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A Public Administration Theory view of the
Department of Veterans Affairs

by
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List of Abbreviations

FHA	Federal Housing Administration
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
HUD	Housing and Urban Development
IT	Information Technology
NPF	Narrative Policy Framework
NPM	New Public Management
PA	Public Administration
PART	Program Assessment Rating Tool
PSM	Public Service Motivation
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury
U.S.	United States
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VHA	Veterans Health Administration
VSO	Veterans Service Organization

A Public Administration Theory view of the Department of Veterans Affairs

Thesis Abstract -- Idaho State University (2019)

This paper is a detailing of the problems encountered within the Department of Veterans Affairs Health and Benefit Administrations. This includes the waitlist scandal that broke in 2014 and the current implementation failure of the Forever GI Bill. I present a summary of public administration theory, literature, and scholarship to demonstrate a grasp of the public administration field. Public administration theory was applied to the VA to better understand and diagnose the underlying problems that presented as well-covered issues. Additionally, I discuss shortcomings within public administration literature and possible future studies of the VA that may assist in the clarification of bureaucratic issues.

Keywords: veterans, Department of Veterans Affairs, VA, GI Bill, public administration

The Department of Veterans Affairs: A History

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is second only to the Department of Defense as the largest federal government agency. While the defense of the United States rightly receives a vast majority of the media and public attention, recent scandals and implementation failures have focused both public and government attention on the department. Care for veterans has remained a high priority for governments around the world and undoubtedly will remain significant in perpetuity. Although veteran care in the United States has existed since the close of the American Revolutionary War, the consolidation and creation of the VA as it is now understood occurred on July 21, 1930 when President Hoover signed Executive Order 5398 and raised the already established Veterans Bureau to one of a federal administration (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018b).

Before the elevation of the Veterans Bureau to a federal administrative bureaucracy, the United States had been providing healthcare and housing for disabled veterans for well over a century. It was the American Civil War that led to a wave of veteran homes being founded at the state level which provided treatment for all diseases and wounds, even if they were not service related (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018b). Care for veterans involved both the federal and state governments with the state providing a majority of the care while the federal government was involved in pensions and other benefits (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018b). However, it was not until the U.S. entry into World War I that Congress established programs such as recompense for service-related disabilities, insurance that covered both service members and veterans, and vocational rehabilitation services for those left disabled by service (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018b).

VA operates around a simple mission statement. Their stated mission is “To fulfill

President Lincoln's promise 'To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan' by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's veterans"

(Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018b). While on the surface this seems like a humble premise, recent global activities conducted by the United States military has placed an increasing strain on VA resources directly related to the growing size of the armed forces.

Through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as several smaller conflicts in Africa and Syria, and the continued care of veterans from the wars in Desert Storm/Desert Shield, Vietnam, Korea, and World War Two, the capabilities of VA to meet an ever-changing environment, both in medical care and technology, has been called into question. Members of the military have faced persistent guerilla forces around the world and experienced more asymmetrical warfare than ever before. Traumatic brain injuries (TBI), an increase in the diagnosis rate of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and other illnesses have stressed resources at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) while an uptick of veterans utilizing education benefits from 2010-2016 (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017) has placed additional strain on the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

The VA is divided into several smaller administrative groups. Beyond the main apparatus of the Department of Veterans Affairs, there exists the National Cemetery, VBA, and VHA. According to data released by VA in 2018, the total number of allotted positions for all administrations of the VA is 419,353 (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018d). That same data also indicates that VA is facing a manning crisis, short almost 50,000 employees with a majority of those vacancies existing in the VHA. Medical care for veterans is of the utmost importance and continued large scale career vacancy issues threaten the viability and availability of treatment for the VHA customer base.

It has appeared at times that the most frequently proposed solution to problems within VA and its administrative arms is to provide the agency with greater budgetary resources. While it is true that lack of funds is a shared problem when attempting to provide health care and distribute benefits, there should be a correlation between the increase in budgetary requests and the ability for the agency to provide services without issue. The most recent budget request from VA totals \$198.6 billion dollars, an increase of \$12 billion from the previous fiscal year and approximately \$30 billion more than the requested budget in fiscal year 2015 (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018a). VA budgets are split between discretionary funding, which includes health care and benefit administration, and mandatory funding, which includes housing, pensions, and insurance benefits (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).

The focus of this paper will be on the problems that occurred within the VBA and VHA arms of the VA. The waiting list scandal of 2014 and the current implementation failure of the Forever GI Bill have stemmed from the separation of administrations. Furthermore, these issues will be viewed through Public Administration (PA) theory. Thoughtful application of PA theory may explain the problems VA has experienced and whether VA should exist in its current form.

A Look at VA Scandals

Understandably, there would be no need for any discussion about the VA and its sub-administrations if each was working effectively and efficiently. However, as previously noted, these administrations have come under fire in varying fashions. Many of the problems have had serious, long lasting consequences to the veteran community that they are mandated to serve. Issues at VA have been covered extensively through media outlets and yet VA has made little progress towards solving them.

The first large-scale scandal broke in 2014 at the Phoenix VA Health Care System. It was

reported that the health system was keeping two separate record sets in order to show that veterans utilizing this health care system were being tended to in a timely fashion while the real list displayed that the actual wait time for veterans seeking care was months long (McCarthy, 2014, p. 1). The outcry regarding the Phoenix waitlists went beyond the simple fact of secret waiting lists to try and hide waiting times. When first reported, it was estimated that approximately forty veterans had died while waiting for care.

Further investigations by the VA Inspector General found similar waiting lists at VHA facilities across the United States (Kalin, 2018, para. 2). Pressure has steadily mounted on VA and VHA since the return of service members and veterans from current wars. According to statistics, approximately 2.7 million members of the armed forces had been deployed to either Iraq or Afghanistan (Hautzinger, Howell, Scandlyn, Wool, & Zogas, 2015). This pressure most likely contributed to the increased usage of waiting lists to disguise the fact that veterans were facing waiting times outside of what would be acceptable when reporting to VHA.

A more current example of the VA and its subsidiaries is the delayed rollout of the Forever GI Bill. The GI Bill has been a staple of recruiting tools since its inception in the 1940s. Improvements throughout the past seventy years have provided increased education benefits to be used by veterans, including the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The Forever GI Bill's main thrust was the elimination of the fifteen-year usage requirement. However, VBA has encountered severe trouble in upgrading its aging information technology (IT) infrastructure to meet the new demand. The VA, and the VBA more specifically, were initially confident that implementation of the Forever GI Bill would be simple and efficient but found quickly that the current IT infrastructure was inadequate for needed changes (McCausland, 2018a, para. 7).

Education benefits are a major portion of the work that the VBA is tasked with

completing. An influx of veterans planning to use the GI Bill to complete their higher education goals since the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan created the potential for bottlenecks if new legislation was passed into law. A major change from the Montgomery GI Bill to the Post 9/11 GI Bill was the inclusion of a housing stipend. Many veterans attending higher education institutions relied on this money, as well as tuition payments and a book stipend, to make ends meet while attending school (McCausland, 2018b, para. 2-5).

The Forever GI Bill was signed into law in 2017. VA and VBA stated that application of the new changes would be ready within the year. However, before the beginning of the fall semester in 2018, the changes were still not in place. This delay in implementation led to thousands of housing payments going unpaid, causing massive problems in the veteran community. VA and VBA have continued to provide updates, each confident that the problem will be solved within the next twelve months. The administration has also utilized other avenues of housing payment calculations to remit missed payments to veterans.

Both of these presented cases, the VA Healthcare waitlist scandals and failed Forever GI Bill implementation, indicate that underlying problems exist within the VA bureaucracy. The office of VA Secretary has seen frequent leadership changes within the previous five years (Brust, 2018, para. 1), seen a response to recurring shortcomings. However, there has been little to no movement to solve the most pressing issues facing VA, VHA, and VBA. While most Congressional responses have been to push more money into the VA budget, resistance to change within the organization prohibits large scale transformation that is desperately needed to support veterans.

It may be easy to cast these problems as issues that will resolve themselves over a period of time, either through an increase in the amount of money allocated to the agency in the

budgeting process, by working each individual issue, or the ever-prevalent senior leadership changes. However, this may only explain why small steps such as budgetary increases do not solve the underlying problem.

Overview of Public Administration Scholarship

Public Policy Analysis:

An overview of the policy making process and the theory behind behaviors when formulating new and evaluating existing policies is crucial to understanding how policy is constructed. Without proper analysis of how policy is made and implemented, serious issues can occur when an agency attempts policy change too quickly. Policy analysis must be conducted at every level of the government and every agency to successfully build and enact policies that support their mission and the communities that they serve. Congressional approval ratings may improve with new laws such as the Forever GI Bill but underestimating the requirements for implementation has led to problems for veterans utilizing education benefits.

Experience has shown that building and implementing public policy is a difficult process. Public administrators may find themselves believing that the public and its individual members are rational enough to separate facts from feelings and that evidence and scientific and evidentiary backings are support enough for policy change. Much of the early focus of public administration was on melding science and administration. Rational models were meant to eliminate decisions that literature decried as ignorant, ungrounded, or messy (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 43).

Despite early focus on science in administration, there has also been push back on this more traditional view and the simple fact remains that human beings at their very core are not rational creatures, nor are they omnipotent (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 99). Critiques of the

rational model have arisen as it becomes more and more accepted that morals and feelings are part of the public policy process. Clemons and McBeth (2017) identified four different critique areas of the rational model which includes intellectual and analytical, cognitive, political and institutional, and ideological and philosophical.

Cognitive critiques of the rational model are evidenced often in the policy creation process. Human history is littered with examples of tribal groups. While this model is useful for organization, it is ineffective when creating policy in that it diminishes issues into partisan politics in us-versus-them fashion (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 108). The ongoing debate over firearms in the United States is a prime example of tribal politics impeding any major policy change initiatives.

Public policy practitioners must also be aware of the role of narratives in the policy creation process. A field of study has emerged to better understand and grasp the power of narratives. This field is referred to as Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). This theory works to exploit the notion that humans are primarily story driven, and that stories hold more persuasive power in the policy making process than more rational methods of science and facts (McBeth, Lybecker, & Husmann, 2014, p. 50). With an accepting view of narratives, policy administrators would be able to deftly handle narratives in the same manner as an interest group might. Many policies have been put into law because there was a powerful enough narrative to sway public opinion.

Along with NPF, public policymakers must also understand multiple streams framework. Multiple streams theory is a framework that can be used to bring groups and organizations with differing philosophies and ideas together to work on policy change. Naturally, the idea of cooperation between tribal groups to find a policy solution is counter to the rational idea of

policy creation. Policy creation often devolves into a power struggle amongst groups who interpret the environment in a vastly different manner than others (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 129).

Multiple streams framework posits that there are three distinct streams that continually exist: 1) the problem, 2) politics, and 3) policy proposal. The problem stream deals directly with a societal problem. The politics stream represents the inclination of the political system towards solving a problem. The policy proposal stream characterizes ideas and theories on how to resolve societal problems (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 127). While each stream will most likely not generate a policy independent of each other, the presence of focusing events can bring each individual stream together to form a window of opportunity, through which there is a higher than normal chance that policy change will be enacted (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 127). A focusing event is an event that triggers a massive response from media and demands public interest due either to its rarity or magnitude that calls attention to a problem (Birkland, 2001, p. 116).

Equally important to the public policy process is engagement of the public in democratic efforts. Policy that would affect any portion of citizenry should have public input. Administrators that belie citizen input into the process risk turning individuals away from a spirit of cooperation to one of confrontation that encourages adversarial behavior (King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998, p. 319). A common thread throughout all public administration is the desire to bring the public into the administrative process. This would allow a smoother process and avoid turning the citizenry against what could easily be perceived as an uncaring or ignorant bureaucratic state.

Democracy and Governance:

Democracy is a foundational pillar of the U.S. political system. Much of the driving force behind the American Revolution can be traced to the inability of Americans to exercise individual freedoms and rights under British rule. While the country is more accurately described as a representative republic, democracy allows the citizenry participation in the political and policy making process.

Public administration may be viewed as the compromise between the will of the government and the wishes of the people. Government must also take the politics-administration dichotomy into account as there is a clear difference between the elected positions in government that set law and the bureaucrat to find the correct manner to employ that law (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2016, p. 18). Outside perception of the government-bureaucratic relationship may view it as public administrators working only for elected officials. This perception should be minimized as much as possible with the understanding that citizens possess as much or more power as the government. Citizens may also not fully understand their rights under the law.

Regular election intervals allow the citizenry to replace ineffective political leadership. However, there has been a rise in the elitism theory of government. Elitism aims to replace the will of the people with those individuals who control the most wealth and power. This theory of elitist government control argues that even with a democratic society, voters are only choosing between different representatives, senators, and presidents and are far less concerned with actual policy (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 27). Elitism's danger lies in the belief that the powerful few understand and can implement more effective and efficient policies, discounting the needs and desires of the general public.

A representative democracy in the mold of the United States is often times accused of being stagnant, that is, the policy implementation process at various levels of government can appear to be painfully sluggish. This was a feature of the constitution, as the Founders believed that a deliberative approach to governing prevented rash decision making. However, over time new paths have formed to improve the current governmental structure. The rise of interconnectedness has opened the door for a strengthening of bonds in both governmental actors and the public. This theory is referred to as network governance. These networks deliver a tool to structure both inputs and outputs of policy development which in turn aligns policy development with more dominant political agendas (Klijin & Skelcher, 2007, p. 598).

A basic understanding of network governance begins with the realization that there are actors within the government and that these actors have been and always will exist within governments but through the utilization of networks, stakeholders and their interests can be better realized on the final outcomes of policy (Klijin & Skelcher, 2007, p. 599). Networks allow interest groups to gain power and influence and in doing so, can wield that power and influence to impact policy development. Networks allow for fluid flow of power between interest groups and rewards those groups with majority opinion on their side to effect outcomes.

Another problem that has emerged with bureaucracy is the distrust the general public has for agencies such as VA. The bureaucracy has become a favorite target of politicians who lament the inability to accomplish sweeping reforms due to those in unelected positions that hold a goodly amount of the power in governments throughout the United States. The fact that a majority of these positions are filled by unelected individuals results in limits to the ability of elected officials to remove them from office or power. This is a direct result of the *Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act* which removed the requirement for political loyalty and in its place a

merit-based system was implemented for the securing of positions within the government (Theriault, 2003, p. 52).

However, there has been a theory that shifts control away from bureaucrats. Public choice organization theory is one way that power can be returned to the public. Gary Marshall (2006) describes this theory as a replacement of the bureaucracy by a decentralized system that more closely resembles the free market (p. 55). There have been traces of this theory in the recent policy initiatives within the VHA and the *Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014*.

This act implemented a system in which veterans who were waiting long periods for VA care or were outside reasonable driving distances to VA hospitals or clinics could seek medical care from civilian providers. While this act was not a complete installation of free market principles to those veterans seeking health care outside VHA, there were the beginnings of New Public Management (NPM) within the organization. NPM posits that government should treat the citizens they serve as customers and to orient themselves to operate in a more businesslike manner (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2016, p. 126).

Public Organizational Theory:

When reviewing the work of both government and the bureaucracy, and even more so when these organizations have become ineffective or inefficient, a potential solution would be to view them through the lens of organizational theory. Through theories expressed in this field, organizations are examined based on a dominant frame. Those frames are human resource, political, structural, and symbolic.

The human resource frame focuses on the human/labor side of organizational theory. Whether or not an organization can harness its employees to work towards its end goals is a major

point of the human resource frame. A quick glance through history would reveal many companies that have failed in engaging employees in the business of the organization and constructing a give and take relationship between the organization and its staff.

The human resource frame draws on several core conventions such as the fact that organizations and people require each other, organizations are built to serve the needs of humans, and that if the fit between individual members and the organization is low quality, then both suffer (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 117). Humans are creatures of need, meaning the organization they are a part of must be willing to provide that need.

The human resource frame also provides public administration academia with McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 123). McGregor posited that there are two ways for management in an organization to behave. In Theory X, leaders within the organization treat their subordinates as resistant to change, lazy, unambitious, and would much rather be led (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 123). Theory Y is the direct converse of Theory X as it relies on the organization to align its requirements with that of the employee's needs so that the employee finds self-satisfaction (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 124).

Much work can be done in the human resource frame to ensure that the organization thrives. A badly managed or ineffective human resource frame usage can quickly ruin an organization's mission and future. An example would be Argyris and Schön's *Theories for Action*. They found that many managers believed themselves to be espousing better management principles than they are actually doing in the work environment (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 165).

The political frame of organizational theory deals mainly with power, conflict, and forming coalitions. It would not be a stretch to state that every organization deals in politics, at least some of the time. Therefore, it is important to understand how politics are used in the

organization and how they can be harnessed to better serve the needs of the organization and its members.

The core of the political frame is the notion that organizations are made up of individuals, each with their own beliefs and value systems, which in turn leads to lasting differences (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 188). This frame also understands that every decision that an organization makes is subject to limited resources which underscores that conflict in the day-to-day management of any organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 188-189). There is little doubt that due to the scarcity of resources, and the difference of opinions on how those resources should be spent, will cause conflict to arise in any organization. Another important aspect of the political frame is the process of compromise and bargaining (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 190).

It is also important to view managers as separate, political beings working within the organization. Organizations may encounter trouble if the manager is unable to map the political terrain around the group. Forrest Fleischman's (2017) review of the work of Hebert Kaufman and the United States Forest Service found that the early success of the organization was not only because of a superior organizational structure, but because there was an understanding of aligning the political support with the agency's mission (p. 748). Fleischman goes on to note that regardless of structural change within an organization, implementation of new goals or mission changes can encounter trouble when arguments over the future course of the organization are conducted by influential political players (2017, p. 748).

The manner in which an organization is established, or changed to later in its lifecycle, can have either positive or negative effects. Restructuring is often seen as a remedy for underperforming or inefficient organizations. An example may be a company that started with a single, unitary structure but over time, and due to changing missions or technology, has added

several separate divisions. This may work well for a time but if the structure presents too many roadblocks to successful integration with the rest of the company or some managers become more politically powerful or astute, there will be an inherent risk that there will be problems in the future.

Bolman and Deal (2013) point out that there are two central ideas related to the structural frame: how to differentiate the work an organization does and how to dole out responsibilities (p. 49). This becomes increasingly important as organizations grow and expand. If there are no clear delineations about the individual work that must be performed and who conducts that work then the organization becomes inefficient and ineffective. This is called suboptimization, an organization failing as individual departments are more concerned achieving their own priorities and goals instead of working as a whole, cohesive group (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 51).

The structural framework of an organization is never limited by the structure it currently finds itself in. Many times, a change to a different organizational structure may solve problems being encountered. What may work for one organization may not work for another. Much of the decision regarding structure should be based on what the organization does as its mission. Structural dilemmas can occur when management swings too far to extremes on topics such as employees experiencing excessive autonomy or excessive interdependence (Bolman & Deal, 2013, 72).

The last frame of organizational theory is the symbolic frame. This frame relies on the symbols, culture, and stories of an organization. This is reflected in VA's history, as President Lincoln wanted all veterans, their widows, and their orphans cared for, a desire that built veterans care as a national concern. Stories, if proper and relevant, can hold a special sway over organization members and the public.

This frame utilizes several different types of symbols to unify employees into the organizational culture and to gain the interest and possible trust of the public. This includes myths, heroes and villains, and even fairy tales (Bolman & Deal, 2013). A manager adept in exploiting the symbolic frame and the organization's culture can aid in molding a more effective and unified environment for employees, which in turn can inspire those employees to make the organization better (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 264).

Public Workplace Issues:

The practice of public administration goes beyond organizational theory. One of the most basic tenets of public administration is the fact that the mission is meant to be centered on the community that it serves while the community must be able to rely on the administration. This is defined as a fiduciary relationship, a relationship of trust that in the realm of public administration translates to the trust the citizen puts in the administrator to act on their behalf. The United States may be a representative republic with strong democratic ideals but the influence and knowledge of the average citizen is limited when trying to enact policy. Public administrators are able to consolidate both power and knowledge and work on behalf of the public.

Public administration suffers from many of the same problems as any other work environment. However, unlike private companies or organizations, public administration work is more often required to be as transparent as possible. Public administrators use budgets that are drawn from taxes paid by the public. This relationship between administrators and the public results in the scrutiny of both how the work of the administration is accomplished as well as the policies that they implement. This again is part of the fiduciary relationship. The public desires, and should receive, the knowledge that those persons working on their behalf are moral, ethical,

and lawful.

The field of public administration is not free from the legal consequences of acting outside of the law. Sexual harassment has been a lightning rod topic in the previous five years. The fiduciary relationship between citizens and administrators requires that sexual harassment in the public work environment be addressed in accordance with employment law. Recent events regarding sexual harassment in the workplace, such as the “#metoo” movement, has made the proper handling of this type of issue top priority.

Another issue gaining steam in the public workplace is off duty behavior, including the use of social media by public sector employees. If, for example, an employee disparages the leadership of the organization or the elected government they work for through social media, do they still retain their constitutional right to freedom of speech? Public sector employers must be continually mindful of these types of issues, especially as the use of social media and the electronic environment grows.

Public workplace issues also include affirmative action. This is a controversial topic that has been in place in public institutions for several decades. The fundamental purpose of affirmative action is to ensure the diversity of organizations. These organizations may include public agencies, government workers, or universities. Affirmative action is the balance between the correction of past wrongs and reverse discrimination.

However, any law must comply with the Fourteenth Amendment, which guarantees every U.S. citizen equal protection under the law. Any public organization wishing to utilize affirmative action must apply the action in a fair manner, without crossing into reverse discrimination as the case of *Board of Regents v. Bakke*. This case involved a quota system installed at the University of California Medical School at Davis and the United States Supreme

Court found that the affirmative action used to boost minority numbers at the school violated the Fourteenth Amendment but the school's general goal to improve campus diversity via utilization of race was acceptable (*Board of Regents v. Bakke*, 1978).

Diversity has become a well-known topic in recent years. The Supreme Court ruled that diversity on college campuses is a worthy goal. It is important to understand that the law should not be sacrificed solely to fulfill the singular goal of diversity. Police departments around the country have struggled with diversity as the prevailing idea has pointed toward matching the constituents and community that they serve.

Negotiation is a necessary skill for those serving in public sector management roles. Fisher and Ury (2011) argue that most individuals want to take part decision making, especially if those decisions will in any way affect them (p. xxvii). Thus, public administrators must be willing to work with other governmental entities and the public when implementing policy. Negotiation is also important when issues arise within an organization that can derail the work the organization is striving to accomplish. Individuals are not rational persons and finding common ground to move forward and accomplish the goals of the organization can be crucial.

Public Administration Ethics:

Previous discussion noted the fiduciary relationship between citizen and administrator. A large part of this relationship relies on the administrator acting in an ethical manner. Ethics can be a highly charged topic as they are often difficult to define or missing vital components that would assist in making problematic decisions (Ventriss, 2012, p. 289). An administrator or administration acting unethically, or even the mere perception of being unethical by the public, may put the organization in a position to have its legitimacy called into question (Ghere, 2013, p. 10).

Public administration is not a straightforward proposition. No two policies will be enacted in the same manner, nor will the public reaction to the administrator's actions be identical. The public has expectations that public administrators will have the type of public service values that are central to the premise of public administration (Molina, 2015, p. 51). If these values are missing, the public may begin to doubt the ability of the administration to fulfill the mission they were appointed to complete.

Ethics in public administration is becoming increasingly important as distrust of the administrative state grows. Curtis Ventriss (2012) notes that in an environment that is more hostile than ever to public administrators, ethical practices would allow the administrative state to share data and knowledge with the public which in turn strengthens the fiduciary relationship between the two entities and engages the public in debate about the future of the community (p. 292). This is not to say that ethics are not practiced in the public administration community, only that over time bureaucracy has been a favored target of political campaigns that point to higher taxes, red tape, and increasing regulation (Garrett, Thurber, Fritschler, & Rosenbloom, 2006, p. 228) as cause for distrust of the bureaucracy. Perception can often be believed as reality, meaning that even the slightest hint that an organization is behaving unethically can shatter the already fragile trust between the organization and the public.

Among other uses of ethics is transparency. This has become somewhat of a buzzword in recent years as governments the world over have promised or moved towards an upturn in transparency. The *Freedom of Information Act* (FOIA) has allowed for much greater transparency in governmental agencies. The basis for FOIA is that any person can request federal records, withstanding certain exemptions (Pozen, 2017, p. 1102). Implementation of electronic databases have also increased the public's ability to find federal records. Fiduciary relationships

benefit greatly from increased transparency as transparency begets accountability, a crucial component of keeping the public's trust (Garofalo & Geuras, 2009, p. 70).

Intergovernmental Relations:

Equally important to public administration is the relationships between each level of government, from the federal to local governments. Administrators deal with a host of difficult to manage problems. These problems include recreational marijuana legalization, transgender bathroom usage in public schools, death with dignity, and land usage. Surface observations of each issue may theoretically provide a simple answer on where responsibility may lie but the answer is usually much more challenging to define.

Decentralization of power has become a common theme regarding some policy initiatives. A prime example of how power has moved from the federal government to the state governments is illegal immigration. While the Constitution provides a legal basis for the federal government to be solely responsible for immigration into the country, the ability for the federal government to enforce the law without the assistance of state and local governments is quite low.

Part of the push for decentralization has been the lack of federal solutions to problems such as illegal immigration and the legalization of medicinal marijuana. Gary Reich (2018) postulated that the reason that federal power transfers to the states in these types of cases is because the federal legislature fails to perform their most basic task and pass laws regarding immigration or marijuana legalization in which case state and local governments pass laws to address the issue (p. 375). Once the balance of power on these issues has swung to the state and local governments, it is much more problematic for the federal government to remand that power back to the federal level. This is especially obvious when comparing the administrations of Presidents Obama and Trump and their vastly different takes on illegal immigration and

marijuana legalization.

The individual states have been referred to as individual laboratories of democracy as stated by Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis in the case of *New State Ice Company v. Liebmann* (1932). While each state may implement diverse policies to address needs within their borders, the country does experience policy diffusion between the states. Policy diffusion is the spread of policies between municipalities or states. Not every policy will diffuse to different areas as the policy may be challenging to implement or the political climate may not support the policy type (Shipan & Volden, 2012).

Within intergovernmental relations, there is debate about where certain powers lie on the spectrum of federal to local governments. The intent of the Constitution was to grant the federal government a specific set of powers, such as the regulation of interstate commerce, and any powers not specified were to be held by the states. Through this view, federalism was implemented throughout the United States. State power has been derived through the use of the Constitution's 10th Amendment, in which it is stated that all powers not explicitly given to the federal government through the Constitution rest with the individual states (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 53).

While the Constitution was written to limit the power of the central government, there has been a fundamental change to the operation of this federalist system. Section 8 of Article 1 expressly states 18 individual powers allotted to the federal government. The final power, also known as the "necessary and proper clause", has been utilized to make sweeping changes to federal law while preempting state and local laws.

However, as the federal government has centralized power in some areas, states have fought in court to continue their ability to create policies in line with federalism. Boring down to

a more micro level, there exists an urban-rural dichotomy through which the disdain found in more rural areas for urban areas and the power urban areas possess by more rural areas is an example of the growing polarization between the urban and rural populace. This is true even as states have become stingier in the decentralization of their own powers to individual cities (Schragger, 2018, p. 1167).

Public Budgeting and Finance:

Budgeting in the public sector has remained a vital function throughout the history of governments. If budgeting is not viewed as a crucial part of how government operates, then the government will be unable to complete the goals that it has promised to complete. Governments do not have unlimited resources, thus making the distribution of limited resources the crux of public budgeting. There are many differences in the manner through which various levels of government approach the budget process. While state governments are preoccupied with funding education programs, the federal government is concerned with procuring enough military hardware to ensure the continued protection of the country, highlighting the differences in responsibilities at each level of government. There remains a stark difference between the amount of money spent at the state and federal levels.

A key difference in state and federal budgets is the ability for the federal government to run on a deficit. State governments are typically barred from running at a deficit in the same manner and are required to have balanced budgets each fiscal year. Programs that are funded at the federal level, such as Medicare, Social Security, and defense, require massive amounts of money that necessitate deficit spending. Budgets at the state level are much more sensitive to tax base changes while the federal government is able to draw from a much larger tax base that is much more stable. Differences in tax laws between states has facilitated the movement of

citizens and caused significant changes to tax revenue for states gaining or losing population numbers.

Due to the possibility of changing tax bases and limited resources at the state level, state governments are less able to handle the demand to support a wide array of public programs. This demands that state governments live within their means and bear a higher degree of responsibility for tax revenue collected to be used in the manner expected by the community. Sales and income taxes are main sources of revenue for states, while local governments rely heavily on property taxes. These revenue types require that state and local governments be extremely careful in estimating their revenue stream each year. This ties into the notion that state and local governments are much more susceptible to changes in the tax base. Economic downturns will more adversely affect state and local governments as they are not structured to utilize spending while in a deficit. State governments can find themselves in a difficult situation if tax revenue falls below the estimated total and they are unable to meet requirements agreed upon in their budget.

Nonprofit Administration:

The nonprofit realm has flourished within the United States over the last one hundred years. Much of the growth has been aided by favorable tax laws and the ability for common citizens to affect change through organizations. Peter Hall (2016) made note that nonprofits were put to use by various segments of society, such as women and minority groups, that were unable to utilize politics due to social status and that the causes that these organizations were used for were diverse and wide-ranging (p. 9).

The simple ability for a nonprofit to tackle any problem that they have identified begets a strong flexibility. While federal law requires that nonprofits meet certain requirements to remain

in a tax-exempt status, freedom is granted to solve the issue as the nonprofit sees fit. Typically, many of the nonprofits readily identifiable are religious institutions. However, there are nonprofits, such as the Council on Foreign Relations, that have had a considerable impact throughout the globe.

Within the field of nonprofit organizations, there has been debate on how these organizations aide those most in need. Perhaps the most famous example is Andrew Carnegie, one of the nation's most prolific philanthropists. His most famous work on philanthropy was titled "The Gospel of Wealth". Within this work, Carnegie argued that it was the duty of the wealthiest individuals to provide for those most in need, that the amassing of immense sums of wealth was immoral, and that the passing of wealth to children was a sin (Carnegie, 1889).

Jane Addams took a very different view of the role of the wealth in caring for the poor and needy. While Andrew Carnegie preached "The Gospel of Wealth" and was certain the right approach was to distribute money in a wide array, Jane Addams was determined to work with the individuals who desired assistance by learning what their actual needs were. While it is noteworthy and honorable to take the same approach as Carnegie, too often the aide distributed does little to solve the most pressing issues for individuals seeking help. The manner in which Ms. Addams approached the problem from the bottom up, understanding that most poor individuals wanted to remain dignified and were willing to lift themselves out of the situations in which they found themselves. Additionally, she believed that there was not an inherent difference between the wealthy and the poor, and that this style of philanthropy was more effective than mass distribution of money, staving off those wealthy individuals who gave without care to where the money went (Knight, 1992, p. 132).

Nonprofits fill a vital role in today's society. There are many instances in which the

government is either unable to provide needed services or unable to. A state or local government may be unable to furnish the funds or employees to help mentally ill citizens receive the care they need. Nonprofit organizations are better able to identify the need for such a service in the community and are situated to make a more extensive impact.

Community and Region Planning:

While a larger share of attention is demanded for the creation of public policy, budgets, and nonprofits, there remains a need for careful consideration of planning in the community. Community and region planning ensures that the community can continue to grow in a manner consistent with local ordinances. Planning can also be used to beautify a city and to make it more attractive to future citizens.

Application and Analysis of PA Scholarship

The VA and its subsidiary administrations suffer from the same types of issues that have beleaguered bureaucracies throughout history. Understandably, the VA is a large, complex organization. Healthcare for five million citizens would be an enormous task for any organization, especially if that organization is under strict governmental oversight and scrutiny.

Beyond healthcare, which is a complicated process, the VA provides other benefits such as disability compensation and education benefits. VA has done an admirable job providing the services it has been mandated to provide and some have argued that it is second to none in service delivery. However, the continued appearance of issues affecting the veteran community should be reviewed using public administration theory to attempt a discovery of solutions.

Control-of-Bureaucracy Theory and VA:

VA is a federal bureaucracy and it is subject to the machinations of Congress and the Executive branch. This could be viewed as needlessly complicating the relationship between the

legislative branch and the federal bureaucracy. Views on the role of the administrative state have changed significantly since Woodrow Wilson's examination of the bureaucracy. His original assessment was one that the administration, or the bureaucracy, should be free from the burden of political influence while acknowledging that tasks for the administration originate from politics (Wilson, 1887, p. 210). This view of public administration is theoretically possible; however, politics and administration have never been able to truly extricate themselves from one another. The VA is a bureaucracy and must follow the responsibilities assigned to it by Congress and the Executive branch.

Control-of-bureaucracy theory explains much of why the input of Congress and the chief executive matters when dealing with federal level bureaucracies. The theory argues that in a democratic system of government such as the United States, those persons elected to office should have the control of choices and activities of those unelected bureaucrats (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2016, p. 15). The Executive and Legislative branches of the government exercise this power often. Consistent update of the GI Bill since its inception in the 1940s is an example of the politics side, playing to the individuals asking for VA services, deciding the manner in which VA interacts with the citizenry. Change to GI Bill law by Congress is typically a move to invoke favor with the veteran community. Only once these bills are passed into law do implementation problems become apparent. This represents a failure by legislatures to understand the issues facing the bureaucracy. Conversely, the waitlist scandals in 2014 were a failure to implement policies from law makers.

There have been countless Congressional hearings on the state of the VA and its administrative arms surrounding the conditions that led to scandals and problems. Through executive powers, the VA Secretary has been replaced often. The replacement of

underperforming or ineffective VA Secretaries is a prime example of control-of-bureaucracy theory as the elected official, in this case the President, makes the decision for the bureaucracy on what path forward VA should take. However, it is difficult to discern whether these changes have produced any tangible results. This may seem unsavory to the public as they may believe that the bureaucracy is better served by permitting agency employees with experience in the field choose a direction the agency should take.

Responsiveness to the client is another applicable field regarding theory of bureaucracies. There is no question that the VA must be responsive to the demands of the federal government. VA and its subsidiaries are often subject to Congressional hearings to explain why certain policies have failed. When a problem has garnered enough attention for Congressional hearings to be called, there is a tendency for Congress to issue changes to the process. This requires that the bureaucracy shift their agendas to one more suited to the whims of Congressional oversight. While this may appear to be the easiest path towards solving issues within the bureaucracy, continual changes to the operations of the bureaucracy can affect the bureaucracy's effectiveness and efficiency. If VA and VHA are constantly shifting priorities to address political pressure from politicians, there may be serious down the line problems with benefit delivery to veterans.

While VA is part of the federal bureaucracy and must be responsive to the federal government, it must also be responsive to the needs of the veterans that it serves. This critical junction of responding to both Congressional members, who are the receptors of constituent pressure, and the veteran community places additional burden on the bureaucracy to meet the demands of each. However, the bureaucracy will more likely choose to meet the demands of the federal government. This remains an issue within bureaucracy as the unelected individuals that comprise these organizations will be more attuned to those who control the budget of their

agency.

If VA and its subsets are to be responsive to the veteran client, the question should be in what manner is the organization beholden to this client type? Eran Vigoda (2002) stated that due to the democratic nature of government, individuals in a professional capacity are essentially duty-bound to respond to the will of the public, even if that public will be ambiguous (p. 528). Similar to Congressional and executive changes to the organization, changing priorities for the veteran client pushes VA toward the implementation of fashionable and more short-term ideas instead of focusing on long term solutions that are less favorable (Vigoda, 2002, p. 528). The Forever GI Bill implementation is a good example of this theory. While the idea of a non-expiring education benefit was, and still is, a great addition to an already great benefit, the rushed rollout without consultation with VA and VBA on whether the new changes could be successfully added in a timely manner proves that the responsiveness to both Congress and veterans, and shortsightedness of future goals, can cause issues of its own.

A problem that can affect organizations such as VA lies within the political and institutional critique of the rational model. The stated goal of VA and its subsidiaries is to serve the veteran and his or her family medical or other benefits. The nature of bureaucracy in the United States tends to shift the focus away from the veteran and towards the federal government or towards the organization's own interests.

The VA receives a majority of its funds from government budgets, the implication being that any funds received from veterans accepting benefits is substantially less than budgetary allotments. This shift towards the federal government exposes the fact that VA is more interested in the growth, survival, and defense of its organization as an unspoken, informal intention (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 113). Organizations by their very nature are prone to serving their

own self-interest and ensuring its survival, regardless of any overarching or noble goals.

Organization self-preservation can be seen in the waiting list scandal at the Phoenix VA hospital. While Congress and upper management of VHA were pressing the individual hospitals and clinics to reduce wait times for veterans, the pressure to meet performance goals led the Phoenix hospital to create two separate lists. One list showed reduced waiting times while simultaneously having falsified information. The other list was one internal to the hospital and showed the actual wait times. The hospital reported false wait times to VHA, VA, and Congress to “prove” that the goal of wait time reduction was occurring.

Organizational Theory:

VA and its sub-administrations can be viewed through the lens of organizational theory. Based on the available evidence, VA’s dominant frame is the political frame. The political frame makes several assumptions regarding organizations, including the fact that most critical choices involve distribution of resources that are difficult to come by and that the decisions regarding what and who receive those resources, alongside differences in values and beliefs, ensure that conflict is part of the daily struggle for organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 188-189).

VA is only one piece of the federal government, making the fight for the limited resources of the federal government vitally important. When those resources are allocated to the department, the management of VA then has an equally daunting task of ensuring that each individual administration receives a share that allows them to accomplish their stated mission. This task is made even more difficult due to the nature of the individual administrations. The National Cemetery Administration may not require as many resources as either the VBA or VHA, but the argument could be made that the proper burial of the nation’s veterans is equally important as providing education benefits. Understandably, VHA receives a majority of

budgetary resources as medical care is an expensive undertaking.

Pressure from groups of differing goals also affects how VA distributes resources. Veterans utilize VA for various reasons, healthcare or education benefits, which affects the demands for resources each group makes to VA. Bolman and Deal (2013) point out that public organizations do not operate in a vacuum in that there are multiple groups clamoring to serve their own interests and ensure that they are above other interests (p. 193). If a veteran only utilizes VA education benefits, they are more likely to support the expansion of education benefits, regardless of whether other parts of VA suffer a reduction of resources.

Woodrow Wilson (1887) concluded that the bureaucratic state is free of politics even as it is understood that bureaucracy's assigned tasks are necessarily political. This view of the bureaucracy may have been true before the maturation of the administrative state in the United States, however, this view has changed significantly in more modern literature. John Gaus (1931) noted that public administrators were becoming increasingly involved in the creation of legislation or construing their own meaning from legislation directing them to complete an objective (p. 123). If bureaucracies are conducting business in this manner, there can be no doubt that these organizations are political entities.

One area that has been a failure at VA is the ability of VA Secretaries to set agendas for the agency. Political appointees of federal bureaucracies are necessarily political managers, and as political managers they must be adept at navigating both the political environment and the organization. A major part of being a successful political manager is agenda setting. If the manager is able to create an agenda for change, the organization then has a sense for its future direction (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 209). With the rapid replacement of underperforming VA Secretaries or those who were unable to deliver on promises of change, there has been little to no

chance to truly change the direction of the organization. There seems to be limited interest by the executive branch of the federal government to find individuals who possess the ability to set an agenda for VA. A transformative leader would be able to make the organization their own.

VA also operates from the symbolic frame. The story behind Abraham Lincoln's proclamation that the government would care for the veteran and their spouse or orphan is a crucial link to why the VA exists. Stories are part of being human (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 254). Consequently, an organization that is able to harness the power of storytelling can bring the individuals that comprise it together.

It can be gathered that VA has taken on new missions since its inception. While the root goals of caring for veterans, healthcare, and cemeteries are still in place, this has not precluded the organization from taking on additional responsibilities. The biggest example of mission expansion was the addition of veteran education benefits with the establishment of the GI Bill in the late 1940s. If one understands that the structure of an organization is important to its overall effectiveness and efficiency, it seems logical to interpret lack of achievement to structural issues.

Bolman and Deal (2013) noted two important assumptions of the structural frame. First, that in order for the organization to perform its mission correctly, the structure of the organization must meet the situation the organization finds itself in including technology and its environment; and second, issues with the structure of an organization can lead to problems of ineffectiveness and inefficiency (p. 45). VA has taken steps to ensure that each administration is correctly tasked with logical missions. VBA handles all aspects of compensation and education while VHA provides healthcare benefits.

However, beyond the three largest administrations, VA has subdivided much of the work it has taken on over the lifetime of the agency. VA has been effective at differentiation tasks

within the organization, as evidenced by the diversification of administrations, boards, centers, and offices. There is usefulness in assigning individuals to specialized functions within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 50).

Beyond the specialization of individuals, VA has also been successful at grouping specialized employees into separate working units. This division of units creates efficient work groups, but leads to sub-optimization in which separate work units become more concerned with the goals of the unit rather than the comprehensive goals of the entire organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 51). Sub-optimization can be seen in the manner with which employees at VHA hospitals across the country became more preoccupied with the reduction in patient wait time that they lost sight of the larger goal of VHA to provide quality healthcare to veterans in need.

The addition of new missions for the organization may have also inadvertently caused the original mission of the VA to become less important than in the past. The mission statement of the organization, “To fulfill President Lincoln’s promise ‘To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan’ by serving and honoring the men and women who are America’s veterans” (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018b) is incredibly strong. A strong mission statement is a guiding principle for the organization. With the spate of problems VA has encountered, it may be assumed that there has been drift away from the original mission.

Kenneth Shepsle (1992) noted that bureaucrats typically have a separate agenda from the legislative body, and that it is difficult to discipline those organization members who divert from organization and legislative policies unless the legislature presents a united front (p. 114).

Public service motivation (PSM) is another facet of PA theory that could be applied to the employees at VA. Traditional views of employee motivation have centered around external controls from the organization and monetary incentives (Christensen, Paarlberg, & Perry, 2017,

p. 529). Understanding why employees choose to serve in a public sector capacity is essential to gaining employees who are both passionate about the mission of the organization and who will provide a good fit for the organization. Perry and Wise (1990) noted that there are three types of motives for persons looking at work in the public sector: rational, in which the individual looks to maximize the organization for their own benefit; norm-based or altruism; and affective, where the individual's belief in a program compels them to work towards its success (p. 368-369).

The VA would be wise to find employees who have high levels of PSM and are either altruistic about VA's work or believe that the programs provide a public good. While this approach would in all likelihood not solve the problem of those already employed in the organization, PSM could provide a useful screening tool for future employees. VA, and other federal bureaucracies, could use PSM to recruit and choose individuals who possess high levels of PSM to serve the dual purpose of member performance and the fulfillment of the agency's mission (Christensen et al., 2017, p. 532).

VA accountability:

While it is crucial for the bureaucracy to be responsive to the needs of both its clients and its overseers, accountability for actions undertaken in the name of mission completion must also be in place. The VA is accountable to Congress, the chief executive, and the client. Added layers of bureaucracy, such as the individual administrations, cloud the accountability of bureaucracy especially in times of crisis (Frederickson et al., 2016, p. 125). It took several Congressional hearings to get a grasp on why the implementation of the Forever GI Bill had failed to be completed by the originally stated date. The healthcare and waitlist scandals in 2014 were investigated thoroughly by Congress and the executive branch.

Accountability also directly influences the legitimacy of an organization. Lack of

accountability or refusing to act in an accountable manner diminishes the level of trust in public organizations. There have been attempts to force the accountability of the administrative state as recently as the George Bush Administration. This administration created the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) which was meant to coerce bureaucracy to answer questions from elected officials (Frederickson et al., 2016, p. 253). Forcing bureaucracies into accountability may not be the preferable path to receive answers to questions from the government but it may provide a sense of legitimacy to the client as they are seen to be complying with information requests.

Defining normative values of accountability can be difficult to accomplish. No two organizations will agree on what accountability deliverables will look like. It is entirely possible that if VA was forced to provide accountability data to overseers that the data would be different from each administration. Each administration is responsible for a diverse group of objectives, and there is no logical notion to expect the measurement of Forever GI Bill implementation in VBA and the amount of budgetary dollars spent on X-Ray equipment across VHA to appear the same. It may make Congressional members and the public more confident in the accountability of the agency if that data is provided, but for all intents and purposes it would be useless. The data requested would need to be a normative value across the entirety of the agency in order for true accountability to be accomplished.

Institutionalism and VA:

Frederickson et al. (2016) notes that institutionalism in its most basic form is the idea that organizations are constrained by rules, norms, and presumptions of community concepts (p. 66). Based on this definition, it can be deduced that any bureaucratic organization will not act in a manner out of sync with the rest of society. Currently, institutionalism has several different

subsets: rational choice, historical, and sociological.

Rational choice institutionalism grew from the study of congressional actions in the United States (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 942). The problem initially studied was the ability of political parties to gain and maintain majorities, and the conflict it had with rational choice theory. Rational choice theory argues that individuals behave in a manner that maximizes self-interest, that competition drives decision making, and that regulation harms the market (Frederickson et al., 2016, p. 196). Research found that institutions such as a congress decrease the cost of transaction charges regarding possible agreements, which in turn allowed stability in the individual members and increasing the likelihood of legislation passing successfully (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 943).

The VA, like any other public agency, is bound by institutionalism. Bad behavior on the part of a bureaucratic organization risks the wrath of both the community and its oversight. Rational choice institutionalism may explain why employees of VA behaved in the manner they did. If organizations are concerned with survival and employees are concerned with their own self-interest, then it is entirely possible that employees may act in a manner that maximizes both self-interests, by way of continued employment, and agency survival, their actions supporting continued existence of the organization.

Historical institutionalism argues that institutions are formed by the environment into which they are born. Hall and Taylor (1996) note that historical institutionalism emerged as part of the political economy, which includes explicit and non-explicit policies, customs, and other routine processes within the organization (p. 938). More simply, historical institutionalism believes it is rules and laws that shape an organization's decision-making processes, including those rules and laws that are not formalized. This can be seen in the adage "that is the manner in

which it has always been done”.

It may be possible to solve future problems by continuing to utilize past examples. However, with the ongoing complexity of the modern world, the past solution may no longer apply. Failure to rehabilitate decaying IT systems to support future changes to the GI Bill indicates that VA and VBA remain caught in the utilization of past performance. This reliance on past solutions producing positive results is a dangerous way to approach bureaucracy.

Within the latter forms of institutionalism, there has been an absence of discussion regarding culture. Organizational theory posits that culture is a type of superbond that unites all pieces of an organization to achieve the goals it has established (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 248). Sociological institutionalism argues that many of the methods utilized in institutions are culturally based and that these rites, myths, and stories are integrated into the organization to aid not only in efficiency, but also to help disseminate those cultural ideas more broadly (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 946-947).

The perception from outside VA is that despite its explicit mission statement, the organization is not fully committed to aiding veterans. While culture itself can help an organization's individual pieces bond, the cultural piece of sociological institutionalism is lacking in the case of VA. This may be the disjointed and displaced nature of individual pieces of the larger organization as is the case with VHA hospitals in clinics. It may also be that leadership turnover prohibits the cohesiveness of culture as employees are consistently introduced to new agency goals, directions, and cultural change.

Bureaucracies and muddling through:

It does appear at times that large bureaucracies muddle through policy change instead of installing much needed major changes. The practice of organizational change is difficult,

especially in organizations that are large or complex. Charles Lindblom (1959) described a bureaucrat that shied away from making a rational choice for change, and instead approached change with small incremental steps pieced together from past incremental steps and consequently finds that they are never able to meet the goals of change and repeat the cycle when facing future choices (p. 79-80). Lindblom termed this change theory as muddling through.

VA has struggled with implementing large scale change to address the myriad issues that have plagued it throughout the last decade. When the waiting list scandal was exposed, there was no formal initiative that surfaced from either VHA or VA that would overhaul the entire administration, relying mainly on small administrative steps in the punishment of lower ranking employees. Similarly, the Forever GI Bill failed due to VBA underestimating the amount of time and infrastructure it required to successfully implement the updated legislation. Instead, the process should have occurred in stages, ensuring the correct information technology structure was in place.

Leadership turnover and bureaucratic derision:

Part of the reason that needed organizational changes continue to elude the VA may rest with the repeated turnover of department leadership. Secretary changes occur frequently in the federal government and oftentimes incoming personnel have a different viewpoint on departmental goals. Added pressure from those who utilize department services, Congressional members, or the chief executive compound already difficult decision-making processes.

Replacement of the agency's Secretary may raise expectations that needed change will occur in short order. However, an incoming VA Secretary may not be as flexible to address problems within the organization due to past decisions of previous Secretaries or budget limitations. The VA's budget split requires that a portion of the money received from the

government is mandatory spending. The VA Secretary does not have the power to change this portion of the organization's budget. They are further limited by past budgetary decisions.

Federal budgets are formulated years before they pass into law, making any change to organization leadership subject to the requirements and needs of a previous Secretary.

Transformative leaders may even find themselves limited by the bureaucratic framework.

Agenda setting and refocusing VA on its original mission and intent is the correct future course of the agency but a lack of flexibility may damage any attempt to right the ship.

It is also possible that repeated leadership changes as well as bureaucracy being a frequent target of derision from elected officials and the public, may provoke employees to further entrench themselves into positions detrimental to the organization. If it is assumed that rational choice institutionalism causes organization members to act in support of the organization's best interest and that members work to ensure the survival of the agency, incremental change presents the least amount of risk and danger to the future of the agency. The removal and replacement of upper leadership and the disparagement of federal bureaucracies is not a private affair and this public display of perceived ineffectiveness most likely hardens the resolve of those within the organization.

Possible Policy Solution

With the current issues affecting the VA, and by extension the veteran community, it may be beneficial to discuss potential solutions. Currently, the VA permits veterans to utilize the Veterans Choice Program. This program was put into place to allow veterans who did not reside in a reasonable driving distance of a VA facility to find providers in their local area. This transformed VA into a type of insurance agency, paying the local provider in lieu of providing services at a VA facility.

This stopgap solution highlights the possibility of transforming the entirety of VHA into an insurance program. This would allow for innovation and competition in the private sector that is not found in federal level bureaucracies. It would also remove the burden of care from VA providers. However, the VHA does possess competencies in health fields related specifically to service-connected health issues. Any attempt to convert VHA to an insurance program would need to consider this possibility. Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) have also expressed their opposition to the privatization of VA services.

The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) department provides a possible template for effecting this change. FHA guarantees home mortgages (Karikari, Voicu, & Fang, 2011, p. 442) as a federal entity while the customer works with a banking institution to secure the mortgage. The government does not participate in the mortgage process but provides a guarantee for the lender. VA home loans also use the principle of a government entity guaranteeing the loan while the veterans bank provides the mortgage. Based on this model, the VA could guarantee payments while veterans sought out approved providers.

Shortcomings of PA Scholarship

Much of the theory application regarding the VA and its administrations focuses more heavily on the theory of organizations and the inability of the agency's leadership to effect any substantive change. This inability for VA to implement needed change has caused many veterans consternation when faced with the prospect of conducting business with VA, VHA, or VBA. If veterans begin to seek other service providers, as allowed in the *Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014* for those who have less access to VA facilities, there may be a demand for change from Congressional offices and the executive branch to the organization that

could cripple its ability to provide care and benefits.

The fact that organizations fight for their own survival is well established (Clemons & McBeth, 2017, p. 113) as well as the rational choice theory that bureaucrats will act in their own self-interest and the interest of the organization. It may be useful to formulate a survey addressing this fact and distribute it to the members of bureaucracies that are experiencing high levels of organization attacks from outside influences and those organizations that are less frequent targets. A survey of this magnitude may provide enlightening answers on whether employees act in a manner that supports the organization and whether that attitude varies with environmental pressures.

Often, the solution to underperforming, ineffective, and inefficient organizations is to restructure. This solution may have a higher chance of success in the private sector due to the nature of the marketplace, however, even private corporations have had failed restructures. There have been few examples of major restructure of a federal bureaucracy. Organizational theory literature does reference restructuring but fails to apply it to the federal level. There is an opportunity for public administration scholarship to examine the feasibility of bureaucratic restructuring.

There are several reasons why federal bureaucratic restructuring should be studied. First, there remains startlingly little evidence that the changes necessary at VA will ever be implemented. This is due to its current form as the VA Secretary serves at the leisure of the chief executive, the turnover of this position limits change potential. Second, the current structure of VA and its administrations may be stifling innovation that could spring from lower level employees. The issues currently facing VA are pressing concerns, with veterans waiting for healthcare or missing tuition and housing payments. If restructuring the entire agency realigns

the organization with its stated mission and goals, along with providing a better accountability system, and improving efficiency and effectiveness, then the study of how a bureaucracy could be restructured should be examined.

Institutionalism, while applicable, appears to have limitations on its applicability. Each of the three institutionalism types discussed, rational choice, historical, and sociological, explain parts of the problems at VA. However, no single theory presented the best case for institutionalism. Rational choice believes that all actions are taken on behalf of the institution, but the lack of study of VA employees makes that difficult to state with any certainty. Historical institutionalism presents the best case, as VA is prone to utilizing past decision making to solve future problems. Sociological institutionalism believes that culture plays a major role in the success of an organization but the disjointed nature of VA, VHA, and VBA precludes equal application of culture through the organization. A more thorough examination of federal bureaucracies may yield another type of institutionalism that may better explain why VA has experienced these types of problems.

There appears to be an epidemic of bureaucracies at the federal level refusing to take high levels of risk in implementing change that would benefit the public. This is seen by the VA's slow response to aging IT structures to better handle future changes to benefits. While organizations muddle through, there should be a more definite examination of why the VA, with its myriad of embarrassing scandals, refuses to make major modifications to the manner in which they conduct business. Shame can be a powerful motivator but seems to have no affect on a bureaucratic agency. A study of why organizations refuse to change, even in the face of mounting political and public criticism, should be in order.

Part of the issues at VA is due to frequent leadership variations. A change in leadership

can cause a cascade effect of distrust, inefficiencies, and ineffectiveness as agenda setters and political evaluators are removed, perhaps at a point when the leader was beginning to gain the trust of their organization. Studying the effect that a leadership change has on a bureaucracy that provides services to a segment of the population may help explain why change fails. Studies conducted on VA would also be applicable to other federal and state bureaucracies.

Issues at VA have invited both government and public scrutiny. While no bureaucracy escapes oversight, the manner in which oversight is conducted is another avenue for examination. Congressional inquiries and whistleblowers have exposed the reasons behind the healthcare scandals and the Forever GI Bill implementation but has not changed the overall direction of the organization. It may be beneficial to research improved methods for oversight that produce more favorable results in the future.

Due to the mission of the VA, and the active recruitment drive of the agency to employ veterans, it would be beneficial to study the effects that military culture has on VA. Accountability in a military setting is unique in that it typically flows from lower ranking members to those in authority positions. If there is no accountability of VA employees in lower ranking positions and it follows the example of military structure, it would appear that the accountability for the agency rests solely on the Secretary, who also is the most public member of the organization. There is also a tendency in military culture to present the best-case scenario to those in authority. If employees of VA are presenting the agency in a more positive light, the Secretary may not be receiving a true picture of how the agency is operating.

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