



**Testimony of Tim Stretton, Director of the Congressional Oversight Initiative
at the Project On Government Oversight,
Before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
on "H.R. 6733, the 'VISN Reform Act of 2025' [and Other Pending Legislation]"
May 20, 2026**

Good morning. Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Tim Stretton and I'm the director of the Congressional Oversight Initiative at the Project On Government Oversight (POGO). POGO is a nonpartisan, independent watchdog that investigates, exposes, and champions reforms on systemic corruption, abuse of power, and waste.

Since 2006, our goal at the Congressional Oversight Initiative has been simple: to equip congressional staff with the tools, skills, and resources needed to conduct effective, fact-based oversight, whether that's understanding investigative authorities, navigating working with government agencies, or knowing where to go for reliable information. We do this work primarily through free monthly training seminars and biannual oversight boot camps. For the past two decades, we have trained nearly 6,000 congressional staffers — Republicans and Democrats from both the House and Senate, and from nearly every committee office as well as many personal offices — on the best practices of oversight and investigations.

I am honored to be here today discussing the importance of congressional oversight in ensuring an effective and accountable federal government, especially at the Department of Veterans Affairs. As the son of a proud Navy veteran, I have witnessed firsthand the benefits the department provides to veterans by accompanying my father to appointments at the Lewiston, Maine, VA Clinic and the Togus VA Medical Center, the nation's first veterans' hospital.¹

Congressional Oversight Is a Core Constitutional Responsibility

As the Article I branch, the framers of the Constitution envisioned Congress as the primary check on concentrated power within the federal government.² While many people view legislating as Congress's central responsibility, meaningful legislation is only possible when Congress has the information necessary to understand how laws are being implemented and where reforms are needed.

¹ "History: Togus VA Medical Center," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, last modified May 1, 2004, <https://www.va.gov/maine-health-care/about-us/history/>.

² "Treasures of Congress: An exhibit in the National Archives Rotunda, Washington, DC," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed on May 5, 2026, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures_of_congress/index.html.

Although the word “oversight” does not appear in the Constitution, Congress’s authority to conduct oversight has long been recognized as inherent to its legislative responsibilities. In the 1927 Supreme Court decision *McGrain v. Daugherty*, the court found that “a legislative body cannot legislate wisely or effectively in the absence of information.”³ In other words, without oversight, Congress cannot fully understand where existing laws are falling short, how agencies are implementing programs, or what reforms may be necessary.

Effective oversight is how Congress ensures that laws are implemented as intended, taxpayer dollars are spent responsibly, and executive branch agencies remain accountable to the public they serve. When Congress conducts rigorous, fact-based oversight, it can uncover systemic waste, fraud, corruption, mismanagement, and abuses of power.

Good congressional oversight starts with answering basic questions of what happened and why. But as Congress is the only branch of government empowered to enact laws, *great* congressional oversight includes recommendations gathered through oversight to craft meaningful reforms that improve how the federal government serves the public.

Congressional oversight takes many forms, ranging from major investigations following national scandals to routine examinations of how agencies implement federal law. We are familiar with landmark congressional investigations formed in the wake of crises and scandals such as the *Titanic* sinking, the Church Committee investigating abuses by the intelligence community, the tobacco hearings in the 1980s and 1990s, the financial crisis in 2008, and the torture and mistreatment of war detainees.⁴ These pivotal investigations exposed serious wrongdoing and led to important reforms to prevent future crises and abuses.

However, the most important oversight Congress can conduct is frequent routine oversight. This includes regularly asking agencies how laws are being implemented, how taxpayer dollars are being spent, and whether programs are functioning as intended. Consistent oversight not only helps prevent misconduct and mismanagement from escalating into major scandals but also creates a culture of accountability that can improve agency performance and responsiveness.⁵

POGO has encouraged Congress to adopt an 80/20 oversight model in which roughly 80% of oversight efforts focus on planned priorities while the remaining capacity is reserved for emerging issues and urgent developments.⁶ Publicizing planned oversight agendas can also encourage whistleblowers and insiders to come forward with information relevant to congressional inquiries.

Only through sustained routine oversight can Congress adequately determine whether laws and programs are functioning as intended and delivering the necessary benefits. Routine oversight also helps Congress make informed decisions regarding appropriations, reauthorization, and legislative reform.

³ *McGrain v. Daugherty*, 273 U.S. 175 (1927) <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/273/135/>.

⁴ “Portraits in Oversight,” Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy, accessed May 6, 2026, <https://levin-center.org/what-is-oversight/portraits/>.

⁵ Tim Stretton, “7 Ways Congress Should Sharpen Its Oversight in 2026,” Project On Government Oversight, January 13, 2026, <https://www.pogo.org/analyses/7-ways-congress-should-sharpen-its-oversight-in-2026>.

⁶ Stretton, *7 Ways Congress Should Sharpen Its Oversight in 2026* [see note 5].

This is one reason I am pleased the committee is holding this hearing. As the chairman and members of this committee know well, Congress has not reauthorized key components of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for three decades, and they are operating under expired authorization of appropriation.⁷ To be clear, the VA is not an isolated case. Last year, the Congressional Budget Office identified 1,326 authorizations of appropriations that had expired at the end of fiscal year 2025, including 457 expired authorizations responsible for approximately \$500 billion in fiscal year 2025 spending.⁸

Bipartisan Oversight Strengthens Congress as an Institution

Routine oversight can take many forms, including sending letters, requesting documents and briefings, and holding public hearings. Regardless of the mechanism used, bipartisan cooperation is key to effective oversight. Agencies and private entities are likely to take congressional inquiries far more seriously when requests come from both sides because it demonstrates unified congressional interest and concern.

Even when members disagree with the substance of a particular inquiry, they should still defend Congress's institutional authority to conduct oversight. Control of Congress changes frequently, and protecting the institution's oversight prerogatives ultimately benefits both parties, and, more importantly, the institution as a whole. In the 114th Congress, then-House Committee on Government Reform Committee Chair Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) and then-Ranking Member Elijah Cummings (D-MD), partisan opposites, demonstrated this principle by sending more than 600 bipartisan letters.⁹ The same principle should apply to subpoenas whenever possible. As POGO has previously stated, just because you can send a unilateral subpoena, it doesn't mean you should.¹⁰

Members of Congress should also resist the urge to turn hearings into political theater. When hearings devolve into partisan spectacle, opportunities to identify problems and discuss meaningful reforms are often lost.¹¹ Hearings are much better when both sides agree to approach the hearing in a bipartisan and civilized way. Oversight is most effective when it is grounded in a legitimate legislative purpose and focused on fact-finding and accountability rather than taking partisan potshots.

Moreover, Congress should also consider reforms to improve how hearings are conducted. Although it has long been traditional practice for each committee in both the House and Senate to alternate five-minute time slots between members across the aisle, this may not be the best approach, as it can cause unnatural distributions in conversations and topics, as each member is allowed to ask whatever questions they want and take the hearing in different directions. POGO and the Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy have long encouraged Congress to

⁷ Congressional Budget Office, *Expired and Expiring Authorizations of Appropriations: 2025 Final Report* (July 2025), 7, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2025-07/61289-EEAA-Final-2025.pdf>.

⁸ Congressional Budget Office, *Expired and Expiring Authorizations of Appropriations: 2025 Final Report*, 1 [see note 7].

⁹ David Rapallo, "Mapping Minority Investigative Powers in Congress," *Harvard Journal on Legislation* 63, (January 28, 2026) (forthcoming): 7-8, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5907347>.

¹⁰ Stretton, *7 Ways Congress Should Sharpen Its Oversight in 2026* [see note 5].

¹¹ Stretton, *7 Ways Congress Should Sharpen Its Oversight in 2026* [see note 5].

implement recommendations from the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress that would allow committees to experiment with more flexible hearing formats and questioning structures.¹² The goal is to foster more coherent and productive exchanges so witness testimony and the central purpose of the hearing remain the focus.

Congress Must Exercise and Defend Its Oversight Authority

Congress cannot fulfill its constitutional responsibilities if it allows its oversight authorities to be ignored, delayed, or diminished. No matter what mechanism Congress uses to conduct oversight, it must uphold itself as the “first branch among equals” and defend its constitutional authority to obtain information from the executive branch.¹³ Agencies must provide timely responses to congressional inquiries and appear before Congress when requested.

Congress should be alarmed that existing executive branch policy, outlined in a 2017 Office of Legal Counsel opinion, does not fully recognize the authority of individual members of Congress to conduct oversight, and therefore members of the executive branch often do not respond to requests when they are not made by a committee chair or authorized by the full chamber.¹⁴ Although the executive branch has tried to soften this posture, it treats oversight inquiries by individual Members of Congress on a case by case basis.¹⁵ This means that an administration could ignore requests from individual members of Congress, including requests made on behalf of constituents or whistleblowers, simply because the members making the requests are not committee or subcommittee chairs. As Senator Chuck Grassley (D-IA) correctly states, “the Constitution does not mention committees or committee Chairmen at all,” and the 2017 Office of Legal Counsel opinion has “no legal or Constitutional basis.”¹⁶ The result is often that congressional offices turn to the Freedom of Information Act to obtain agency records, which isn’t how the framers wanted the government to work.¹⁷

¹² Letter from Jim Townsend, director of the Levin Center at Wayne Law, and Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project On Government Oversight, to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Rules and the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on House Administration on improving bipartisan oversight, April 22, 2022, 4, <https://docs.pogo.org/document/2022/2022-4-22-POGO-Levin-Center-to-House-Rules-Admin.pdf>.

¹³ Michael Bopp et al., eds., “Introduction: Updating the Study of Legislative Inquiry and Adapting it to the Changed Climate of Congressional Oversight,” in *When Congress Comes Calling: A Study on the Principles, Practices, and Pragmatics of Legislative Inquiry*, (Project On Government Oversight and Jenner & Block, 2025), 10. <https://www.pogo.org/reports/when-congress-comes-calling>.

¹⁴ Authority of Individual Members of Congress to Conduct Oversight of the Executive Branch, 41 Op. O.L.C. 76-79, <https://www.justice.gov/olc/file/1085571/dl>.

¹⁵ Letter from Marc Short, director of legislative affairs, to Chairman Charles E. Grassley about legislative branch oversight, July 20, 2017, 1 <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2017.07.20%20WH-Short%20Response%20to%20CEG%20re%20Oversight.pdf>; Requests by Individual Members of Congress for Executive Branch Information, 43 Op. O.L.C. 42-55, <https://www.justice.gov/olc/media/1385441/dl?inline>.

¹⁶ Letter from Chairman Charles E. Grassley to President Donald J. Trump, June 7, 2017, 5, [https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2017-06-07%20CEG%20to%20DJT%20\(oversight%20requests\).pdf](https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2017-06-07%20CEG%20to%20DJT%20(oversight%20requests).pdf).

¹⁷ U.S. Senator Adam Schiff, “WATCH: Sen. Schiff Discusses FOIA Requests to Break Through Stonewalling for Answers from Trump Admin, Blasts Brazen Intimidation of Members of Congress on MS NOW,” Press Release, November 26, 2025, <https://www.schiff.senate.gov/news/press-releases/watch-sen-schiff-discusses-foia-requests-to-break-through-stonewalling-for-answers-from-trump-admin-blasts-brazen-intimidation-of-members-of-congress-on-ms-now/>; U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight Minority Staff, “In FOIA Request Filing, Ranking Members Connolly and Raskin Demand DOGE Stop Lying and Come Clean,” Press Release, March 18, 2025, <https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/news/press-releases/foia-request-filing-ranking-members-connolly-and-raskin-demand-doge-stop-lying>.

The Importance of Oversight at the VA

All federal agencies warrant congressional oversight, but this is especially true for the VA, a department with a troubled history of management challenges and performance issues. As this committee knows too well, the 2014 VA waitlist scandal that likely resulted in preventable hospitalization and even deaths demonstrates the harm that can come from a lack of oversight and accountability within the agency.¹⁸ POGO had raised this issue back in 2013.¹⁹ Even after the scandal became widely known, POGO partnered with other organizations and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and collected nearly 1,000 responses revealing a troubling culture of fear and retaliation at the VA, in which employees were often punished for raising concerns.²⁰

In April 2017, the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP) was created through Executive Order 13793, which was later codified and expanded upon by Congress via the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act.²¹ As an organization that works with whistleblowers and advocates for reforms to protect them coming forward, POGO raised concerns from the beginning that OAWP would not be sufficiently independent and effective.²² Unfortunately, we were correct and have testified several times before Congress, including before this committee, about the office's lack of independence from the agency, its inability to enforce its own disciplinary recommendations, and, at times, its acting as a source of retaliation itself.²³ POGO strongly urges this committee to renew its effort to oversee and overhaul this office and make it as effective as possible and as intended.

¹⁸ Scott Bronstein and Drew Griffin, "A Fatal Wait: Veterans Languish and Die on a VA Hospital's Secret List," CNN, April 23, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/04/23/health/veterans-dying-health-care-delays>

¹⁹ Mia Steinle, "VA Healthcare System Failing Veterans, Study Says," Project On Government Oversight, March 28, 2013, <https://www.pogo.org/analysis/va-healthcare-system-failing-veterans-study-says>.

²⁰ Phoebe Bodkin, "VA Continues to Manipulate Wait-Time Data," Project On Government Oversight, May 16, 2016, <https://www.pogo.org/analyses/va-continues-to-manipulate-wait-time-data>.

²¹ Executive Order 13793, "Improving Accountability and Whistleblower Protection at the Department of Veterans Affairs," April 27, 2019, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/05/02/2017-08990/improving-accountability-and-whistleblower-protection-at-the-department-of-veterans-affairs>; Public Law 115-41, Codified at 38 U.S.C. § 323.

²² *Pending Health and Benefits Legislation: Hearing before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs*, 115th Cong. (May 17, 2017) (testimony of Liz Hempowicz, policy counsel, Project On Government Oversight),

<https://www.pogo.org/testimonies/pogo-testimony-on-va-accountability-and-whistleblower-protection-act>

²³ *Learning from Whistleblowers at the Department of Veterans Affairs: Hearing before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations*, 116th Cong. (June 25, 2019) (testimony of Rebecca Jones, policy counsel, Project On Government Oversight), <https://docs.pogo.org/testimony/2019/POGO-R-Jones-Testimony-6-25-19.pdf>; *Protecting Whistleblowers and Promoting Accountability: Is VA Making Progress?: Hearing before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations*, 117th Cong. (May 19, 2021) (testimony of Melissa Wasser, policy counsel, Project On Government Oversight), <https://docs.pogo.org/testimony/2021/Testimony to HVAC Protecting Whistleblowers and Promoting Accountability 5-19-21 2.pdf>; *Ensuring Independence and Building Trust: Considering Reforms To Whistleblower Protections at VA: Hearing before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations*, 117th Cong. (June 16, 2022) (testimony of Joanna Derman, policy analyst, Project On Government Oversight), <https://docs.pogo.org/testimony/2021/Testimony to HVAC Protecting Whistleblowers and Promoting Accountability 5-19-21 2.pdf>; *Trust in Transparency: Holding VA Accountable and Protecting Whistleblowers: Hearing before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations*, 118th Cong. (October 19, 2023) (testimony of Joe Spielberg, policy counsel, Project On Government Oversight), <https://docs.pogo.org/testimony/2023/POGO-Testimony-on-VA-OAWP-to-House-VA-O-and-I-Subcom-10-19-2023.pdf>.

The VA's 2027 fiscal year budget requested \$488.2 billion, a \$34.9 billion or 7.7% increase over enacted fiscal year 2026 levels.²⁴ As stated above, many of these appropriations are being done under expired authorizations. The topline spending levels are just the tip of the iceberg. When breaking down spending at the department, it becomes clearer why additional oversight of the VA is warranted. In fiscal year 2025, the last full year of data available, the VA made \$287.95 billion in awards, including \$203.04 billion in direct payments, \$90.74 billion in contracts, \$3.12 billion in grants, \$1.01 billion in loans, and \$2.47 billion in other assistance.²⁵ To be clear, POGO is not suggesting this funding is unjustified or unwarranted. Rather, the sheer scale of this taxpayer investment demands robust oversight to ensure funds are spent responsibly and efficiently while producing the intended outcomes.

POGO understands that one of the bills before the Committee addresses contracting and procurement reform.²⁶ While we are still reviewing the specific legislation, we strongly support robust congressional oversight of federal contracting, an area that has historically been vulnerable to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement. Specifically, Congress must ensure that best practices are invoked, including robust competition and avoiding contract types and vendors associated with a heightened risk of misconduct, poor performance, or conflicts of interest.

For 45 years, POGO has monitored and called attention to problems in the federal contracting system.²⁷ POGO has documented problems involving federal contractors, including corruption and conflicts of interest that can weaken public trust.²⁸ Our federal contractor misconduct database helped inspire the government's own version, which was established in 2008.²⁹

²⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *FY 2027 Budget Submission: Budget in Brief* (April 20, 2026), 1, <https://department.va.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/2027-BiB.pdf>.

²⁵ That combines the \$78.31 billion the footnoted profile lists as simply "Contracts" and the \$12.43 billion that is listed as "Contract IDVs," which are contract indefinite delivery vehicles. IDVs are contracts for which some portion of the agreement is open-ended or not fully set; "Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): FY 2025 Summary," USASpending.gov, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/departments-of-veterans-affairs?fy=2025>; "Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): FY 2025 Summary," USASpending.gov, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/departments-of-veterans-affairs?fy=2025>.

²⁶ U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs, "Chairman Bost, House Republicans Launch a Veteran First Initiative to Modernize VA Healthcare for the 21st Century," Press Release, December 10, 2025, <https://veterans.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=7810>.

²⁷ Neil Gordon, "Visualizing 20 Years of Contractor Misconduct," Project On Government Oversight, December 14, 2015, <https://www.pogo.org/analyses/visualizing-20-years-of-contractor-misconduct>; "Defense Waste & Fraud Camouflaged As Reinventing Government," Project On Government Oversight, September 1, 1999, <https://www.pogo.org/reports/defense-waste-fraud-camouflaged-as-reinventing-government>.

²⁸ Letter from Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project On Government Oversight, to Kevin Flanagan, inspector general of the U.S. Department of Defense, regarding expansion of inquiry into former Air Force Acquisition Chief Darleen Druyun's conduct with Boeing, September 4, 2003, <https://www.pogo.org/policy-letters/letter-to-department-of-defense-inspector-general-regarding-expansion-of-inquiry-into-former-air-force-acquisition-chief-darleen-druyuns-conduct-with-boeing>; Scott Amey, "The Politics of Contracting," Project On Government Oversight, June 29, 2004, <https://www.pogo.org/reports/politics-of-contracting>.

²⁹ Alice Lipowicz, "Contractor watchdog updates misconduct database," *Washington Technology*, November 4, 2008, <https://www.washingtontechnology.com/2008/11/contractor-watchdog-updates-misconduct-database/319801/>; Project On Government Oversight, "President Bush Signs Law Creating Contractor Responsibility Database; POGO's Database Extended to Top 100 Contractors," Press Release, October 15, 2008, <https://www.pogo.org/press-center/release/president-bush-signs-law-creating-contractor-responsibility-database-pogos-database-extended-to-top-100-contractors>.

POGO’s decades-long work in federal contracting makes one thing especially clear: Anytime federal money goes out the door, there’s an opportunity for it to be misused or wasted. When looking at problematic contracts, it’s often a good idea to start with sole-source contracts or non-competitive contracts awarded to a sole applying recipient.³⁰ In fiscal year 2025, the VA awarded \$6.09 billion in contracts with no competition.³¹ The agency also awarded another \$9.58 billion in contracts that were technically open for competition, but for which the agency only received a single bid on each award.³²

POGO is not anti-contracting. In many cases, it makes practical and financial sense for the government to rely on contractors for specialized services rather than attempting to perform every function in-house, especially at an agency like the VA. However, contracts should be examined and evaluated on a case-by-case basis. POGO testified to that effect before the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee last year, when the department stated it wanted to cut “non-mission-critical” services that appear central to VA operations, including nursing support, help desk functions, Freedom of Information Act assistance, health and safety inspections, and work intended to help the VA improve veteran health care and address longstanding concerns identified by the Government Accountability Office.³³

Congress Must Protect and Utilize Its Oversight Institutions

To fulfill its constitutional oversight responsibilities, Congress must both utilize and defend the independent oversight institutions that support its work, with two institutions deserving particular attention.

Offices of the Inspector General

Offices of the inspector general (OIGs) serve as independent watchdogs within federal agencies and play a critical role in promoting accountability, improving government performance, and detecting waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement. In fiscal year 2025, inspectors general across the federal government had a \$17 dollar return on investment for every dollar spent.³⁴ In its recent semiannual report, the VA OIG had a return on investment of \$18 for every dollar spent on oversight.³⁵ OIGs report directly to the agency they oversee and to Congress. For

³⁰ Scott Amey, “Fact Sheet: End Price Gouging on Federal Contracts,” Project On Government Oversight, February 25, 2025, <https://www.pogo.org/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-end-price-gouging-on-federal-contracts>; “Federal Contracting Investigative Tips,” Project On Government Oversight, 2, <https://docs.pogo.org/resource/coi/Federal-Contracting-Investigative-Tips.pdf>.

³¹ USASpending.gov, *Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): FY 2025 Summary* [see note 25]

³² USASpending.gov, *Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): FY 2025 Summary* [see note 25]

³³ Roundtable before the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, (June 11, 2025) (testimony Scott Amey, general counsel, Project On Government Oversight), <https://docs.pogo.org/testimony/2025/VA%E2%80%99s-DOGE-Cuts-Sting-and-Will-Reduce-Efficiency-PDF.pdf>; U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, “Blumenthal Blasts DOGE & Trump Admin’s Chaotic Cancellation of VA Contracts at Spotlight Forum,” Press Release, June 11, 2025, <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/2025/6/blumenthal-blasts-doge-trump-admin-s-chaotic-cancellation-of-va-contracts-at-spotlight-forum>.

³⁴ Council of the Inspectors General On Integrity and Efficiency, *Annual Report to the President and Congress: Fiscal Year 2025*, (February 3, 2026), 1, https://www.ignet.gov/sites/default/files/files/CIGIE%202025%20Annual%20Report%20to%20the%20President_FI_NAL.pdf.

³⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, *Semiannual Report to Congress: Issue 95 October 1, 2025 – March 31, 2026*, (April 1, 2026), ii, https://www.vaig.gov/sites/default/files/document/2026-04/semiannual_report_to_congress_issue_95_final_1.pdf.

congressional staff, OIGs can also be invaluable oversight partners, providing audits, investigations, data, and subject-matter expertise that can help inform and strengthen oversight efforts.

As of May 12, the VA OIG has 556 open recommendations, 28% of which have remained open for more than a year, and three of which have been open for more than five years.³⁶ These open recommendations provide an opportunity for the committee to conduct oversight. The committee should be asking the VA what they are doing to implement the remaining recommendations. Depending on the department's level of progress or willingness to accept the recommendations, the recommendations can also serve as a source for future legislation by members of the committee.

In discussing OIGs, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the recent attacks on inspectors general. Last year, President Donald Trump fired 18 inspectors general, including more than a dozen in his first few days in office.³⁷ Currently there are 28 vacant inspector general positions, including 21 awaiting nomination by the president.³⁸ All but two of these vacancies are still waiting for a nominee to be put forward. Furthermore, several of these positions have been vacant across multiple administrations, in some cases for years, including one position that has been vacant for nearly seven years. Lack of permanent Senate-confirmed IGs risks rigorous oversight not being conducted, and waste, fraud, and abuse going undetected. While the VA does have a permanent Senate-confirmed inspector general, to ensure accountability across the executive branch, POGO urges every Member of Congress to push the administration to nominate qualified individuals for these posts.

Furthermore, last October, despite funds being appropriated for the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE), the Office of Management and Budget refused to release those funds.³⁹ As a result, for more than six weeks, CIGIE was unable to operate, until finally the Office of Management and Budget released those funds following bipartisan congressional pressure.⁴⁰

Government Accountability Office

For over 100 years, the independent, nonpartisan Government Accountability Office (GAO) has worked to improve government efficiency and save taxpayer dollars.⁴¹ As a legislative branch agency, GAO audits and investigates executive branch programs, reviews agency contract awards to ensure they are above board, and makes recommendations to improve government

³⁶ "Recommendations," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, accessed May 12, 2026, <https://www.vaogig.gov/recommendations-all>.

³⁷ Faith Williams, "The Administration's Latest Attack on Oversight," Project On Government Oversight, October 2, 2025, <https://www.pogo.org/analyses/the-administrations-latest-attack-on-oversight>; Manu Raju et al. "Trump fires inspectors general from more than a dozen federal agencies," CNN, January 25, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/25/politics/trump-fires-inspectors-general/index.html>.

³⁸ "Inspector General Vacancies," Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency, accessed May 6, 2026, <https://www.oversight.gov/about/inspectors-general-vacancies>.

³⁹ Williams, *The Administration's Latest Attack on Oversight* [see note 37].

⁴⁰ U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley, "OMB Releases Nearly \$4.3 Million for CIGIE Following Push by Grassley, Collins," Press Release, November 18, 2025, <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/omb-releases-nearly-43-million-for-cigie-following-push-by-grassley-collins>.

⁴¹ "About," Government Accountability Office, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.gao.gov/about>.

program performance and ensure accountability.⁴² Since 2002, GAO’s work has led to over \$1.51 trillion in financial benefits for the federal government.⁴³

As of May 12, the GAO has 173 open recommendations for the VA, including 21 listed as priority recommendations.⁴⁴ GAO’s priority recommendations are those the agency believes would have the greatest impact in saving taxpayer dollars, improving government performance, and reducing waste, fraud, and abuse.⁴⁵ Similar to outstanding VA OIG recommendations, these recommendations from GAO could be a useful resource for the committee’s future oversight and legislative efforts.

Unfortunately, as is the case for OIGs, the administration has undertaken a concerted effort to weaken and sideline Congress’s watchdog.⁴⁶ Director of the Office of Management and Budget Russell Vought even stated GAO “shouldn’t exist.”⁴⁷ Last year, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) unsuccessfully attempted to embed a team at GAO under the executive order establishing DOGE.⁴⁸ GAO rejected this effort on the grounds that, as a legislative branch agency, it is not subject to executive orders.⁴⁹ More recently, in March, the administration issued updated guidance on agencies’ internal controls that will likely reduce executive branch reliance on standards and recommendations from GAO, despite Congress requiring coordination between the Office of Management and Budget and GAO in this area.⁵⁰ While an administration criticizing GAO and their findings is not entirely new, as no administration enjoys scrutiny of its management of programs, the level of criticism directed at the agency by this administration is unprecedented.

Most concerning, however, are attacks on GAO not by the administration, but by Members of Congress themselves.⁵¹ Some Members of Congress have falsely portrayed GAO as political

⁴² Government Accountability Office, *Performance and Accountability Report, Fiscal Year 2025*, GAO-26-900644 (January 29, 2026), 1, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-26-900644.pdf>; “Federal Contracting,” Government Accountability Office, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.gao.gov/federal-contracting>; “Recommendations,” Government Accountability Office, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.gao.gov/about/what-gao-does/recommendations>.

⁴³ Orice Williams Brown, Government Accountability Office, *Fiscal Year 2027 Budget Request*, GAO-26-900720 (March 18, 2026), 1, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-26-900720.pdf>.

⁴⁴ “Recommendations Database,” Government Accountability Office, accessed May 12, 2026, https://www.gao.gov/reports-testimonies/recommendations-database?processed=1&topic=all&agency=Department%20of%20Veterans%20Affairs&agency_id=46306&subs=1.

⁴⁵ “Priority Recommendations,” Government Accountability Office, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.gao.gov/priority-recommendations>.

⁴⁶ Tim Stretton, “OMB’s Latest Attempt to Sideline GAO,” Project On Government Oversight, April 17, 2026, <https://www.pogo.org/analyses/ombs-latest-attempt-to-sideline-gao>.

⁴⁷ Filip Timotija, “Russell Vought Says Government Accountability Office ‘Shouldn’t Exist,’” *The Hill*, September 3, 2025, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/5485324-russ-vought-says-government-accountability-office-shouldnt-exist/>.

⁴⁸ Executive Order No. 14158, 90 Fed. Reg. 8,441 (January 20, 2025) <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-02005/establishing-and-implementing-the-presidents-department-of-government-efficiency>.

⁴⁹ Janice Luong, “Congress Must Protect the GAO from Executive Overreach,” Project On Government Oversight, July 9, 2025, <https://www.pogo.org/analyses/congress-must-protect-the-gao-from-executive-overreach>.

⁵⁰ Stretton, *OMB’s Latest Attempt to Sideline GAO* [see note 46].

⁵¹ Jennifer Scholtes, Jordain Carney, Katherine Tully-McManus, “GOP Declares War on GAO,” *Politico*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/05/27/gop-declares-war-on-gao-00369762>.

simply for issuing reports and legal opinions that have been viewed as critical of the administration.⁵² Additionally, last month the House Appropriations Legislative Branch Subcommittee voted along party lines to cut GAO's budget by approximately 25%, despite GAO requesting a 5.9% increase above the enacted fiscal year 2026 level.⁵³ The proposed \$200 million reduction would likely require GAO to eliminate approximately 1,000 jobs.⁵⁴ Reducing GAO's budget and workforce on this scale would significantly weaken Congress's oversight capacity and appears difficult to reconcile with the subcommittee's stated goal of supporting members in carrying out their constitutional responsibilities.⁵⁵

For more than a century, GAO has worked in a nonpartisan manner on behalf of you, Members of Congress. As auditors and investigators, GAO calls balls and strikes, regardless of what administration is in power. Congress should continue to recognize GAO as an essential, nonpartisan resource and institution for independent oversight and accountability.

Finally, I draw the committee's attention to the fact that, since the end of last year, GAO has been operating without a permanent Senate-confirmed leader following the retirement of Gene Dodaro as comptroller general.⁵⁶ Under the GAO Act of 1980, the comptroller general is appointed by the president with Senate confirmation following recommendations from a bipartisan congressional commission composed of House and Senate leadership and relevant committee leaders.⁵⁷ This process has successfully been followed three times now.⁵⁸ However, Congress has not yet put forward a slate of recommended candidates, and President Trump has yet to nominate someone to the post. POGO once again calls upon Congress to launch the bipartisan commission to evaluate and put forward qualified nominees and urge the president to nominate someone.⁵⁹ Lack of permanent leadership at GAO risks reduced institutional authority and less pushing back against the executive branch when they don't cooperate fully with GAO's audits and investigations.

⁵² Scholtes, Carney, Tully-McManus, *GOP Declares War on GAO* note 51].

⁵³ "Appropriations Status Table: FY2027," Congressional Research Service, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-appropriations-status-table>; "Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill, 2027," U.S. House Appropriations Legislative Branch Subcommittee, 3, updated April 29, 2026, <https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-appropriations.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/fy27-leg-branch-subcommittee-bill-summary.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Justin Doubleday, "GAO would need to cut 1,000 employees under House bill," *Federal News Network*, April 30, 2026, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/agency-oversight/2026/04/gao-would-need-to-cut-1000-employees-under-house-bill/>.

⁵⁵ Doubleday, *GAO would need to cut 1,000 employees under House bill* [see note 54].

⁵⁶ Jennifer Scholtes, "The Federal Government's Top Watchdog Has Retired. Now Congress Has to Pick a Replacement," *Politico*, December 30, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/12/30/congress-trump-gao-search-00706651>.

⁵⁷ "Acting U.S. Comptroller General," Government Accountability Office, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.gao.gov/about/comptroller-general>.

⁵⁸ Government Accountability Office, *Acting U.S. Comptroller General* [see note 57].

⁵⁹ "Principles for Evaluating Nominees for Comptroller General of the United States," Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy, March 3, 2026, <https://levin-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Principles-for-Evaluating-Nominees-for-Comptroller-General-of-the-United-States.pdf>.

Conclusion

Congress's oversight authority should not be exercised only when the executive branch is controlled by the opposing party. Rather, oversight is a core responsibility of Congress and one of its most important constitutional duties as the legislative branch of government. Effective oversight protects taxpayer dollars, improves government performance, safeguards veterans and whistleblowers, and preserves the system of checks and balances envisioned by the framers.

To fulfill this responsibility, Congress must not only conduct vigorous oversight but also defend the institutions and authorities that make meaningful oversight possible.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.