

Changing the Conversation: The VA Backlog

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Executive summary

The Center for Investigative Reporting is committed to covering the issues U.S. veterans face when they return home from active-duty deployment. In our ongoing series *Returning Home to Battle*, we have investigated problems veterans encounter in securing health care, disability benefits, education and housing. Our investigations have led to congressional action, reforms at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the California VA, and other real-world changes. This case study follows one example, focusing on CIR's investigation into why veterans were waiting a year or more to learn whether they qualified for disability benefits from the VA.

For our investigation into the disability claims backlog, CIR analyzed publicly available VA data, other data obtained through public records requests logging the performance of the nation's 58 regional VA benefits offices and, later, information obtained through leaked documents. The analysis revealed a dramatic increase in the time veterans spent waiting for disability claims to be processed since President Barack Obama took office. This slide occurred despite the president's campaign promise to revamp the VA and continued public statements that treatment of veterans was among his top priorities. The first set of findings was published in April 2012, and CIR continued to report on the issue over 19 months – a media strategy commonly called “rolling thunder.”

Between April 2012 and November 2013, media across the country increasingly covered this issue. Advocacy organizations and individual constituents used CIR's reporting to lobby members of Congress. Congress pressured Obama to take action and respond publicly. And, ultimately, the VA implemented reforms that resulted in far fewer veterans waiting a year or more for a decision about their benefits.

The most meaningful impact of this investigation was that VA processes were measurably improved and the lives of veterans were changed. In November 2013, CIR reported that between March and October 2013, there were nearly 300,000 fewer veterans waiting for disability benefits. The number of veterans waiting a year or more had dropped by nearly 90 percent, the number waiting for two years dropped 99 percent and the average wait time dropped 112 days, from 280 days to 168 days.

As the media impact analyst at CIR, my job is understand the connections between our investigative reports and their impact. In this case, I wanted to determine whether the actions taken to decrease the backlog were a result of CIR's reporting, outside factors or a combination of the two.

This case study analyzes the results of CIR's investigation into the VA backlog, the coverage's position and role in the broader media context, and congressional and presidential responses to the series. It also details the methodology I used to understand how CIR's multiplatform content and distribution strategy significantly shifted the way Obama characterized the VA backlog.

My analysis provides compelling evidence that CIR's investigative series introduced the VA backlog to the national mainstream media while simultaneously providing a deeply reported data set to regional media across the country, allowing them to localize the story for their communities. This two-pronged, above-and-below distribution brought widespread attention to the backlog at a national level, empowered local newsrooms to make the story relevant to their audiences and provided the public with the information to hold public officials accountable for this systemic failure. It also ensured that from Washington to their home constituencies, members of Congress could not ignore the rolling thunder media storm.

I also found measurable evidence that Congress' actions in response to this media storm led the president to publicly acknowledge the failure of his administration's strategy, change the way he framed the issue and take swift action.

Investigating the VA backlog

CIR has a full-time reporter, Aaron Glantz, dedicated to covering the challenges veterans face when seeking health care, disability benefits, educational opportunities and other promised assistance. He first reported directly on the VA's backlog of disability claims on April 14, 2012. The [story](#) was published in [The New York Times](#), which touched off media coverage in California, where the crisis was especially acute.¹

Just over four months later, in late August 2012, CIR published a [second story](#) about disabled veterans who were still "stuck in backlog limbo," together with an [interactive map](#) that allowed anyone to explore the VA data CIR had analyzed for its story.² This map, searchable by each of the 58 VA regions, presents data on the number of veterans waiting for disability benefits, the average wait time and the number of veterans waiting more than 125 days.

¹ The Bay Citizen published Glantz's first story within weeks after the merger between CIR and The Bay Citizen was announced.

² At the date of publishing this paper, the map had last been updated in August 2014.

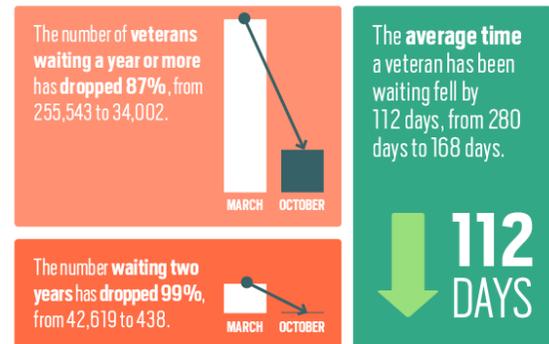
This story and the map were published in the national online news blog [The Daily Beast](#), as well as in regional papers across the country. National outlets including [Time](#), [Vice](#) and [NBC News](#) covered CIR's findings and embedded the interactive map or a link to it on their websites. Opinion pieces followed. CIR distributed [follow-up reporting](#) nationally through text, TV and radio in early November 2012.

On Dec. 20, 2012, [CIR reported](#) that tens of thousands of veterans were being approved for benefits and pensions only after it was too late to help and that nearly 19,500 veterans had died while waiting for their claims to be processed. This story was distributed through national outlets, and Glantz discussed the story in interviews aired on TV and radio across the country.

CIR continued to cover the problem, publishing additional stories in 2013, including a large investigation based on leaked VA documents that broke in [March](#). Despite agency promises, the wait times for disability claims had increased. While the VA had not publicly acknowledged the increased wait times, the leaked documents revealed that many attempts to address the problem had "fallen apart in the implementation." The documents showed that the number of veterans waiting more than a year for disability compensation had increased by more than 2,000 percent under Obama – from 11,000 in 2009 to 245,000 in December 2012. The documents also showed that veterans filing their first claim, including those returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, waited between 316 and 327 days on average, much longer than the officially published average of 273 days. In major metro areas, waits for first-time claimants were even longer: 642 days in New York, 619 days in Los Angeles and 542 days in Chicago.

THE SHRINKING BACKLOG

After The Center for Investigative Reporting revealed the full scope of the Department of Veterans Affairs benefits backlog in March, 67 senators and more than 160 Congress members wrote to President Barack Obama demanding change. The VA responded by promising that by October, all year-old claims for disability compensation or other benefits would be addressed. While the VA did not meet that goal, much progress has occurred.



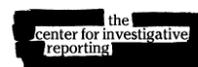
BIG STRIDES IN BIG CITIES

Major metro areas, where veterans previously waited the longest, were among those that improved the most.

VA OFFICE	(MARCH)	AVERAGE TIME WAITING (NOVEMBER)	DIFFERENCE
OAKLAND, CALIF.	467	154	-67%
BALTIMORE	459	224	-51%
LOS ANGELES	421	193	-54%
INDIANAPOLIS	387	163	-58%
CHICAGO	387	192	-50%
SEATTLE	375	151	-60%
BOSTON	356	174	-51%
HONOLULU	351	150	-57%
RENO, NEV.	351	195	-44%
PHOENIX	346	176	-49%
NEW YORK	333	179	-46%
WACO, TEXAS	332	167	-50%
HOUSTON	320	220	-31%

The VA says that by 2015, no veteran will have to wait more than 125 days for benefits. Currently, more than 400,000 claims are stuck in the backlog.

If the VA continues at its current pace, it will eliminate the backlog in mid-December 2014, fulfilling a promise set by the Obama administration that no veteran would have to wait more than four months by 2015.



SOURCES: Department of Veterans Affairs and CIR analysis

Figure 1 This CIR infographic, "The Shrinking Backlog," was distributed online Nov. 11, 2013.

CIR released additional stories in [April](#) and [May](#) 2013, sparking consistent national press coverage and responses from public officials, many of which focused the reaction from Congress and the administration. During this time, CIR continued to update and improve its interactive map with data on the VA’s claims backlog. CIR also worked with other news organizations to localize reporting and added profiles of veterans highlighted by media partners to the interactive map to humanize the data.

Waiting for help

Where is the veterans’ backlog the worst?

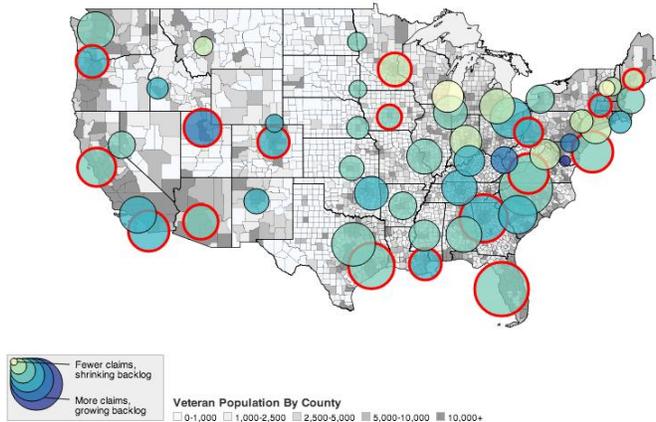


Figure 2 The relative size of the circles indicates the length of wait times at VA benefits offices across the country. The circles outlined in red show where news organizations localized the story.

Many media organizations used the interactive map to help localize the VA’s disability claims backlog, in some cases embedding the charts and maps created by CIR on their websites. Other media, such as Digital First Media, used the [API](#)³ as the source for their own interactives comparing the number of veterans waiting nationwide, which ran with new stories published in newspapers across the country.

Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” featured Glantz’s findings in an ongoing campaign called “[Red Tape Diaries](#).” Newspaper

editorials ran in the Los Angeles Times, The New York Times and dozens of places between.⁴

On [Nov. 11, 2013](#), Veterans Day, Glantz assessed the effectiveness of the VA’s [reform efforts](#). CIR found that the VA’s new computer system had been fully deployed, wait times had fallen across the country and the number of veterans waiting a year or more had fallen by nearly 90 percent.

CIR’s stories consistently framed the growth in the VA backlog as a failure not only by the VA at national and local levels, but also as a failure by Obama to follow through with his campaign commitment. “The waiting list has more than doubled since President Obama took office, despite the appropriation of more than \$300 million for a new computer system and the hiring of thousands of claims

³ An application programming interface allows users to access data from a database and integrate that data into new or existing applications. The value of an API is that many users can use it for different purposes, beyond what the original developer intended.

⁴ According to a LexisNexis news search, there were at least 26 editorials published following this story.

professionals nationwide,” [Glantz wrote](#) in April 2012. Both then-VA Secretary Eric Shinseki and Obama were identified in nearly every story of the series.

Due to the accuracy and credibility of CIR’s investigation, the rich data it presented, the reach of national partners like The New York Times and the efforts of advocacy organizations, Glantz’s work made a national splash. The embeddable interactive map further amplified the findings by providing news organizations with easy access to local data.

The distribution strategy here was called “above and below”: Stories are distributed at a national level, often through prominent media partners (in the case presented here, The New York Times, NBC, Time and others). National data sets then are used to inform localized stories, especially in particularly affected communities, to reach and empower new and diverse audiences.

Media and public response

In addition to the investigative series’ active distribution by CIR through its partners, the information it contained was widely cited by media across the country. CIR uses a news clipping service, which catalogues each time “The Center for Investigative Reporting” is mentioned in media – print, online and all closed-captioned TV and radio. While this tool is useful for identifying direct citations of CIR’s reporting, it does not provide the broader media context or the ways in which content travels.

The challenge, therefore, was to understand the broader media landscape surrounding the VA backlog during the time period of CIR’s reporting and parse out CIR’s role. A keyword search for both “veteran” and “backlog” in LexisNexis, a database of all print news in the U.S., between April 2011 (one year before CIR’s first story) and February 2014 created a data set of all relevant articles.⁵

Prior to April 2012, one article contained both “veterans” and “backlog”: a column in The Journal Gazette in Fort Wayne, Indiana. However, in the two years after Glantz’s first story broke in April 2012, LexisNexis identified 847 unduplicated articles containing the two keywords, evidence that in the wake of CIR’s national coverage of the backlog, the issue entered mainstream media.

Between CIR’s April 2012 and March 2013 stories, there were 112 stories about the VA backlog. In the 11 months following the March 2013 story, which used leaked documents to show that wait times for disability and benefits claims were far longer

⁵ I chose February 2014 as the end date for the media search for two reasons. First, the time between CIR’s first story in April 2012 and the second big story with new information from leaked documents in March 2013 is 11 months. February 2014 is 11 months after the second story, making it a comparable time period. Second, The Arizona Republic released an [investigation](#) in April 2014 linking long wait times to veterans’ deaths in that state. This story was picked up in national media, so CIR’s share of influence in the growing chorus of outrage around the VA backlog became more difficult to parse.

than the VA publicly acknowledged, there were nearly 850 stories on the VA backlog. The fact that coverage increased so dramatically after the March story has interesting implications for the type of content that media choose to pick up. While the story about the growing VA backlog did spread through other media, the story about the VA's lack of public disclosure went viral.

Glantz sent his stories to individuals and veterans' advocacy organizations with whom he has built relationships – like Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and Concerned Veterans for America – to ensure that the organizations most interested in the information would be prepared to share his reports with their constituents as soon as they were published. In news releases, these organizations noted that while they had known about this issue for years, they were pleased it was receiving national attention. They also called upon the government to respond. In 2013, members of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America heavily promoted Glantz's reporting, appearing as guests on news programs and walking around the U.S. Capitol handing copies of the stories to members of Congress.

Government response

Government officials consistently responded to CIR's investigations into the VA backlog. For example, after Glantz's April 2012 story, the VA announced it would [overhaul operations](#) at 12 offices.

CIR's investigation also galvanized bipartisan action. Unlike most issues that arose during this period of political polarization,⁶ congressional Democrats and Republicans reacted quickly, responding in a unified manner. On Nov. 29, 2012, the U.S. Senate unanimously [passed a budgetary amendment](#) demanding that the VA draft a plan within 60 days to address the backlog.

Following the CIR's [March 2013](#) story, Democrats from California and Republicans from Florida wrote letters to Obama, urging him to clear the backlog. In total, [67 senators](#) and more than 160 members of the House of Representatives signed public letters to the president.

The quick response from public officials followed widespread media coverage of the backlog. Because the story was in the national media and sparked deep local coverage, elected officials could not ignore the debate. The rolling thunder of CIR's series kept the issue alive for months in the national media.

Presidential framing of the backlog

Media and public officials – especially the president – have unique opportunities to influence the dominant frames in public discourse, shaping how the public perceives

⁶ Scholars such as Skocpol and Jacobs (2011), Tesler (2012) and Winter (2011) have argued that we are in a period of extreme elite political polarization.

reality.⁷ This section analyzes presidential discourse about the VA backlog to better understand how Obama used his unique position to frame public understanding.

A keyword search of 640 presidential speeches from January 2009 to May 2014 including “veteran,” “backlog” and/or “wait time” resulted in 28 speeches.⁸ Closer analysis found 19 of them to be relevant.⁹ (Content analysis methodology and tools are detailed in Appendix A.) Each reference was coded based on the sentiment and words used.

VA backlog: Presidential mentions and frames						
Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of mentions	3	7	1	2	3	3
Frames	Funding Tech	Progress Funding Tech	Increase Funding Tech	Attack Funding Tech	Attack Progress	Accountability Fix Funding

Table 1 The number of mentions of the VA backlog per year and the frames employed in those mentions.

When Obama was campaigning for president in 2008, he spoke openly about the VA backlog, vowing to address and reduce it if elected. In 2009 and 2010, after he became president, Obama continued to refer to the VA backlog. In 2009, the president described the backlog in terms of increased funding and advancing technology within the VA. In 2010, he began to speak about progress being made in addressing the VA backlog. He spoke about the VA backlog in an overwhelmingly positive tone and brought it up in civilian settings even more frequently than in front of military audiences.

In 2011, Obama referred to the VA backlog only once, and then only when he was asked directly about what he was doing to reduce it during an American Legion convention. His response was consistent with his earlier characterization of the backlog, saying it was being addressed through increased funding and technology. However, he did acknowledge the “growing backlog.”

After Glantz’s early 2012 national story about the dramatically increased backlog at the VA, Obama stopped mentioning the backlog publicly except in front of veteran audiences when he was asked about it during Q&A sessions. In these instances, he shifted his message to one of attack, with secondary messages of increased funding

⁷ Frames are socially constructed ways to give meaning to reality and often are used to persuade. For example, a child who calls spinach “yucky” is combating the parents’ “healthy spinach” frame. In contemporary politics, activists employ “pro-life” and “pro-choice” frames to try to win over voters, while gay marriage has been framed in terms of “equality” on the left side of the political spectrum and “the sanctity of marriage” on the right. Often, frames are used for persuasion and may be code words to current and/or potential supporters. For example, “sanctity of marriage” suggests religious righteousness to be fundamental to the position of anti-gay marriage organizations, without having to reference religion or God directly.

⁸ Speeches were pulled from The American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php>.

⁹ Speeches deemed not relevant were those that referred to the immigration backlog.

and technology. He continued to speak about the VA backlog in terms of attacking the problem throughout 2013. In August 2013, Obama reintroduced the progress frame when he said, “Finally, the backlog is shrinking.”

In January 2014, Obama referred to the backlog in what is perhaps the highest-profile annual presidential speech, the State of the Union. He characterized the backlog as a problem that his administration was attacking and highlighted the progress that had been made.

Conclusions

This analysis has identified that a significant shift in presidential framing of the VA backlog occurred after CIR reported that the backlog had grown during Obama’s tenure. This case study suggests that congressional attention to the issue resulted directly from CIR’s above-and-below distribution strategy. National media attention made it difficult for members of Congress to ignore the issue, while localized reporting – much of which was made possible both through tailored regional stories provided by CIR and by easily accessible granular data through CIR’s interactive map – informed and fueled pressure from below by constituents and advocacy organizations.

CIR frequently employs the above-and-below approach. The evidence found through this case study suggests that it is effective, especially for national issues of government accountability that Congress can help solve. We hope this analysis will be useful for others interested in media impact.

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Appendix A

I used WordSeer, an exploratory text analysis system in development at the University of California, Berkeley, to visualize word frequencies and relationships within the corpus of all official communications released by the White House, including those from President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, first lady Michelle Obama and Jill Biden, a total of 2,534 records. Whitehouse.gov provides access to all official communications (speeches, press releases, etc.) as Web content. However, there is no way to download the records. In order to obtain the 2,534 records, a script to scrape Whitehouse.gov and pull all content into an HTML file was employed.

WordSeer enables a user to select keywords and see their relationships to other co-occurring terms through a visualization; when one hovers over the co-occurring term, a box with the sentence and document in which it appears pops up, providing instant contextualization for the user. The word trees for “veterans,” “va,” “va → health care” and “backlog” are presented in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

The word trees provide confirmation for the content analysis provided in this case study, as well as some interesting insights. While “backlog” did not have any consistently co-occurring terms, Figure 3 makes clear that “claims → backlog” almost always was referred to in a positive confirming the progress, technology In this entire represented not only from was the only directly to suggesting this issue for the be dealt with highest level.

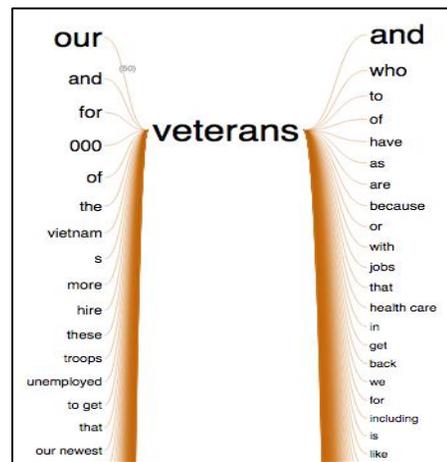


Figure 1 WordSeer’s “veterans” word tree illustrates the frequent co-occurrence of “veterans” and “jobs,” as well as “health care.”

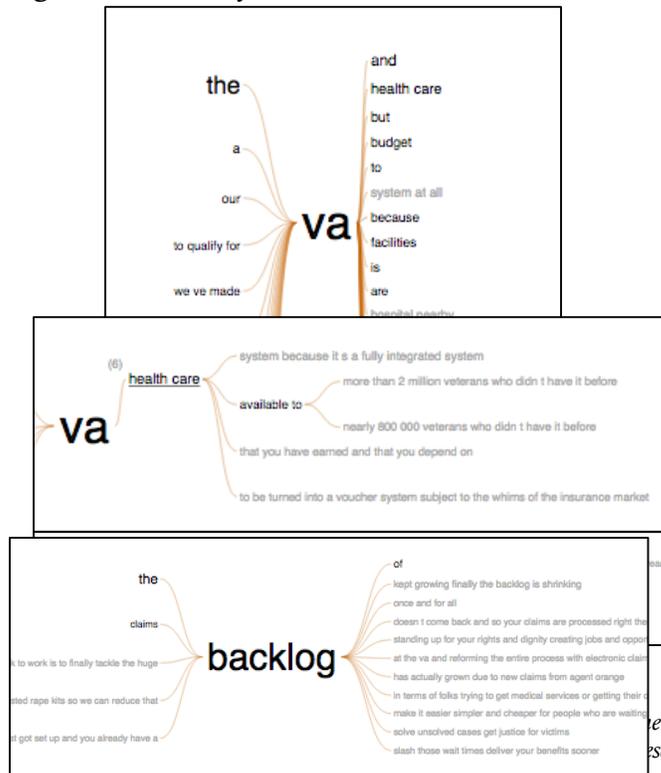


Figure 3 The “backlog” word tree illustrates the word in context.

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