysis and reporting on the most critical veterans' health care issues today.

## **Report on Strengthening Mental Health Efforts**

With co-authorship of distinguished mental health luminaries Joseph Ruzek, Harold Kudler, and Andrew Pomerantz, VHPI's policy analysts published a comprehensive [blueprint](#) that can serve as the foundation for thinking about future mental health care programs and policies for veterans.

## **Newsletter and Blog**

VHPI routinely sends out a newsletter to more than a thousand influential veteran advocates on critical veterans' issues. We have debunked inaccurate [VA news coverage](#), explained serious [private sector healthcare issues](#), and interpreted peer-reviewed work, including a [Stanford study](#) on ER care that showed the VHA's model helps veterans not only survive during an emergency but for months after it. Our blog also spotlights stories written by veteran patients who have been supported and saved by the VA.

## **Expanding our Reach**

### **Connecting New Audiences with Veterans' Healthcare Issues**

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 routinely publish their work in a plethora of national news outlets. In 2021, those publications included [The Washington Monthly](#), [The Hill](#), [Jacobin](#), [The American Prospect](#), [The New York Times](#), [The New Republic](#), [The Federal Practitioner](#), and [The Chicago Crusader](#). Analysts have also served as sources on stories in publications including [St. Louis Public Radio](#), the [Star Tribune](#), [Newsweek](#), and [The War Horse](#).

VHPI also 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. VHPI fellows have gone on other programs as well, including CBS News, The Arnie Arnesen Show, and various veteran-centric podcasts and healthcare reform radio shows.

### **Next Steps**

As we move through 2022, VHPI will continue our bedrock work while expanding our reach and focus. As part of these efforts, we've launched two major research projects, one focused comprehensively on the state of the VA's Community Care Program, another investigating the influence of the impending AIR commission. This work will be grounded in survey data, government documents, and well-informed VA sources. Through this work, VHPI will create the definitive record of the VA MISSION Act, the most consequential veterans' law in a generation. From there, we will offer and advocate for a new policy vision to better support those who've served.