

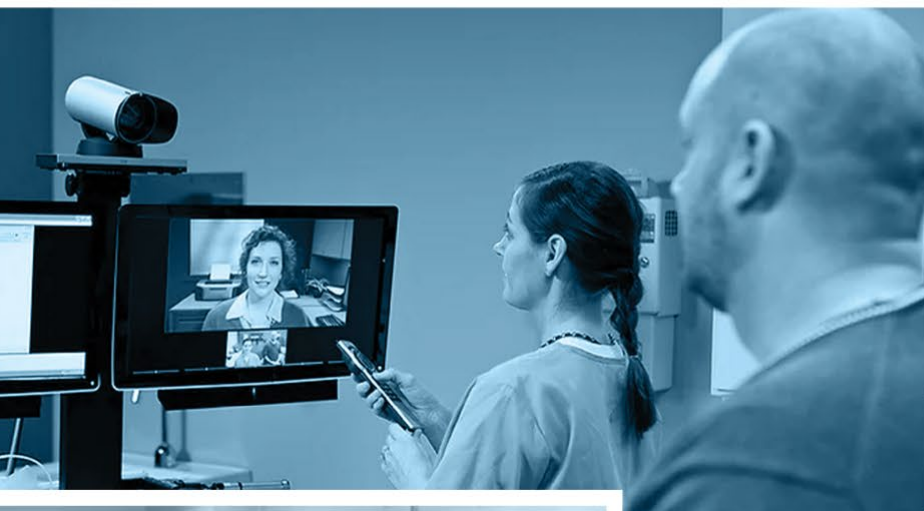


**2022 ANNUAL REPORT**

# **VETERANS HEALTHCARE POLICY INSTITUTE**

**A 501(C)3 NON-PARTISAN NON-PROFIT**

Ensuring accountability, quality, and  
transparency in veterans' health care





## **2022 Annual Report**

Learn more about VHPI, a 501(c)3 non-partisan non-profit at:

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## About VHPI

The Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute (VHPI) is a non-profit, non-partisan research and policy organization that studies and reports on the provision of healthcare, disability compensation, and other benefits for former U.S. military service members and their families. Our goal is to provide unbiased information that can be used to improve the quality of care offered to veterans. We also advocate for applying VA best practices to the rest of the American healthcare system.

Through our journalism, policy analyses, reports, legislative testimony, and other work, we help veterans, veterans' advocates, legislators, members of the media, and the broader public understand the complex nature of veterans' health conditions and how best to treat them. In doing so, we highlight the vital role played by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as a highly coordinated public health system that cares for nine million of our nation's veterans. We help veterans' advocates and the public understand how the movement towards privatization of VA benefits and services adversely impacts the veteran population. In building popular support for veteran-centric policymaking, we also build support for public institutions that work for all of us.



## What's At Stake

Since the wake of World War Two, veterans have fought hard with Congress to build a robust healthcare and benefits system. Their series of impressive, multi-generational wins ultimately produced the modern VA, which became a cabinet-level agency in 1989.

Millions of veterans and their families today depend on the healthcare and benefits respectively administered by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The VHA is the largest and only publicly-funded and fully integrated healthcare system in the United States — and the only system that addresses veterans' specific healthcare problems. Studies consistently show that the VHA provides veterans with higher quality care in a timelier fashion than the private sector. In addition, the VHA trains the bulk of the nation's healthcare professionals. It's also the nation's second largest research powerhouse, conducting pathbreaking work that serves not only veterans, but all patients. Moreover, the VHA helps the nation respond to local, regional and national emergencies.

Despite all this vital work, a well-funded group of ideological and corporate interests has, over the last decade-and-a-half, launched an unprecedented campaign to gut the VA, leading policymakers to outsource and privatize important services, from core healthcare programs to compensation and pension exams. This work has been coupled by a surge of predatory actors, some swooping in to take advantage of G.I. Bill dollars, others poaching veteran pensions or starting up dubious veterans' charities that do little more than enrich their leaders.

These well-orchestrated, privatization efforts, which have gained bipartisan support in Congress, are often wrapped in seductive but misleading rhetoric promising to give veterans a "choice" between services provided in the public and private sectors. Almost always, the VA is mischaracterized as being broken beyond repair: the wrong choice. Before VHPI's founding, this pernicious privatization movement had been largely overlooked, or even abetted by the

mainstream media and Congressional representatives. Inaccurate reporting and inflammatory commentary on the VA had become a staple of American journalism, driving clicks and ratings but not better outcomes for veterans' health.

VHPI was founded to push back against these forces by identifying and investigating bad actors, countering news and political disinformation about the VA, highlighting the VA's many successes, and offering creative policy solutions to reinforce this system for the future.

As threats to veterans strengthen and multiply, VHPI has grown, too. We've added to our staff and secured more allies in Congressional offices. We've become a critical source of information for more veterans' advocates, labor unions, and healthcare reform activists. We've helped connect the fight against VA privatization with the broader struggles for healthcare reform, as well as with the privatization of Medicare, the US Postal Service, and other public services.

All our work shares a simple but vital mission: to support and defend the interests of veterans and to preserve the VA system and other government programs for generations to come.



## We Defend and Strengthen the VA

Over this last year – our fifth as an organization – VHPI members worked tirelessly to defend and strengthen the VA. We built coalitions across the public healthcare space; strengthened relationships with Congressional lawmakers, veterans' advocates, and senior VA officials; produced original reports, Congressional testimony, regulatory comments, and other information used by policy experts and lawmakers; and supported advocates on the ground.

Much of our work this year took place in the lingering context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through our cornerstone VA advocacy work, we highlighted how former service members

experienced unique health threats from the pandemic and detailed how, in the throes of an unprecedented emergency, the VA system outperformed virtually every other system in accessibility and healthcare outcomes. We also detailed how the VA, through its “[Fourth Mission](#),” served as a backup system to private civilian clinics, sharing staff and resources to provide life-saving care to non-VA patients.

We covered an array of other topics, too, from toxic exposures and the PACT Act to deep dysfunction within the Veterans Community Care Program mandated by the MISSION Act of 2018.

Our work was broadly split between *Research + Reporting* and *Outreach + Advocacy*.



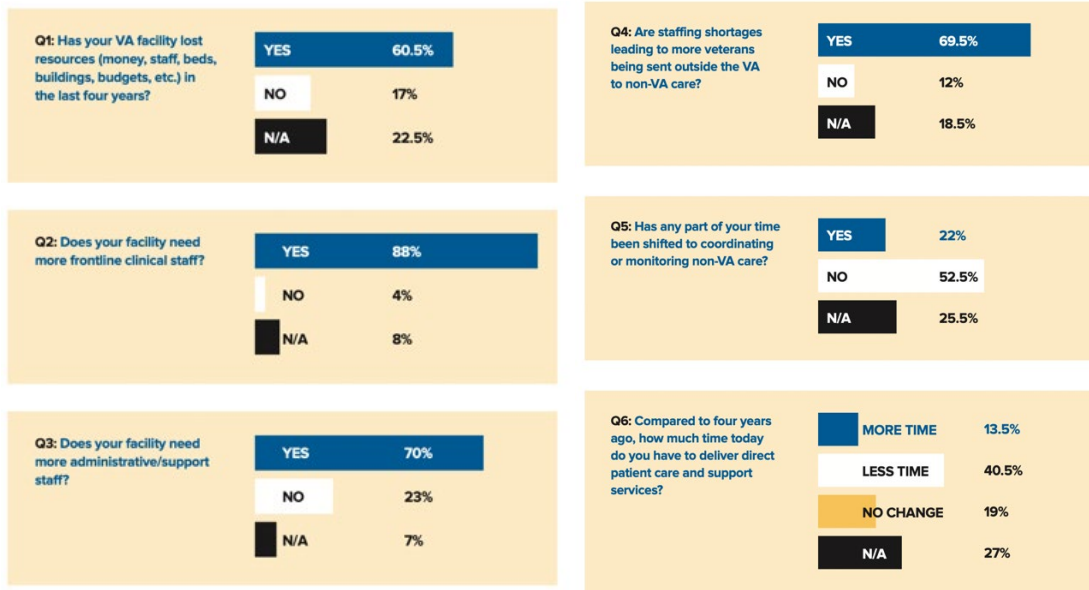
## Research + Reporting

*VHPI fellows and analysts routinely offer testimony, regulatory comments, and legislative policy analysis. We also produce fact sheets, op-eds, and investigative journalism.*

Among our many projects this year, we conducted an important survey in collaboration with the National VA Council of the American Federation of Government Employees. More than 2,300 frontline VA workers completed our survey, which focused on the privatizing impacts of the VA MISSION Act and other initiatives that threaten the delivery of quality care to veterans. The data we collected also detailed visceral stories of burnout and understaffing.

Ahead of our comprehensive report on this survey, scheduled to be released in 2023, VHPI [released top-line findings and a basic analysis of the data](#), which were used by VHPI fellows and other advocates to challenge various VA privatization initiatives.





VHPI fellows also analyzed and offered [support](#) for the PACT Act, a long-overdue law providing treatment and benefits for those sickened by toxic military exposures. As part of this work, we wrote a [paper](#) that helped scrub draft legislation of poison pill language aimed at outsourcing care, escalating costs, and cracking down on organized labor. We also produced research on the [veterans suicide crisis](#), VA [telehealth](#) and the rural health crisis, and growing issues around misguided productivity standards within the [VBA](#).

Over the last year, our fellows have written about these and other issues in a series of high-profile op-eds and investigative reports that have appeared in outlets including [The Washington Monthly](#), [The American Prospect](#), [The New York Times](#), [The Hill](#), [Federal Practitioner](#), [New York Magazine](#), and [The New Republic](#). House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano recently cited one of our [articles](#) in a Congressional hearing. Another [piece](#), which exposed the devastating consequences of the Trump administration’s failed Human Resources Modernization project, similarly caught the attention of VA leadership and produced concern on Capitol Hill. Our analysts have also served as sources for stories in publications including [St. Louis Public Radio](#), [Newsweek](#), and [The War Horse](#). VHPI also met with Secretary McDonough and expressed concerns about the impact of outsourcing and VA’s need to better to tell its story to the public.





Two VHPI fellows, Suzanne Gordon and Jasper Craven, also co-authored a book for Duke University Press titled [\*Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs\*](#). The book received substantial news coverage, including in The New York Times Book Review, The American Prospect, The Nation, and Beyond Chron. The authors also held various book events, focused largely on VA policy and veterans' lives, in Vermont, California, New York, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oregon, Ohio, and Washington D.C.



## Outreach + Advocacy

*VHPI often advises veterans, VA employees, Congressional staffers, veterans' advocates, and other sources to sound the alarm on problematic legislation and provide legislative alternative responses to the concerns these initiatives address. As part of this, VHPI highlights emerging academic research, plus stories and reporting from our national network of sources from VA facilities across the country.*

Much of our advocacy work this year was focused on a VA Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission, which was tasked with assessing the department's footprint for the future. In March, VA Secretary Denis McDonough released a set of recommendations that, if

implemented, could have closed a third of VA medical centers across the nation. This radical downsizing would have subjected far more veterans to lower quality private healthcare while simultaneously depleting VA budgets.

We vigorously opposed these misguided recommendations through [op-eds](#), [in-depth reports](#), [investigations](#), and briefings with veterans advocates and Congressional leaders. We also collaborated with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) on an invitation-only panel on AIR for major veterans' service organizations. Panelists included Kenneth W. Kizer, the VA's highly respected former Under Secretary for Health, Dr. Mark Deutchman, a nationally recognized expert in rural medicine, and James Farsetta, a former VA medical director.

Joy Ilem, DAV's National Legislative Director, subsequently hailed the event, and VHPI's assistance more broadly, as nothing short of "tremendous." She added: "As we continue our work with other Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), Congress, and the Administration to strengthen and sustain the VA health care system, we hope to continue benefiting from the authoritative research and analysis provided by VHPI's health policy experts."

As part of our campaign, we also obtained and analyzed internal VA market assessments and spoke with frontline employees, local civic leaders, and veterans and their families about the disastrous impacts of potential closures. VHPI staff wrote articles that appeared in a variety of publications and briefed labor leaders, lawmakers, and VSOs with information that allowed them to effectively oppose dangerous closure proposals.

Our coalition collectively breathed a sigh of relief in June 2022, when the Commission was officially killed. A top VA labor leader subsequently thanked VHPI for our analysis and action on the issue. "Without your help we could not have killed the AIR Commission," she said.

We launched a similarly [effective campaign](#) to save VA research. Our work informing and organizing allies helped ensure the passage of legislation that derailed attempts to curtail some of the most critical healthcare research in the nation.

We also formed another effort to reverse a toxic Trump-era initiative that's crippled the department's already cumbersome Human Resources system. Through all this, we continued to

interrogate and oppose a series of reckless piecemeals proposals that threatened to privatize core VA services.

Our major allies and partners in advocacy include senior Congressional staffers and VA officials, as well as a diverse slate of veterans' and healthcare groups, including:

- The American Psychological Association
- The Association of VA Psychologist Leaders
- The Association of VA Social Workers
- Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs
- The Veterans of Foreign Wars
- Paralyzed Veterans of America
- Disabled American Veterans
- Common Defense
- Veterans for Peace
- Physicians for a National Health Program
- National Single Payer
- Healthcare Now



## Our Team

### Steering Committee

- **Paul Cox**

Paul Cox is a Marine veteran, with 18 months in Vietnam as an infantryman. Paul has returned to Vietnam four times since 2008 to help inform his advocacy to assist the Vietnamese in eliminating the continuing deadly legacies of the war — unexploded ordnance and Agent Orange contamination. Paul believes that comprehensive, integrated care is integral to veterans' health and wellness. He proudly uses the Veterans Health Administration. He is a member of the American Legion Post 315 and is

the Chair of the American Legion War Memorial Commission. He is also a founder of Veterans for Peace Chapter 69 and Hoa Binh (Vietnam) Chapter 160. He is a lifetime member of Veterans of Foreign Wars. Paul is a licensed civil engineer thanks to the G.I. Bill.

- **Suzanne Gordon**

Suzanne Gordon, VHPI co-founder, is an award-winning journalist and author. She has written for The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, The Atlantic, The Nation, The Washington Monthly, The American Prospect, The Boston Globe, The Globe and Mail, JAMA, The Annals of Internal Medicine, The British Medical Journal, and others. Suzanne is the author, editor, or co-author of 21 books. For 17 years she edited the Culture and Politics of Healthcare Work Series for Cornell University Press. Her books on veterans' issues include "Wounds of War: How the VA Delivers Health, Healing, and Hope to the Nation's Veterans" and "The Battle for Veterans' Healthcare: Dispatches from the Frontlines of Policy Making and Patient Care." She's received the DAV's Special Recognition Award for her writing on veterans' healthcare.

- **Russell Lemle**

Russell B. Lemle, PhD, co-founder of VHPI Russell B. Lemle, PhD, is a Policy Director for the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute. From 1981 to 2019, he worked for the San Francisco VA Healthcare System, the last 25 years as Chief Psychologist. He's authored numerous scientific publications and media commentaries, including in *The Hill*, *The American Prospect*, *Washington Monthly*, *Task & Purpose*, *Federal Practitioner*, and *Guns & Ammo* on the prevention of firearm suicide and the looming decimation of the VA resulting from unrelenting outsourcing of veterans' health care into the private sector. Dr. Lemle has been widely recognized for his contributions to veterans' health care policy and firearm suicide prevention, including the American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Citation (2005), APA Division 18 Harold Hildreth Award (2011), Association of VA Psychologist Leaders (AVAPL) Antonette Zeiss Distinguished Career Award (2013), AVAPL Patrick DeLeon Advocacy Award (2016), and the Disabled American Veterans' Special Recognition Award for Veterans Health Care Advocacy (2020). In 2017, the AVAPL Russell B. Lemle Leadership Award was established in his honor for those who promote leadership development to improve veterans' mental health care. He

was a member of the Presidential PREVENTS task force and has testified to Congress on veterans' mental health policy.

- **Paul Sullivan**

Paul is the Director of Veteran Outreach at Bergmann & Moore, a national law firm managed by VA-accredited attorneys providing training and appellate litigation support to Veterans and advocates. During more than three decades of advocacy for fellow Veterans and their families, he served as a Deputy Secretary at CalVet, a project manager at VA, and the executive director at the National Gulf War Resource Center and Veterans for Common Sense. He successfully fought for VA's Veteran's Crisis Line as well as improved access to VA care and benefits for PTSD and Gulf War illness. Paul served as a cavalry scout in the Army's 1st Armored Division during the 1991 Gulf War ground invasion of Iraq and Kuwait. He earned his undergraduate degree in political science at West Georgia College, and his master's certificate in project management at George Washington University.

- **Jasper Craven**

Jasper Craven covers the military and veterans' issues for outlets including POLITICO Magazine, The American Prospect, The Nation, The New York Times, New York Magazine, PBS News, and Vermont Digger. He has written about snake oil salesmen hocking dubious PTSD treatments, untoward corporate and ideological lobbying over veterans' policy, and corruption inside the Vermont National Guard.

- **Louis Kern**

Louis Kern is a Vietnam combat veteran. He was at the Siege of Khe Sanh and he ran deep recon patrols with 3rd Force Recon Co, USMC. He completed college after his military service and opened a custom wood shop. Lou specialized in grand staircases, although is now a semi-retired [master craftsman](#).

## Advisory Committee

- Craig Newmark
- Edward Machtinger
- Andrew Pomerantz
- Joseph Riotta
- Joan Zweben
- Marilyn Park
- Bridget Lattanzi
- Charlynn Johns
- Larry Cohen
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- Hugh Foy
- Mark Jwayad
- Charlene Harrington
- Adam Pelletier
- Dorothy Salmon
- Kenneth W. Watterson
- Jay Youngdahl
- Josef Ruzek



## Our Funding

VHPI enjoys generous support from the Craig Newmark Philanthropies, the Napa foundation, and the Herman Foundations, as well as a network of small-dollar donors. Details on our finances can be found in our 990 reports [here](#).



## Our Plan for 2023

In 2023, VHPI will continue our bedrock work while expanding our reach and focus.

As part of these efforts, we've launched three major research projects:

- A comprehensive review of the VA's Community Care Program, which outsources an ever-increasing percentage of the VA's patient load and consumes nearly a third of its clinical care budget.
- The first major investigation of greed and mismanagement by unaccredited VA claims companies (also known as "claims sharks")
- A detailed analysis of the problems of the rural healthcare crisis, how it effects veterans and the role the VA can play in solving it.

This work will be grounded in survey data, government documents, and interviews with well-informed VA sources, as well as healthcare policy experts. Members of our Advisory Board – who include some of the nation's most well-respected experts – will help craft productive solutions to these issues.

The Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute thanks its generous donors, Advisory Board members, veterans, and volunteers who make our work possible. To make a contribution to our non-partisan, non-profit, click [here](#).