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Don't give VA another \$17.6 billion; privatize the agency

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In case you're keeping score at home, the Department of Veterans Affairs repeatedly ignored and hid warnings from whistleblowers about a pattern of negligent practices resulting in delays in care, shoddy treatment and needless patient deaths at its medical centers. According to a report by Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., VA negligence cost taxpayers nearly \$1 billion in malpractice settlements over the past decade and may have killed up to 1,000 veterans.

Secret wait lists were created to hide patient wait times and backlogs, and, for the past four years, each and every senior executive at the VA received "fully successful" job ratings from the agency. Nearly two-thirds of the executives also received financial performance awards — bonuses awarded to them based, at least in part, on the agency's deadly ruse.

On top of that, the jobs of roughly 13,000 VA employees have long been misclassified, resulting in some employees being overpaid for as long as 14 years. The overpayments (not including the aforementioned performance bonuses based on fraud) misdirected millions of dollars that could have been used to hire more doctors and improve care at VA facilities.

The VA found out about the overpayments two years ago, but agency officials prematurely squashed a federally required internal review, in order to avoid bad publicity and fallout among employees. Because nothing was done to fix the problem, hundreds of new positions have been filled at inflated salaries, and the VA is still advertising open, overpaid positions. Even if VA officials wanted to correct the pay grades (which they obviously don't), federal rules won't allow them to, and a senior official with the VA's Office of Human Resources Management says no corrective action will be taken for at least 15 more months, during which time employees will continue to be overpaid.

As we've argued time and time again, the situation at the VA is beyond repair. Hundreds of VA administrators and employees should be fired, the entire agency should be dismantled, and its facilities and services fully privatized. Veterans need to be able to seek care at any hospital or with any physician's office they choose, and they need to be able to do it now.

Interim VA Secretary Sloan Gibson would disagree with this approach, however. Testifying for the first time on Capitol Hill last week, Secretary Gibson told the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee that the VA needs an additional \$17.6 billion over the next three years in order to hire more doctors and decrease patient wait times. The almost \$6 billion per year would be on top of the more than \$150 billion Americans already pay for the VA each year.

Not surprisingly, lawmakers differed in their responses to Secretary Gibson's request. Sen. Jon Tester of Montana and other Democrats approved of the request. Republicans, led by Sen. Mike Johanns of Nebraska, were extremely skeptical.

"This sounds so similar to what we've heard over the years," he said. "If you can't clean up your act, then guess what? You lose out. I don't think you need more billions and billions of dollars."

Sen. Johanns is correct. According to the Cato Institute, the VA is already the fifth-largest federal agency in terms of spending. Leadership at the agency has shown time and time (and time) again that they can't be trusted with the money they've already been given, and giving them even more isn't going to fix the layers of corruption.

No more money and no more chances. And soon, hopefully, no more VA. It's far past time to privatize this agency.