

**From:** [March, Joseph H.](#)  
**Subject:** Obama to Legion: VA making progress, but work remains  
**Date:** Tuesday, August 26, 2014 3:49:18 PM

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## **Obama to Legion: VA making progress, but work remains**

*Addressing the 96<sup>th</sup> Annual National Convention in Charlotte, N.C., the president*

*pledges to “do right” by veterans, their families.*

CHARLOTTE (Aug. 26, 2014) -- Speaking to thousands of veterans attending The American Legion's 96<sup>th</sup> Annual National Convention, President Barack Obama said progress has been made in correcting issues that became a scandal that has rocked the Department of Veterans Affairs since late April.

But the president told a packed hall in the Charlotte, N.C., Convention Center that much more work remains to restore veterans' trust in their health-care system.

“The misconduct we've seen at too many facilities – with long wait times, veterans denied care, and folks cooking the books – is outrageous and inexcusable,” Obama said. “As soon as it was disclosed, I got before the American people, and I said we would not tolerate it. And we will not. And I know the Legion has been on the frontlines, fanning out across the country, helping veterans who've been affected.

“But what I want you to know, directly from me, is that we're focused on this at the highest levels. We are going to get to the bottom of these problems. We're going to fix what is wrong. We're going to do right by you, and we are going to do right by your families, and that is a solemn pledge and commitment that I'm making to you here.”

Obama said that steps have been taken to make sure that those manipulating or falsifying records are held accountable, as well as to get veterans off wait lists and into clinics to receive health care. “And to help get that done, you supported, and Congress passed, and I signed into law the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, which means more resources to help the VA hire more doctors and nurses and staff,” he said. “It means if you live more than 40 miles from a VA facility, or your VA doctors can't see you fast enough, we'll help you go to a doctor outside the VA.”

Along with that, Obama said, is a new culture of accountability within VA. “If you engage in unethical practices, or cover up a serious problem, you should be and will be fired,” he said. “And by the way: If you blow the whistle on higher-ups because you've identified a legitimate problem, you shouldn't be punished. You should be protected.”

But, Obama said, despite the positive quality of VA health care and the progress the health-care system has made, “We are very clear-eyed about the problems that are still there. And those problems require us to regain the trust of our veterans, and live up to our vision of a VA that is more effective and more efficient, and that truly puts veterans first. And I will not be satisfied until that happens.”

Earlier in the day, the White House announced 19 new executive actions to improve mental health care for servicemembers and veterans. The president gave a brief overview of some of the initiatives, which include expanding suicide prevention training, improving access to care, and making it easier for servicemembers being treated for mental health conditions to continue their care as they transition to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We all know we need to do more," Obama said. "Veterans called for it; we heard you. We're going to keep saying loud and clear to anyone out there who's hurting: it's not a sign of weakness to ask for help. It's a sign of strength."

Obama said VA will continue to work toward reduce its benefits claims backlog, but "we need to make sure (claims) get processed right," he said. Eliminating veterans homelessness remains a priority for the president, as does making sure military personnel and veterans have an opportunity to purchase a home. He said a new partnership with some of America's biggest banks and financial institutions "will simplify the process, proactively notify servicemembers who qualify for lower rates and make it easier to enroll

Touching on national security issues, the president also pledged that although he has authorized targeted air strikes against ISIS, that will be the extent of the U.S. military role in Iraq. "Let me say it again: American combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq," he said. "I will not allow the United States to be dragged back into another ground war in Iraq. Because ultimately, it is up to the Iraqis to bridge their differences and secure themselves. The limited strikes we're conducting have been necessary to protect our people and have helped Iraqi forces begin to push back these terrorists. We've also been able to rescue thousands of men and women and children who were trapped on a mountain. And our airdrops of food and water and medicine show American leadership at our best.

"And more broadly, the crisis in Iraq underscores how we have to meet today's evolving terrorist threat. The answer is not to send in large-scale military deployments that overstretch our military, and lead for us occupying countries for a long period of time, and end up feeding extremism. Rather, our military action in Iraq has to be part of a broader strategy to protect our people and support our partners to take the fight to ISIL."

Obama also said that as U.S. troops leave Afghanistan, the Afghan government needs to take responsibility for transitioning into the next step in the nation's path. "Afghan leaders need to make the hard compromises that are necessary to give the Afghan people a future of security and progress," he said. "As we go forward, we'll continue to partner with Afghans so their country can never again be used to launch attacks against the United States."

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