



*News From The ...*

## COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Jeff Miller, Chairman, 335 Cannon House Office Building, Washington D.C. 20515

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CONTACT: Amy Mitchell (202) 225-3527

### **Mental Health Care and Accountability Major Concerns at VA**

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Today, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs questioned officials from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on vital programs including the perennially growing disability claims backlog, mental health care, and oversight and stewardship of VA funding over the past two years.

Questions remain regarding VA's announcement earlier this year regarding the hiring of 1,600 additional mental health care professionals, [following the release of VA's Office of Inspector General \(OIG\) report which indicated VA was not treating veterans in a timely manner](#). Yet, at the time, VA had a shortage of 1,500 mental health care providers nationwide. [VA Secretary Shinseki testified to the Committee in May that the Department's goal was to hire the 1,600 by the end of this year](#). VA Deputy Secretary Gould reiterated that goal in testimony to the Committee today. However, according to the President's August 31, 2012, Executive Order, that timeline appears to be in direct conflict with Congressional testimony: "directs VA to use its pay-setting authorities, loan repayment and scholarships, partnerships with health care workforce training programs, and collaborative arrangements with community-based providers to recruit, hire, and place 1,600 mental health professionals by *June, 2013* [emphasis added]."

"Data continues to show that eighteen veterans per day commit suicide, and five of those were receiving VA care at the time of their death," stated Rep. Jeff Miller, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "As of mid-July, VA had hired less than 900 employees as part of this effort, and there seems to be confusion among officials as to what the goal is and when it will be reached. I have grave concerns about access to VA mental health care, which is clearly in crisis."

The Committee also questioned whether monies spent on VA executive conferences were a good use of taxpayer dollars, especially as several conferences took place just months after a government shutdown was averted last year, and weeks before the country was at risk of defaulting on its obligations.

"More than two weeks ago, the deadline I and Ranking Member Filner set came and went without a response from VA to our basic questions regarding conference expenditures over the past three years and what actions have been undertaken since to safeguard veteran and taxpayer dollars. The Committee, and apparently VA, does not know," said Miller. "VA was, and, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, continues to be, tone-deaf to the fiscal difficulties this country is facing. I am extremely frustrated by VA's lack of transparency, accountability, and stewardship of funding entrusted to its officials."

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