



**2019 ANNUAL REPORT**

# VETERANS HEALTHCARE POLICY INSTITUTE

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

Ensuring accountability, quality, and transparency during a radical new era in how veterans' receive their health care.





## **2019 Annual Report**

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

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## A Snapshot in Time

In 2016, a group of veterans, health care providers, journalists, and policy experts assembled to address a serious gap in the discussion about veterans' clinical needs. Over the last three years, this band of veterans and subject matter experts chartered a 501(c)3 non-partisan, non-profit, the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute (VHPI) and helped to shape the discussion about veterans' health care.

As a veterans' health care watchdog, VHPI documents and analyzes the shifts in veterans' health care and critical areas where that care – whether in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) or private sector – can be improved. This annual report is a snapshot about how VHPI communicates essential information about veterans' health care to legislators, veterans' advocacy groups, the media, and Americans who believe that veterans deserve the highest-quality health care.

Before VHPI's founding, core stories, needs, and concerns related to the delivery of veterans' health care had been overlooked despite hours of cable TV commentary and print news reports. Inaccurate reporting and inflammatory commentary on the VA and the VHA had become a staple on cable news, driving ratings but not better outcomes for veterans' health. Data on the private sector's performance treating veterans had been absent from Capitol Hill committee meetings and news coverage. Although VA privatization was an increasing focus of debate, there was little understanding of how it was defined – much less how it would impact America's veterans. But now, VHPI bridges the divide in thought leadership and veterans' health care needs.

VHPI is committed to exploring and analyzing the health care issues important to veterans — from the treatment of chronic physical and mental health conditions to caring for veterans inside and outside the VHA. Although VHPI began as a tight-knit group of concerned veterans and citizens, it has become an essential source for news, commentary, and policy analysis for veterans, lawmakers, and journalists.

As VHPI enters its fourth year, its role has become even more critical in keeping veterans at the center of the discussion about their health. Meanwhile, the only American health care system designed specifically to deal with veterans' complex health needs – the VHA – is undergoing the most radical period of change it has ever experienced.



## A Policy, Media, and Analysis Powerhouse

VHPI has become a leader in thought, commentary, and analysis on veterans' health care issues. As a 501(c)3 non-partisan, non-profit organization, party affiliation doesn't matter as long as veterans' issues are front-and-center. VHPI's subject matter experts have acted as sources in some of the nation's most significant publications. VHPI's analysis is sought by inside-the-beltway policy leaders, Veteran Service Organization leadership, presidential candidates, and academic and health care organizations across America.

Undoubtedly, VHPI's most critical area of work is around the privatization of veterans' health care services. VHPI's team of experts have helped legislators, policy makers, and media commentators better understand and more accurately define the phenomenon of privatization. VHPI is conducting ongoing interviews and surveys with veterans to see how they're being impacted by privatization efforts.

VHPI has highlighted the chronic problems that plague America's private health care system that treats veterans: understaffing, variance in quality, high cost, uncoordinated care, and an epidemic of preventable – yet often fatal – medical errors and injuries.

VHPI's work reminds decision makers that any analysis or proposed solution for veterans' health care must be put in the context of broader problems of the larger American health care system in which the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) functions. VHPI's independent investigations like *Unreliable Sources: How Corporate Funders Influenced Mass Media Coverage of Veterans' Health Care* and *Performance Review: VA and Private Sector Nursing Homes* provide a critical fact check on corporate-owned media. VHPI's important publications in the *Federal Practitioner* drive conversation inside federal agencies and in the private sector.

VHPI's work focuses on how veterans' health care can be improved and what it will take to assure that veterans remain at the center of decisions about how their care is designed and delivered. With the rollout of the VA MISSION Act in June 2019, VHPI is committed to documenting the successes and failures of VHA and the private sector – so veterans can continue to receive the best care everywhere.



## Educating Health Providers and Decision Makers

Lawmakers and non-VA health care providers alike have a stark knowledge gap on veterans' unique health care issues and needs. VHPI's renowned care providers and journalists work with veterans and other subject matter experts to explain how policy can, will, or has impacted veterans in the real world.

VHPI is committed to increasing transparency within the health care policy process. Understanding who is behind Veterans Health Administration (VHA) privatization schemes is critical. VHPI's investigations have revealed some of the biggest, for-profit health care players who want a bite of the VA's budget, peddle unproven (and potentially harmful) treatments, or move seamlessly between Congress and K Street.

### **Analysis and Statements for the Congressional Record**

The number of VHPI analyses of the most pressing issues is unparalleled for an organization of its size. As a testament to VHPI's expertise, the VA cited VHPI's work in its submission to Congress of the MISSION Act's Quality Standards in May 2019. VHPI's senior policy analysts have submitted statements for the record on veterans' health care issues more than a dozen times since 2016. Often, VHPI has partnered with the American Psychological Association, the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders, the Association of VA Social Workers, Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs, and other veterans' health care leaders. VHPI has submitted analyses in the following areas:

#### **The Veterans' Choice Program**

- Choice Program Redesign
- Care in the Community Act
- Choice Program Redesign Act
- Wrong Choice for Veterans
- Myths Behind Outsourced Care

#### **The VA MISSION Act of 2018**

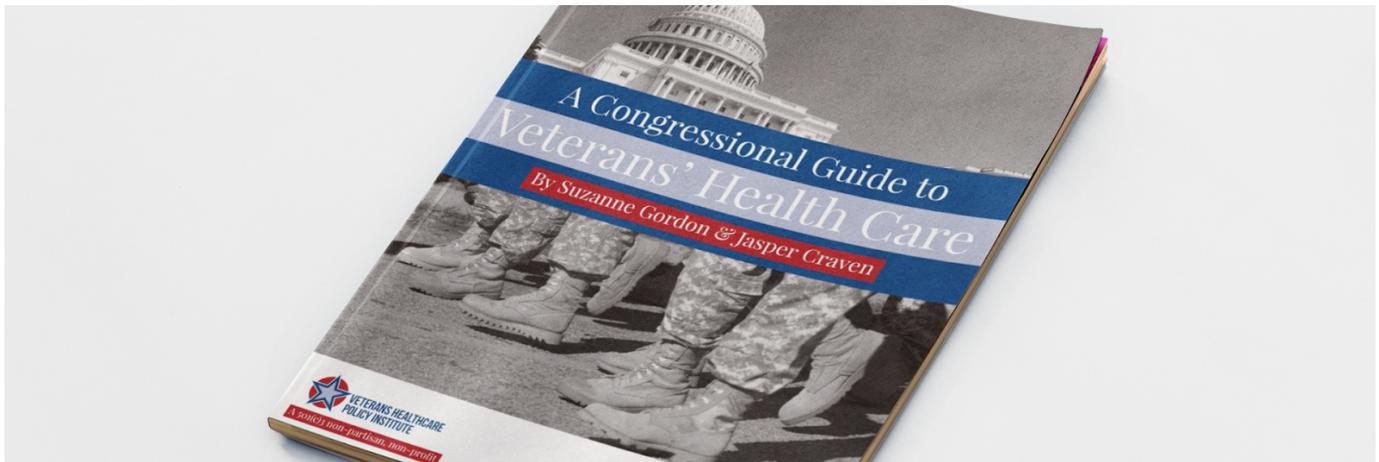
- AIR Commission Cost Analysis
- Walk-In Care
- Access Standards
- AIR Acceleration Act

#### **VA Facilities and Funding**

- Impact of Closure of San Francisco VA Medical Center
- Never Again Act

#### **Mental Health & Suicide Prevention**

- PTSD Competency Standards
- Double Standards for PTSD Provider Competency
- PREVENTS Analysis
- Joint Action Plan (for newly discharged veterans)
- Telemental Health
- National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide
- Veterans, Firearms and Suicide Prevention
- Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act



## **The Congressional Guide to Veterans' Health Care**

The Congressional Guide to Veterans' Health Care was designed for junior staffers who routinely interact with constituents who served in the U.S. Military and policymakers with a veteran, health care, or Armed Forces expertise. It explains the most common veterans' health care conditions, the structure of the Department of Veterans Affairs and its sub-agencies, and how the Veterans Health Administration is funded.

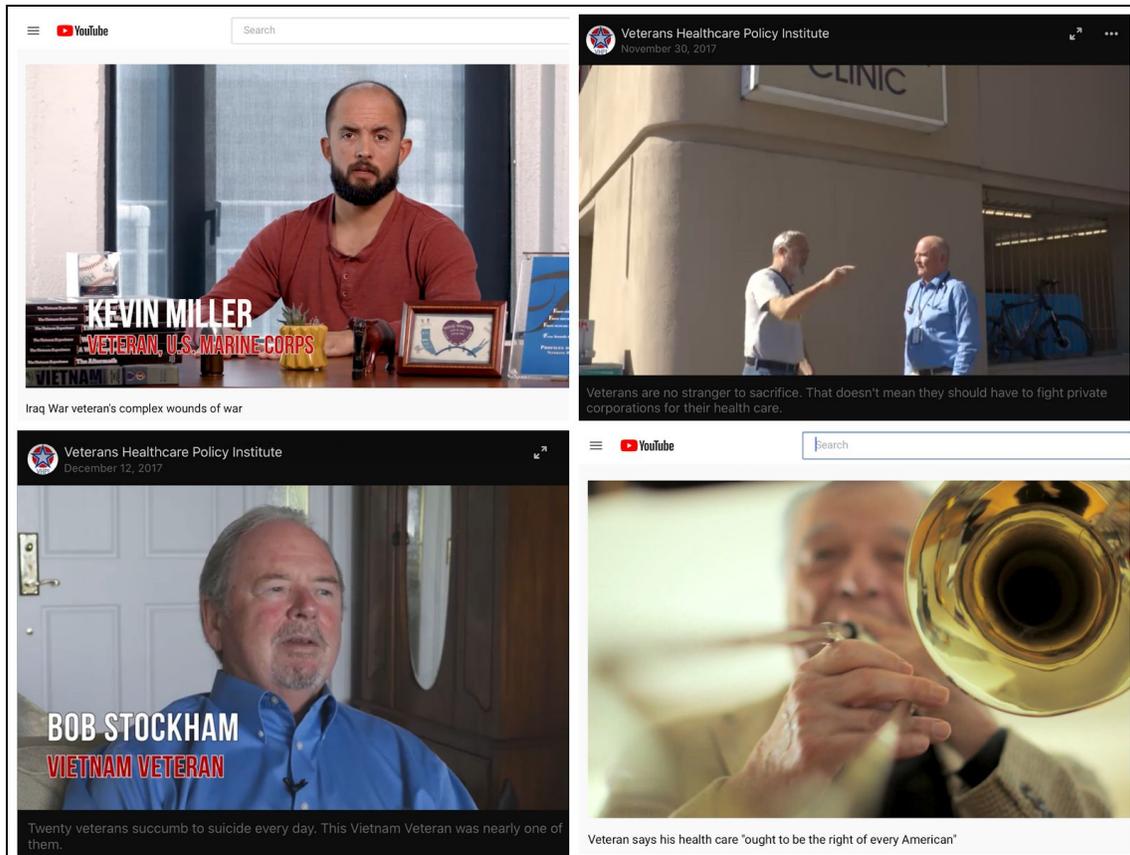
The Union Veterans Council, AFL-CIO, graciously printed copies of VHPI's Congressional Guide and distributed them to all 535 members of Congress in the House of Representatives and Senate. The guide has also been used by members of Veteran Services Organizations and other veterans' activist groups as a way to learn more about veterans' unique conditions as well as about how the VA works.

## **A Subject Matter Expert for Policy Makers**

Senior members of the VHPI team consult regularly with Veteran Service Organizations. In October 2019, a VHPI Senior Policy Analyst was asked to join the White House/VA task force on suicide prevention as a thought leader.

CQ Researcher's October 2019 report "Veterans' Struggles" heavily relied on VHPI for its extensive report. VHPI's policy analysts and fellows were cited numerous times throughout the 30-page report. Paul Cox, a Vietnam veteran and VHPI's President, wrote a companion piece that ran alongside the pro-privatization Koch-funded group, Concerned Veterans for America. This placement is a testament to VHPI's credibility on veterans' issues, as CVA's former executives were instrumental in proposing the radical changes now being implemented at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

## Telling Veterans' Stories



VHPI has produced a series of videos that let veterans speak about their health care conditions in their own words. These clips demonstrate the unique needs of veterans while also illustrating the differences in quality provided by the private sector and the Veterans Health Administration. Peter Coyote, the narrator behind many Ken Burns documentaries like *Country Music* and *The Civil War*, lent his talent to serve as the voice behind VHPI's mission.

### Tools for Veterans

In addition to providing content to decision makers, VHPI takes pride in providing veterans with information they can use when navigating their own health care. When the VA MISSION Act rolled out in June, 2019, VHPI released a helpful wallet card with questions veterans should ask their VA health care provider before being sent into the Community Care Network.

**WHAT TO ASK VA STAFF  
BEFORE YOU'RE  
REFERRED TO  
COMMUNITY CARE**



- What data do you have about the quality of care I will receive?
- Is the quality any better than the VA?
- Will the cost be the same as it is at the VA?
- Will that provider have the expertise in military-related conditions to appropriately treat my service-related conditions?
- Are the wait times shorter than at the VA?
- Can I choose to receive VA care even if I need to wait or drive longer?
- Would my Community Care provider coordinate my care with other outside and/or VA providers?
- If I have a bad outcome from Community Care treatment, will I be left to deal with this on my own and have to seek outside legal help?
- Is getting a VA Telehealth appointment an option for me?



## Improving Veterans' Health Care Media Coverage

Because of today's media environment of shrinking ad revenue and overburdened bureaus, the beat reporter has virtually disappeared from newsrooms around America. Fewer journalists are doing more of the work, making them unable to develop specialty areas of coverage like they have in the past.

Veterans' health and care needs are incredibly complex, requiring knowledge of medicine, psychosocial factors, military culture, and public/private health care systems. It's a lot to ask of any journalist or reporter operating in the 24-hour news cycle. VHPI has become an essential resource to break through the noise by helping reporters understand complex health care delivery and policy nuances that require years to master.

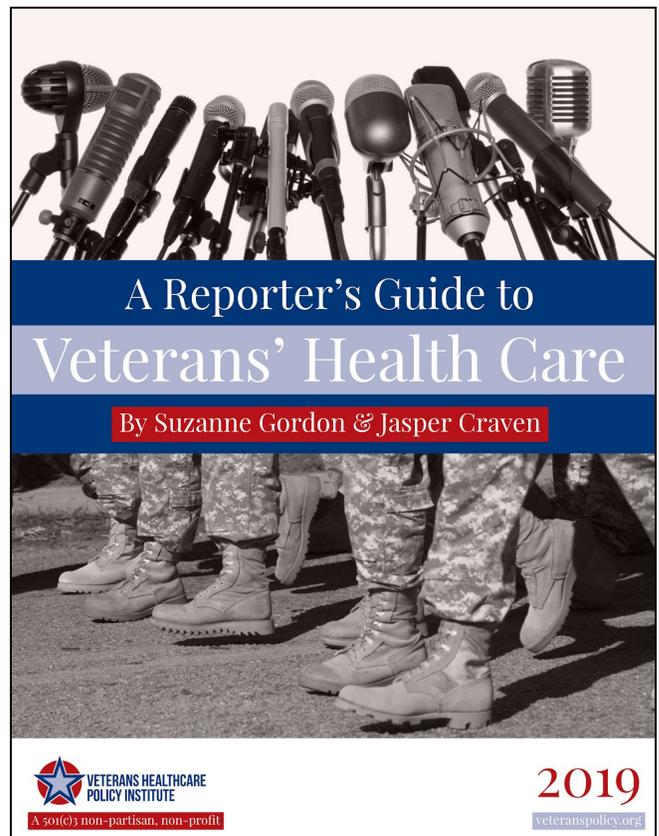
### The Reporter's Guide to Veterans' Health Care

The Reporter's Guide to Veterans' Health Care is an easy-to-reference resource for any reporter facing an imminent deadline. The guide provides the foundational knowledge needed to accurately report on veterans' specific health conditions and much-needed context about how and why veterans' care is delivered.

As of October 2019, the Reporter's Guide has been distributed to nearly 300 members of the media who report on veterans' health care issues in large and small media outlets – from radio to TV, print, and digital journalism. VHPI has reached out to reporters assigned to the VA or military beat and responds to requests for help in understanding difficult-to-parse health care and policy issues.

### The 'Driving the Week' Newsletter

VHPI's weekly newsletter, "Driving the Week," collects the stories and studies often missed by mainstream reporting into a single Monday tip sheet. Subscribers include Capitol Hill legislative staff, reporters in big cities and small towns, policymakers from coast to coast, and veterans across the nation.





## Sought after Commentary, Analysis, and Expertise

VHPI's team has gone on the record, been a source, or contributed to print, television, radio, and digital news platforms, including:

- The American Prospect
- America's Heroes Group Radio
- The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
- The Atlantic
- The Arizona Daily Star
- Army Wife Talk Radio
- Army Wife Network
- Beyond Chron
- Bloomberg Radio
- The Boston Globe
- CQ Researcher
- C-SPAN
- Democracy Now!
- The Federal Practitioner
- Frontlines of Freedom
- The Hill
- Jacobin Magazine
- Kaiser Health News
- LIVE!
- Military Times
- Military Wives Radio
- The Minneapolis Star-Tribune
- The Nation
- Gallant Few Radio's The New American Veteran
- The New York Times
- NPR
- ProPublica
- Reveal News at the Center for Investigative Reporting
- The San Antonio Express-News
- San Francisco Chronicle
- Stars and Stripes
- The Twin Cities' Pioneer Press
- Veterans Radio
- VICE TV
- The Washington Monthly
- ...among many other publications



## Nationwide Outreach on Veterans' Health Care Issues

VHPI is meeting veterans, health care workers, and decision-makers where they live, practice, and govern. From coffee shops to legacy Veteran Service Organization conventions, and lecture halls at Cornell Weill Medical School, the University of Tennessee and UCSF Schools of Nursing, the VHPI team is dispelling VA myths and untangling the complex world of veterans' health care.

The non-profit has cosponsored veterans' health care town halls, book events, discussion groups, and other meetings in the following cities (often on multiple occasions in large metro areas):



- Tucson, AZ
- Eureka, CA
- Lafayette, CA
- Palo Alto, CA
- Sacramento, CA
- San Diego, CA
- San Francisco, CA
- San Jose, CA
- Baltimore, MD
- Minneapolis / St. Paul, MN
- Reno, NV
- New York, NY
- Troy, NY
- Portland, OR
- Memphis, TN
- Dallas / Fort Worth, TX
- Burlington, VT
- Seattle, WA
- Milwaukee, WI



## The Advisory Board



**Dr. H. Westley Clark** is the Dean's Executive Professor of Public Health at Santa Clara University. He is formerly the Director of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, where he led the agency's national effort to provide effective and accessible treatment to all Americans with addictive disorders. Clark was also the former chief of the Associated Substance Abuse Programs at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in San Francisco, California and a former associate clinical professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of California at San Francisco (UCSF). He worked for Senator Edward Kennedy as a health counsel on the U.S. Senate Committee of Labor and Human Resources.

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**Larry Cohen** currently chairs the board of Our Revolution, the successor organization to Bernie 2016. Cohen served as President of the 600,000 member Communications Workers of America from 2005-2015, and spent nearly all of his adult life as a member, organizer, and officer. Cohen was the founding chair of Jobs with Justice believing that workers' rights is a community issue. Cohen was also the founding chair of the Democracy Initiative, a coalition of more than 50 membership organizations working together on voting rights and to get big money out of politics. Cohen is a member of the Democratic National Committee, and was appointed by Senator Bernie Sanders as vice-chair of the Unity Reform Commission whose mandate is to democratize the party structures and presidential nominating process.

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**Charlene Harrington, Ph.D., RN** has been a professor of sociology and nursing at the University of California San Francisco since 1980. She was elected to the American Academy of Nursing and the Institute of Medicine (now the Academies of Medicine). Her research has included designing and managing a model California long-term care consumer information system website (2002-2016); studying state Medicaid home and community-based service programs and policies (1994 to 2016); directing the National Center for Personal Assistance Services (2003-2013), and assisting with a new Community Living Policy Center funding (2013-2017). She has testified before the U.S. Congress on long term care research and policy, written many articles and books on nursing homes and long term care, and lectured widely in the U.S. and internationally.



**Mark Jwayad** is a writer and filmmaker living in Los Angeles and working around the world. Originally from Portland, Oregon, Jwayad attended the University of San Francisco and studied Performing Arts & Social Justice. He continued with a Masters in Film Directing from Chapman University. Jwayad spent several years working with actors in the commercial casting world. Today, his work ranges from short-form to film and television development. He writes and directs comedic, dramatic, and documentary content for various brands and non-profits. His work documenting veterans' stories has led him to a deep concern for veterans' health care.

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**Charlynn Johns** is the Executive Director of Sunshine After Rain Ministries, faith-based non-profit founded over 20 years ago. For the past ten years she has worked with military families and veterans, developing a website, Battle Buddy Info, a collection of resources to help veterans find assistance when they need it. She is the advisor to Texas Vets Cares for Health Care, a group of stakeholders, veterans and concerned patriots who are working to ensure veterans know legislative information that will have long-term consequences; considered by many to be an expert when it comes to current efforts and issues on privatizing the VA. She was awarded the 2017 Honoree of the Year by Greater Dallas Veterans Council for her work.

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**Phil Longman** is a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University and a senior editor at Washington Monthly. He is also the policy director at the Open Markets Institute, where he is currently researching the effects of concentration in health care. Longman was appointed by Senate President Harry Reid to serve on the Commission on Care, a federal panel charged with creating a strategic plan for the future of veterans' health care. He has written extensively on VA health care, including his book *Best Care Anywhere: Why VA Healthcare Would Work Better for Everyone*, now in its third edition. Longman lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife, Sandy, and son, Sam.

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**Edward Machtinger, M.D.**, is a Professor of Medicine and Director of the Women's HIV Program (WHP) at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). He is a national thought leader and advocate for using trauma-informed approaches to more effectively address complex health and behavioral conditions, and to improve the resiliency and joy of care providers. He has consulted about trauma-informed care for multiple federal agencies and foundations and is currently a consultant for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), co-authoring federal guidance on trauma-informed primary care. He is a graduate of Harvard Medical School and performed his residency in internal medicine at UCSF.



**Dr. Andrew Pomerantz** is the National Mental Health Director for Integrated Services in the Veterans Health Administration and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. He was a primary care physician in Chelsea, Vermont from 1972-1984, prior to training in psychiatry. He joined the White River Junction, Vermont VA and Dartmouth faculty in 1987 and served as the VA Chief of Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences from 1992 until 2010 and was Associate Director of Residency Training at Dartmouth for over a decade during that time.

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**Dr. Josef Ruzek** retired as Director of the VA National Center for PTSD Dissemination and Training Division in April 2018, after helping improve PTSD services in VA for over 26 years. Ruzek is an Adjunct Professor at Stanford University Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and Co-Director of the Center for m2 Health at Palo Alto University. He has been a member of the VHA Undersecretary's Special Committee on PTSD and served as psychotherapy champion for the joint VA-DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for Management of Traumatic Stress. He edited several volumes on treatment of PTSD, including *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies for Trauma and Caring for Veterans with Deployment-Related Stress Disorders: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond*. He is a past member of the Board of Directors of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies. Ruzek specializes in early intervention to prevent the development of PTSD, dissemination of evidence-based treatments for PTSD, and development and evaluation of internet and smartphone-based interventions for trauma survivors. His team at the National Center for PTSD developed widely-used apps for veterans, including PTSD Coach and PTSD Family Coach.

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**Dorothy Salmon**, known affectionately as “Auntie Dorothy,” is a civic and business leader in Napa County. Salmon was a key fundraiser for Measure A, which brought about a renaissance in Napa County and, in particular, the City of Napa. Salmon was the first woman President of the Napa Rotary Club, and a proactive leader during the crucial organizational and developmental phases of The Napa Valley Opera House, the Napa Chamber of Commerce, The Napa Valley Community Foundation, The Napa Valley Expo, If Given A Chance Foundation, The Napa Land Trust, Friends of the River, COPIA, Queen of the Valley Hospital Foundation, Napa County Workforce Investment Board, NapaLearns, and currently, President of the Board of The Pathway Home Inc. Salmon and her husband, John, host a 150-plus member Napa Valley Leadership Council Informative Lunch Group consisting of a cross-section of Napa Valley business and community leaders. For 22 years, The Council Lunch group has met monthly with the goal of informing and creating common ground regarding major social and economic challenges facing Napa County. Salmon hosts a weekly KVON Monday morning radio show.



**Kenneth W. Watterson** joined the United States Marine Corps in January 1965, arriving in Vietnam in July 1965, where he served for 13 months. Watterson volunteered to go back to Vietnam for his second tour in July 1967. During that time he received wounds on his 21st birthday while out on operations. Again, after 13 months of duty in Vietnam he was assigned back to Camp Pendleton, California. Watterson served for eight years on the Board of Trustees as National Vice Commandant of the Southern Division of the Marine Corps League. He was awarded National Marine of the Year 2007-2008 from the Marine Corps League and was recipient of the 2007 Presidential Call to Service Award, Life Time Achievement. Watterson served as Vice Chairman of the Texas National Cemetery Foundation and as the chairman of the All Veterans Faces of Freedom Memorial committee. He is the Chairman and founder of The Dallas Fort Worth (D/FW) Honor Guard and serves on numerous committees including the Homeless Veterans Services of Dallas. Watterson also serves as President of Homeless Veterans Services of Dallas and currently chairs the committee for the Veterans Resource Center and the Veterans Homeless Day Center. Watterson has been a stakeholder at the Dallas VA Medical Center for the past 10 years. Watterson is a life member of the Marine Corps League, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), Military Order of the Purple Hearts, AMVets, 1st Marine Division Association, 3rd Marine Division Association & 5th Marine Division Association.

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**Jay Youngdahl** is presently a Visiting Research Scholar at the Murphy Institute at City University of New York (CUNY). Prior to this he was a Fellow at Harvard University in Ethics as well as in Responsible Investment. A lawyer, he is a partner in The Youngdahl Law Firm in Houston, Texas where he represented workers and unions. Youngdahl served with the Third Armored Division in the U.S. Army. He was honorably discharged in 1974 as a Private First Class.

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## The Steering Committee

Paul Cox  
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*Vietnam Veteran*

Suzanne Gordon  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

Russell B. Lemle, Ph.D.  
*Senior Policy Analyst*

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Bridget Lattanzi  
*Iraq War Veteran*

Joan Zweben, Ph.D.  
  
Brett W. Copeland  
*Executive Director*



**Thank You.**

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To make a contribution to our non-partisan, non-profit, **visit [www.VeteransPolicy.org/donate](http://www.VeteransPolicy.org/donate).**

– or –

Contact Brett W. Copeland, VHPI Executive Director, at (202) 210-8879 or [ExecDirector@VeteransPolicy.org](mailto:ExecDirector@VeteransPolicy.org) to discuss other opportunities to help ensure veterans continue to get the world-class health care they deserve.