

Setting the record straight

The good, the bad and the reality of VA reform proposals

If you have opened a newspaper, browsed the headlines online or tuned in to the evening news anytime over the past two years, you likely know all too well the Department of Veterans Affairs has faced a continual uphill grind to restore its trust among veterans following numerous scandals brought to light.

There is a public focus on veterans and the quality of their care today that has not been seen for quite some time within the realms of traditional and social media. Veterans—and the VA in particular—are a hot topic for discussion and debate both in and outside Washington, D.C., and rightfully so.

With the 2016 presidential candidates beating a constant drum for support in voters' ears, it isn't surprising that veterans' issues have become dinner table talk even for the increasing number of American families without direct military ties. Politicians have wedged themselves firmly in the debate, and of course, no candidate's talking points are complete without strategically crafted messages about the VA and what the nation must do to reform the health and benefits systems for our nation's veterans. In addition, some political organizations have also become immersed in the discussion, injecting their own—often radical—solutions for reform.

One problem that emerges from a national conversation on veterans is that the rhetoric has a tendency to drown out reality. There is a lot of talk, but so far there has been little progress nailing down what a lot of the “big ideas” for reform really mean.

“There are a lot of catchphrases and buzzwords being thrown around, especially by politicians and presidential candidates, but these ideas have not been clearly defined,” said

Washington Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine. “Before we get swept up in these big ideas, it’s important to recognize the serious ramifications they would likely bring for veterans.”

Having digested the independent reports conducted on the VA’s access crisis, the congressionally mandated Commission on Care continues its discussions in Washington about the future of the department, with plans to deliver their recommendations this summer. Later this year, Congress may take action on a new VA plan to integrate community care with VA care. Paired with a presidential election taking place this year, there are possibilities for even more far-ranging ideas in the future.

“On the surface, a lot of these ideas sound great,” said Augustine, “but there is the potential for very negative and irreparable consequences for many veterans if these proposals are not fully developed and explained. We’re hoping to help those engaged in the discussion understand the overall impact of some of these proposals, so together, we can lay out the very best possible plan for the future of VA.”

While the details of these ideas remain murky, what is clear is that there are numerous individuals and organizations today eager to implement potentially destructive changes to the VA health care system without regard for the veterans who benefit from it.

“During an election cycle, it’s common for some very complex issues to be packaged in ways that make them appear to be simple, common-sense solutions,” said National Adjutant Marc Burgess. “It’s important that we stand up to partisan, fringe elements who would propose legislative measures that could undermine the progress made to improve veterans health care.”

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