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# Denver vets hospital mistakes echo larger VA issues

By Leo Shane III, Staff writer 1:32 p.m. EDT April 15, 2015



(Photo: David Zalubowski, AP)

Veterans Affairs planners are nearly \$1 billion over budget for a new hospital in Denver, and finding the money to pay for it may be the least of their problems.

Lawmakers say the latest agency debacle — coming just after the one-year anniversary of the patient wait-time scandal that rocked VA to its core — underscores the department leadership's lingering problems with accountability, integrity and public credibility, critics say.

Rep. Kathleen Rice, D-N.Y., suggested that federal investigators should look into possible criminal charges for fraud and negligence over contracting mistakes.

Other House Veterans' Affairs Committee members said they will reluctantly find ways to cover the funding shortfall, but are at a loss to fix the underlying dysfunction at the department that seem to breed problem after problem.



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[Senator wants details on how VA will finish Denver hospital](#)

(<http://www.militarytimes.com/story/veterans/2015/04/03/senator-wants-details-on-how-va-will-finish-denver-hospital/25263219/>)

"Failures of this magnitude represent systemic problems above and beyond the work of a single person," Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., committee chairman, said during a Wednesday hearing on the issue. "Much more housecleaning and top-to-bottom reform is needed before we can even begin to consider whether VA is competent to manage a construction program."

VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson, testifying on the topic for the second time this year, offered repeated apologies for the Denver failures and acknowledged "we've made mistakes for years" on the project.

But he insisted that reforms have been put in place, including new collaboration with the Army Corps of Engineers on some major construction projects.

Lawmakers dismissed those promises and apologies. Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn, said he won't support any VA management of major construction in the future.

Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Colo., asked whether VA "is qualified to build a lemonade stand, let alone a multimillion-dollar hospital facility."

The ongoing \$1.73 billion construction debacle touches on nearly every concern highlighted by the committee over the past year, adding extra frustration and anxiety to efforts to finish the hospital.

Gibson said all the officials involved with past planning mistakes that lead to the cost increases are now gone, but Miller noted that none were fired.

Lawmakers have complained for months that VA leaders are not holding supervisors accountable for errors, despite new laws from Congress designed to do that.

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Earlier this week, the Denver Post reported that one employee who raised concerns about the hospital project's cost in 2010 was ignored and fired, part of a long list of whistleblower retaliation reports inside VA.

The department wants to use \$5 billion in facility improvements funding approved last summer to finish the Denver project. But lawmakers were leery of that plan, noting the money was meant to relieve ongoing space shortages that fueled the problems with patient wait times.

And Gibson sparred with lawmakers over proposed legislative fixes that VA opposes, including withholding performance bonuses to pay for the project and turning over all major VA construction projects to the Army Corps of Engineers.

Congress needs to approve another \$100 million in spending on the Denver project by mid-May to keep construction on track for a 2017 completion date, but lawmakers made no promises Wednesday.

Gibson warned that without that action, the costs for finishing the Denver hospital could go even higher.

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