It's deep in an underground mine.

Its operation is so outdated, officials expressed concern about the need to modernize it in the 1970s.

Employees there still handle cases on paper, scouring more than 28,000 file cabinets by hand.

It's more than a symbol of government inefficiency. It is a . . .

SINKHOLE OF BUREAUCRACY

An aerial view taken in 2007 shows the center's parking lot and the entrance to the mine in Boyers, Pa.
by David A. Fahrenthold
IN BOYERS, PA.

The trucks full of paperwork come every day, turning off a country road north of Pittsburgh and descending through a gateway into the earth. Underground, they stop at a metal door decorated with an American flag.

Behind the door, a room opens up as big as a supermarket, full of five-drawer file cabinets and people in business casual. About 230 feet below the surface, there is easy-listening music playing at somebody’s desk.

This is one of the weirdest workplaces in the U.S. government — both for where it is and for what it does.

Here, inside the caverns of an old Pennsylvania limestone mine, there are 600 employees of the Office of Personnel Management. Their task is nothing top secret. It is to process the retirement papers of the government’s own workers.

But that system has a spectacular flaw. It still must be done entirely by hand, and almost entirely on paper.

The employees here pass thousands of case files from cavern to cavern and then key in retirees’ personal data, one line at a time. They work underground not for secrecy but for space. The old mine’s tunnels have room for more than 28,000 file cabinets of paper records.

This odd place is an example of how hard it is to get a time-wasting bug out of a big bureaucratic system.

Held up by all that paper, work in the mine runs as slowly now as it did in 1977.

“The need for automation was clear — in 1981,” said James W. Morrison Jr., who oversaw the retirement-processing system under President Ronald Reagan. In a telephone interview this year, Morrison recalled his horror upon learning that the system was all run on paper: “After a year, I thought, ‘God, my reputation will be ruined if we don’t fix this.’”

Morrison was told the system still relies on paper files.

“Wow,” he said.

The existence of a mine full of federal paperwork is not well known: Even within the federal workforce, it is often treated as an urban legend, mythic and half-believed. “That crazy cave,” said Aneesh Chopra, who served as President Obama’s chief technology officer.

But the mine is real, and the process inside it belongs to a stubborn class of government problem: old breaking points, built-in mistakes that require vital bureaucracies to waste money and busy workers to waste time.
In some cases, the breaking point is caused by a vague or overcomplicated law.

In New Jersey, for instance, one researcher found that the approval process for a bridge project dragged on for years in part because officials were required to do a historic survey of all buildings within two miles and to seek comment from Indian tribes as far away as Oklahoma.

In other places, what breaks is the government’s technology.

The rollout of HealthCare.gov, of course, was ruined by glitches in the Web site, but there are other examples: The Census Bureau had a failed experiment with hand-held computers, then reverted to paper, which cost up to $3 billion extra.

The Department of Veterans Affairs had trouble with an online records system and, while they struggled with it, accumulated so much paperwork in one office that auditors feared the floor might collapse.

Obama took office with the hope that these hang-ups could be separated from Washington’s endless wars over the size of government. In theory, these are problems everybody wants to fix.

“The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works,” Obama said in his first inaugural address.

In many places, however, these federal systems still don’t work well. Some of the explanation can be found here, in this
Data mining. The old-fashioned way.

REPORTING BY DAVID A. FALKENHOLZ; GRAPHIC BY TODD LINDSEMAN

Inside one of the country’s weirdest office spaces — an old mine, located 20 stories under the rolling Pennsylvania countryside — federal employees do one of the government’s most old-fashioned jobs: processing the retirement paperwork of other federal employees. And they do it by hand, mostly on paper, retrieving records from any of the 28,000 file cabinets and passing them from desk to desk, from cavern to cavern. The process works as slowly now as it did in 1977.

PROCESSING FEDERAL EMPLOYEES’ RETIREMENT PAPERWORK

1. Documents shipped to mine
When federal employees retire, their paperwork must be brought to a vast underground complex 50 miles north of Pittsburgh. Most arrive by FedEx, the day after an employee submits his or her retirement packets. The Postal Service ships it all to the mine — which takes a day longer than FedEx.

2. Assembling the file
The next task is to find the employee’s existing personnel file in order to combine it with the paperwork that just arrived. In about 17 percent of cases, that means a long walk into the mine’s eight vast underground file rooms. Each room is a tunnel dug into the rock, about as wide as a football field and as long as two football fields. In the rest of the cases, the files are available in a digital archive — they are printed out and added to the paper file. The finished file is often about a quarter-inch thick, and can be up to two or three inches thick.

3. Determine what is missing
The next step is to find elements that are missing from the file: payroll records, signatures and other things that must be found before retirement payment is approved. Inside a makeshift room with a roof of jagged, white-painted limestone, at least 20 people make phone calls and send emails, trying to track down the missing elements. Sometimes, this process can take weeks.

INSIDE THE SUBTERRANEAN OFFICE

Each file room is sorted alphabetically, by last name. The office space shown processes the paperwork of federal workers whose last names start with L and M.

DIGITIZE THE PAPER FILES

4. Data entry

Once a file is "healthy," or complete, it moves into two nearby rooms — which, combined, house space for 1,33 workers. Their job is to enter information from the paper files into a computer program. That computer program then determines what a retiree’s payout will be. Veterans of the mine say that a fast adjudicator can get through two cases a day this way. But the system can be slowed down further, if the case is complicated. At the last official count, more than 22,500 cases were waiting in a backlog.

APPROVE WORKER’S BENEFITS CHECK

5. Review the case

Once the information has been entered and the computer program spits out a result, another OPM official must review the case, to be certain the calculation is correct. A file can spend at least two or three days in this phase. Once it is done, an employee approves the case. Only then can a retiree begin getting his or her full benefits check. On average, the process takes more than 60 days per case.

Sources: Current and former employees of Office of Personnel Management

Located more than 500 feet underground, the storage facility, a former limestone mine, spans about 125 acres.
baroque underground bureaucracy.

During the past 30 years, administrations have spent more than $100 million trying to automate the old-fashioned process in the mine and make it run at the speed of computers.

They couldn’t.

So now the mine continues to run at the speed of human fingers and feet. That failure imposes costs on federal retirees, who have to wait months for their full benefit checks. And it has imposed costs on the taxpayer: The Obama administration has now made the mine run faster, but mainly by paying for more fingers and feet.

The staff working in the mine has increased by at least 200 people in the past five years. And the cost of processing each claim has increased from $82 to $108, as total spending on the retirement system reached $55.8 million.

In a statement issued Saturday, OPM Director Katherine Archuleta said: “I do not believe that the current level of service is acceptable.” She added that modernizing the system is a priority for her.

In an interview inside the mine this month, another federal official called the operation “very successful.”

But that official balked when asked if it was modern. “What does ‘modern’ mean?” the official said. The OPM allowed a reporter in the mine on the condition that interviews with some officials there would not be conducted on the record.

This is how the mine works:

Step 1 begins when a federal employee submits retirement paperwork to his or her own agency. That happens at least 100,000 times a year. Within a few days, the government starts sending “interim payments” to the retirees — checks worth about 80 percent of their full pensions. This is meant to tide them over while the mine works on the case.

Then, the paper begins to move. The retiree’s agency assembles a paper file of personnel records and ships it off at rush speed.

Most agencies send these files using FedEx, and their packages arrive the next day. The Postal Service, however, ships its own retirees’ paperwork by U.S. mail.

Its packages arrive in two days, officials in the mine said.

Nearly all of those packages come here — over the winding roads, into the tunnel and through the door with the American flag.

“You don’t forget that it’s a cave,” said Ashley Weber, a former temp who worked on the mine’s incoming files. “But they try to make it look as not-cave-like as you can.”

But why is it in a cave at all?

The answer to that question is that, back in 1958, the U.S. government was in the market for storage space. It needed 30,000 square feet to hold personnel files that were being relocated from a building in Washington. Officials looked at buildings in Richmond, Va., and Syracuse, N.Y., before choosing this place, an underground complex where 1,000 workers had once cut limestone to feed the steel mills.
A private company had turned the place into an enormous safe-deposit box: safe from the weather and the Soviets, kept naturally cool as a cave. Today, the complex is owned by the company Iron Mountain, which leases out other caverns to store old Hollywood movie reels and photo archives.

The government moved its old records here in 1960. At first, it was just a file room. Records were shipped to Washington for

ABOVE: Patty DeCaria worked at the complex for 38 years before retiring last year. LEFT: Mike Deal of the Annandale Country Store, loads his truck with food to bring to the center. Meals must be brought in from outside because open flames aren’t allowed in the mine.

On washingtonpost.com

See a video about the town surrounding the mine, and get a closer look at the center’s laborious process for handling government workers’ retirement papers at wapo.st/papermine.
processing. But over time, the government began to hire more people to work in the mine itself.

They worked hard. And since there were few other office jobs available in this rural area, they tended to stay.

“Nobody up there goes on to another job. You can work Monday through Friday, 8 to 5. … There’s mostly overtime, if you want it. They’re really flexible about using leave,” said Patty DeCaria, 57, who retired last year after 38 years in the mine. DeCaria said she also enjoyed the sense that she was helping people who deserved it. “People don’t leave Boyers.,” she said.

Still, at best, it’s a good job in a bad place.

In the winter, employees enter the mine in the dark and leave in the dark. Food must be brought in from outside, because you can’t have an open flame in a mine. So there is a pizza guy, with a security clearance, who arrives every day at 11:30 a.m. Another vendor, Randy Armagost, trucks in hot lunches and an assortment of at least four deep-fried items every day.

“People are crabby. They’re miserable. I mean, you can’t blame them. They never see any sunlight,” Armagost said. “I’m only down there for 2½ hours a day, and I can’t stand it.”

For workers inside the mine, Step 2 in the paperwork process is to take the retiree’s newly arrived file and match it up with any records already stored in the mine.

In about 15 percent of the cases, that means a long walk into the mine’s eight massive file caverns. Inside, they are empty enough to be spooky.

“I heard rumors of ghosts, out in the files,” DeCaria said. “They just pull drawers open.”

In most cases, however, Step 2 can be completed without a walk. The retiree’s files have been scanned into a digital archive and can be looked up on a computer.

But there’s a problem: All the information must go in the retiree’s manila folder.

And you can’t put a computer file in a manila folder.

“We do print them out, right now. But we won’t in the future,” said Doug Berger, who supervises this operation. The printed-out documents are put in the folder, and it continues.

Now, Step 3: The file moves around the corner to an adjacent cavern. The workers there have a vital but frustrating job. They must call, e-mail, fax, badger and harass workers in other federal agencies to find paperwork that has been left out of the file.

“I used to chase people for months — literally — for one signature on one piece of paper. You want to talk about an egregious waste of taxpayer money?” recalled said one worker who left the mine recently and declined to be named because of fears of retribution.

Step 3 usually takes a few days to a few weeks. But if anybody’s file is misplaced along the way, it slows everybody’s work down.

“On a daily basis, we would get from five to 50 e-mails, asking everybody to take
time out of their day to search their desks for case files,” the former worker said. That worker said the experience of hunting down lost paperwork and lost files inside an underground cavern had been bad enough to force a career change.

The worker’s new job: setting off explosives.

“I’m handling live ordnance on a daily basis, just to get out of there,” said the worker, whose company blasts holes in the ground for oil and gas wells. “One of the five worst jobs in the world was a great alternative to being down there.”

Finally, when all the file’s missing papers are found, the file moves on to a new set of workers in a new set of caverns. This is Step 4.

Now that all the retiree’s digital data have been turned into paperwork, these workers turn that paperwork into digital data again. They type all the pertinent information into a computer, by hand.

“You can do a case in as little as an hour,” said Bonnie McCandless, the president of the center’s local labor union, whose job is entering this data. “Or you can do a case as long as eight hours, or two days.”

The task takes so much time in part because Congress has made the federal retirement rules extremely complex. The center’s workers must verify and key in information that answers a huge range of questions: What were the retiree’s three years of highest salary? Was the retiree a firefighter? A military veteran? A cafeteria worker at the U.S. Capitol? What about part-time service?

All those answers can change the final pension payment. “One hundred years of bad laws,” McCandless said.

The nightmare cases are the “reemployed annuitants.” A government worker retires. Then un-retires. Then gets another job with the government. Then retires again.

The law allows that. But it is a heck of a mess to deal with.

“I’m working on one, and it’s going on three weeks,” said an employee sitting near McCandless.

When all the data are entered into the computer, it is onto Step 5. Another employee reviews the case to be sure the data were entered correctly. Then, at last, the case is “triggered.” The retiree gets the full check.

That process now takes, on average, at least 61 days. That's the same amount of time it took in 1977, according to a federal audit from that time. Many state retirement systems, which also handle large loads of employees, do it much faster. Florida takes 47 days. The California teachers’ retirement system takes 23. Texas takes two.

Those three process their files digitally, not on paper. Since the 1980s, the U.S. government has been trying — and failing — to do the same thing here.

The first time, work began in 1987. Years passed. About $25 million was spent, according to the Government Accountability Office. But within the government, offi-
cials started to worry that it wasn’t working.

“The reports [from the contractor] just asserted that they had written X lines of code. ... For an executive, that’s just invisible; you don’t know what it means,” said Curtis Smith, who oversaw retirement processing from 1989 to 1994. He was a longtime federal employee with a PhD in English literature, supervising a massive technology project.

“I had no idea [if] they were making progress from month to month. And I just sort of took it on faith that they could make it work,” Smith said. “And they never did.”

In 1996, two years after Smith left the government, officials finally pulled the plug on that project. Then, in 1997, the government tried again.

First it tried revamping the system in-house. Then it scrapped that plan and hired contractors. After years of work, the system the contractors built was supposed to be ready by early 2008.

But by 2007, there were concrete warnings that it again wasn’t going to work.

“Every time we would do what I would call a stress test, we would come up with abysmal numbers — like an 18 percent success rate,” said Robert Danbeck, who was overseeing the project. The root of the problem, he said, was that the system had trouble synthesizing information from so many sources and calculations based on so many laws. “We would go back and look at what caused it, and it was always just so many pieces, trying to tie things together.”

Danbeck quit. In early 2008, the system went live.

Then it broke and was eventually scrapped, after more than $106 million had been spent. In the mine, the files continued to move on paper.

Contained in all those failures, experts say, is a very brief history of the federal government’s recent troubles with information technology.

A recent study by the Standish Group, a firm in Boston that researches failures, found that only 5 percent of large federal IT projects in the last decade fully succeeded.

Of the rest, 41 percent were failures, canceled before they were turned on. The reasons often echoed the problems in the mine: Federal officials either tried to buy a technology they didn’t fully understand because they lacked the technical skill, or they didn’t test what they were getting until it was too late.

At the low point, in the first years of Obama’s presidency, the processing time dragged out to 156 days. In response, officials did not try to eliminate the glitch. Instead, they hired more people to wrestle with it and rearranged the old process so that the paperwork moved more quickly.

Jonathan May, a recent retiree from the Justice Department, was pleasantly surprised that his case only took three months to process. He’d expected far worse.

“I was actually bracing for it. I had saved up all my annual leave ... went out with about 440 hours [of stored-up leave],
just in case I had to live off of that for a while,” May, who lives on Long Island, said in a telephone interview. “I was just amazed at how smoothly everything went.”

Inside the mine, officials said they were gradually increasing the number of records that are stored digitally. Eventually, they said, the entire operation would run on computers. They had faith in the government’s ability to eliminate this breaking point.

“There’s a rover on Mars, mister,” one OPM official said.

In the meantime, the workers who make this old-fashioned system work get a special — if unofficial — benefit.

When they retire, they don’t have to wait on it.

“OPM employees get special treatment,” said DeCaria, the recently retired mine worker. The agency said this is not its official policy. But when DeCaria retired, a colleague spotted the file and moved it to the front of the line.

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Alice Crites contributed to this report.
It's deep in an underground mine. No computers or software. Officials expressed concern about the need to modernize in the 1970s. Employees there still handle cases on paper, working more than 28,000 hours a year by hand.

It is one of the reasons the government's technology. It's a system that is used to process claims, and it is used for both successful and unsuccessful operations. The government has spent more than $55.8 million on the retirement system, as total spending on the retirement system reached $55.8 million. The government has also faced issues with the cost of processing each claim, which has posed costs on the taxpayer. The OPM allowed a reporter to look at buildings in Richmond, N.J., and busy workers to waste time. They work underground not for the government. In theory, these are steps that can be taken to modernize the system.

Still, at best, it's a good job in a bad place. "I do not believe that we have made progress," the official said. "I do not believe that 'modern' means anything." The government moved its old records system reached $55.8 million in 2005. Obama took office with the hope that these hang-ups could be separated from Washington's woes. He'd e.

"Nobody up there goes on to another job. You can work Mon-Tues, Wed-Fri, or Fri-Mon. Still, at best, it's a good job in a bad place. "I do not believe that we have made progress," the official said. "I do not believe that 'modern' means anything." But that system has a spectacular flaw. It's a system that is used to process claims, and it is used for both successful and unsuccessful operations. The government has faced issues with the cost of processing each claim, which has posed costs on the taxpayer. The OPM allowed a reporter to look at buildings in Richmond, N.J., and busy workers to waste time. They work underground not for the government. In theory, these are steps that can be taken to modernize the system.
Every year, as required by law, the U.S. government prepares an official report to Congress on “Dog and Cat Fur Protection.” The task requires at least 15 employees in at least six different federal offices.

First, workers have to gather data about the enforcement of a law banning imports of fur coats, furry toys or other items made from the pelts of pets. How many shipments were checked? How many illegal furs were found?

The data are written into a report, passed up the chain of command and sent to Capitol Hill.

And then nothing happens.

Although it was Congress that demanded this report in a 2000 law, the legislators who pushed for it are gone. The debate over imported pet fur has waned. Congress lost interest. Of the seven committees that still get copies of the report, none reported finding it useful.

Still, the law lives on, requiring a bureaucratic ritual that has become a complete waste of time.

“I said: ‘Look, let’s just not send it. Let’s just not send it this year and see if anybody asks for it,’” said Michael Mullen, a former official at Customs and Border Protection, which handles the report. Mullen said his bosses always said no. “Is that thing still being sent in?” Mullen said, laughing. “Oh, God.”

This is a story about how Congress built a black hole.

It started out with a good idea. Legislators wanted to know more about the bureaucracy working beneath them. So they turned to a tool as old as bureaucracy itself — the interoffice memo. They asked agencies to send in written reportsmandated by Congress just gather dust

by David A. Fahrenthold
reports about specific things they were doing.

Then, as happens in government, that good idea was overused until it became a bad one.

This Congress is officially expecting 4,291 written reports, from 466 federal agencies and nonprofit groups. Legislators have demanded reports on things as big as Social Security, as small as the House’s employee hair salon and as far afield as the state of Little League baseball.

But as the numbers got bigger, Congress started to lose track. It overwhelmed itself. Today, Congress is not even sure how many of those 4,291 reports are actually turned in. And it does not try to save copies of all the ones that are.

So some agencies cheat and send in nothing. And others waste time and money sending in reports — such as the one on dog and cat fur — that simply disappear into the void.

“Remember the original movie ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark,’ where the ark got put away in that government storeroom?” said Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.), who has pushed to cut down on unnecessary reports. “Probably next to the lost ark are all the reports that have never been reviewed.”

This is a modern problem, made out of a very old thing. As far back as 1792, when Congress was still meeting in Philadelphia, it ordered the U.S. Mint to produce an annual report, to “be laid before Congress for their information.”

Today, the process works like this: First, Congress passes a law with detailed instructions for a report and a timeline for when it ought to be turned in. Some reports are due every year. But not all of them. In fact, Congress has asked for reports on 1,307 distinct schedules. The due dates range from “monthly” to “within 60 days after close of the fiscal year” to “from time to time.”

When they are ready, the reports are sent to Capitol Hill. Some go on paper, by courier. Others are sent by e-mail. (Only a small number of the reports are classified as secret.)

The reports are not all useless. Many reports are quite valuable and well read, such as the ones on Medicare’s finances and on the Pentagon’s assessment of the war in Afghanistan.

The problem is that there is no system to sort the good ones from the useless ones. They all flow in together, which
makes it hard for congressional staffers to spot any valuable information hidden in the flood.

“To be honest, a lot of the reports that have been mandated from these federal agencies are so overwhelming that I [didn’t] generally look at them,” said former congressman Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.), who served in the House from 1989 until last year. Stearns said his staff often threw the reports away, hoping somebody else would go through them instead. Such hope is not always well founded — many of the reports are not posted where the public can see them.

“If you’re a Republican, you go to the Heritage Foundation, you go to the American Enterprise Institute,” Stearns said. “…You almost take the opinion that the outside groups are going to monitor these better than you and your staff can do.”

For decades, legislators have complained that they get more reports than they can reasonably sort through. In 1928, for example, there were 303 reports. And Congress thought that was already too many.


But their victory over paperwork did not last. As decades went on, the number of reports began to grow again. By 1960, there were 470 reports required. By 1970, there were 759.

The numbers grew for two main reasons. The first was entirely noble. In many cases, legislators were pursuing the goal of better oversight, keeping watch on the money they were spending. As government has expanded over the past 50 years, they have needed more reports to keep track.

The other reason was less noble. Congress ordered reports to shut somebody up. In these cases, legislators allowed colleagues to order reports on pet problems as a way of pacifying them.

“Everyone can get a little bit of satisfaction [out of requesting a report], but the Senate’s not getting dragged into a drawn-out debate on whatever the issue is,” said Jim Manley, a former longtime aide to Senate Democrats. “Once you request a study, you don’t really have to pay attention to the details — such as how much it’s going to cost to put together a study.”

The problem was that, in many cases, Congress’s orders had no expiration date. Legally, these reports are immortal. They are due, forever, until somebody repeals
the law requiring them. So new reports were added, old ones stayed on and the total number kept growing.

By 1980, there were 2,300 reports required. By 1990, there were 3,448.

Along the way, federal auditors warned Congress that it was losing oversight of its own oversight system. “There is no way of insuring that the agencies … submit reports when they are due,” auditors said in 1981.

Throughout the government, crafty bureaucrats began to notice the same thing. Nobody was checking the homework.

In the 1990s, Agriculture Department employee David Rust was in charge of completing a report for Congress on
how his sub-agency served the public. The first year, he took it seriously. He wrote a polished and well-documented report and sent it off to the Hill.

“Never heard a thing,” Rust recalled in a telephone interview.

The next year, Rust’s boss asked him to do it again. But he didn’t. He sent Congress nothing, and he never heard a thing.

“I killed that, after just one year,” Rust said.

Over time, such congressional reports were becoming a Washington parable about why some big government systems break down.

In cases such as this, the cause is not too little funding or too much corruption or failed technology. It is Congress’s tendency to pile new solutions on top of outdated ones, and to try to make all of them work at once. As a result, funding and energy are spread too thin. Bad ideas live on — sucking in resources — because nobody bothers to kill them.

In one infamous example, the government ended up with 47 job training programs — and still wasn’t very good at job training.

In this case, however, the system that Congress overburdened and broke was its own.

“And at the end of the year, you will see lots and lots of these big kind of mobile trash barrels. And you will see people just throwing away just pounds and pounds of reports into the trash,” said Steve Bell, a longtime staffer for Republicans on Capitol Hill. During the year, he said, “we used them as doorstops. Literally. The thicker ones, we used them as doorstops.”

Today, nobody in Washington can say how many reports are actually done every year, or how much money is spent to prepare them. The last good estimate comes from 1993, when they were believed to cost more than $100 million — $163 million in today’s dollars.

This year, the only thing that Congress could say for sure was how many reports it was expecting to get. In early April, the House administration committee said that official total was 4,637.

But even that was wrong. The Washington Post counted the entries on the House’s list, and the number was more than 300 less than the House said it was. After that, the House administration committee changed its official total to 4,291.

That figure is also probably misleading, since the House’s list of expected reports seems riddled with errors. For one thing, it says Congress is still expecting two annual reports about the Soviet Union, a country that dissolved in 1991. And it still asks for two reports from the association of veterans of the Spanish-American War. The last member of that group died in 1992.

The broader breakdown of this system can be seen — in miniature — in the history of that report on dog and cat fur protection. It began life as a well-intentioned idea but then lived long enough to become a farce.
The story of the report began in the late 1990s, when the Humane Society of the United States found that coats, toys and other imported items were being made with the fur of dogs and cats. Often, the animals were cruelly abused before they were killed.

“We want this trade in dog and cats pelts to stop at our borders, and hopefully save millions of animals from this cruel practice,” said then-Sen. William Roth (R-Del.), one of the measure’s supporters.

Congress passed a bill banning the import of dog and cat fur and demanded an annual report on how the law was being enforced. But after a few years, there was not much to say — customs officers reported finding relatively few shipments of contraband fur. In 2012, the government had found just one violation of the law in six years.

But the law says there will be an annual report. This is what that means:

First, according to former customs employees, somebody has to gather data from more than 320 U.S. ports of entry. It can take weeks for them all to report back, with totals of how many searches they made for illegal fur and how much they found. In fiscal 2012, for instance, there were 109 searches of commercial shipments. None of them contained illegal fur.

Then, somebody writes a short report. “If everybody’s reported in — you’ve got all the information together — it probably would be a couple of days” to write it, said Kelly S. Herman, a lawyer who worked on the report years ago.

Then the reviews begin. The report is checked by Customs and Border Protection’s Office of Field Operations, its Office of International Trade, its Office of Policy and Planning, and its Office of Congressional Affairs. Then it goes to the deputy commissioner and then the commissioner.

Everybody is supposed to look closely. After all, this is going to Congress.

“If Congress is asking for this report, then it’s obviously of somebody’s high priority,” said Allen Gina, another former Customs and Border Protection official who worked on the report. And, he said, “there’s nothing more embarrassing than being in a public forum, and somebody says: ‘Thank you for that report you sent me. I have a specific question,’ [when you didn’t review what the report said].”

For now, nobody on Capitol Hill seems likely to ask.

“It seems we don’t have anyone that remembers using the report,” said Aryele Bradford, a spokeswoman for the Democrats on the House Oversight Committee.

“Still have not been able to confirm that we have even received the report in the past,” said Sean Bonyun, a spokesman for the Republicans on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which is supposed to get it every year.

In the past few years, both the Obama administration and several members of Congress have tried to reform this system. In the process, they have demonstrated how hard it is to reform.
In late 2012, the White House identified 269 reports it would like to eliminate. The Dog and Cat Fur Protection report was on that list, along with a few other doozies. The Social Security Administration, for instance, has for more than 25 years sent Congress a long annual report about its printing operations. Among other things, the report includes the ages and serial numbers of individual pieces of equipment: a forklift, two copiers, several laminators. The full report takes about 95 employees and 87 workdays to complete.

But why on Earth would Congress want to know the serial number of somebody’s forklift? That was unclear. The senator who asked for the report retired in 1987 and died in 2010.

After the White House put out its list, the Senate’s Warner and Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) wrote bills to eliminate some of the least useful reports. (Issa has irritated Obama administration officials with his numerous requests for information, though most are one-time requests, not repeating reports.)

But in the House, some committees objected — they wanted to keep their reports coming.

For instance, that time-consuming Social Security printing report was saved from elimination. But why? Only one committee on Capitol Hill gets the report, the Joint Committee on Printing. A spokeswoman for the Republicans’ side of the committee said they had nothing to do with it; a spokesman for the panel’s top Democrat did not respond to requests for comment this past week.

In the end, last Monday the House passed a bill that would eliminate 79 reports, less than a third of the White House’s list. And, yes, it would get rid of the dog and cat fur report.

Also this year, Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.) has written a bill that would at least post all the reports on a public Web site so the public can read them. “This information could help other people,” Quigley said. “It could help farmers. It could help businesses.”

When a report comes in now, Quigley said, “it is stored in the abyss.”

Unless, course, it doesn’t come in at all.

This year, a reporter went looking for one of those obscure reports that the White House had asked to get rid of, a Forest Service report on timber supply and demand in Southeast Alaska. The Forest Service refused to answer questions about it or provide a recent copy.

The reason, apparently, was that there was no recent copy. After the staff of Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) asked this year about the report, the Forest Service then said that the employee who did that report had left the agency.

So, for the past two years, they had just stopped doing it.

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WHERE THE GOVERNMENT FALLS APART

Build a black hole.

It started out with a good order.

A STUMBLING BLOC

A terminal neglect for hospice patients?

Unrequired reading: Some reports mandated by Congress just gather dust.

Some reports mandated by Congress just gather dust. At least 15 employees in at least six agencies were assigned to track 4,291 written reports — such as the one on dog and cat fur protection — in the past year, when the congressman sponsored the legislation that made it happen. Although it was Congress that demanded the reports, none reported in 2012, records show.

In the absence of accountability, the law requiring them. So new Congress want to know the serial number of somebody’s forklift? How hard it is to reform.

Some reports are turned in. And it does not try to reduce the number of reports, Congress started to lose track. It has never been reviewed. Congress could help businesses.

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Long wait times among bureaucratic problems that predate Shinseki

by David A. Fahrenthold

About two years ago, Brian Turner took a job as a scheduling clerk at a Veterans Affairs health clinic in Austin. A few weeks later, he said, a supervisor came by to instruct him how to cook the books. “The first time I heard it was actually at my desk. They said, ‘You got to zero out the date. The wait time has to be zeroed out,’” Turner recalled in a phone interview. He said “zeroing out” was a trick to fool the Department of Veterans Affairs’ own accountability system, which the bosses up in Washington used to monitor how long patients waited to see the doctor.

“The first time I heard it was actually at my desk. They said, ‘You got to zero out the date. The wait time has to be zeroed out,’” Turner recalled in a phone interview. He said “zeroing out” was a trick to fool the Department of Veterans Affairs’ own accountability system, which the bosses up in Washington used to monitor how long patients waited to see the doctor.

This is how it worked: A patient asked for an appointment on a specific day. Turner found the next available time slot. But, often, it was many days later than the patient had wanted.

Would that later date work? If the patient said yes, Turner canceled the whole process and started over. This time, he typed in that the patient had wanted that later date all along. So now, the official wait time was … a perfect zero days.

It was a lie, of course. But it seemed to be a very important lie, one that the system depended on. “Two to three times a month, you would hear something about it,” Turner said — another reminder from supervisors to “zero out.” “It wasn’t a secret at all.”

But all this was apparently a secret to Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, perched 12 levels above Turner in VA’s towering bureaucracy. Somewhere underneath Shinseki — among the undersecretaries and deputy undersecretaries and bosses and sub-bosses — the fact that clerks were cheating the system was lost.

On Friday, Shinseki resigned and was replaced by his deputy.

But his departure is unlikely to solve VA’s broader problem — a bureaucracy that has been taught, over time, to hide its problems from Washington. Indeed, as President Obama said, one of the agency’s
key failings was that bad news did not reach Shinseki’s level at all.

This is an ironic development: Until recently, VA had been seen as a Washington success story. In the 1990s, reformers had cut back on its middle management and started using performance data so managers at the top could keep abreast of problems at the bottom.

Then that success began to unravel.

As VA’s caseload increased during two wars, the agency grew thick around the middle again. And then, when the people at the bottom started sending in fiction, the people at the top took it as fact.

“Shinseki goes up to Capitol Hill, and says, ‘I didn’t know anything.’ I find it perfectly believable,” said Paul C. Light, a professor at New York University who has studied the bureaucracy of VA and others in Washington. “And that’s a real problem.”

For decades, VA was a byword for bureaucracy itself, seen as Washington’s ultimate paper-pushing, mind-bending hierarchy. That reputation was rooted in VA’s history: It came about because the agency’s first leader was an audacious crook.

Charles R. Forbes was chosen to head the Veterans Bureau by his poker buddy, President Warren G. Harding, in 1921. He was a poor choice. Forbes took kickbacks. He sold off federal supplies. He wildly misspent taxpayer money — once buying a 100-year supply of floor wax, enough to polish a floor the size of Indiana, for 25 times the regular price (apparently as a favor to a floor wax company).

Eventually, Forbes was caught. The president was unhappy. In 1923, a White House visitor opened the wrong door and found Harding choking Forbes with his bare hands. “You yellow rat! You double-crossing bastard!” Harding was saying, according to historians. When he noticed the visitor, he let go of Forbes’s neck.

Forbes was eventually convicted of bribery and conspiracy. But afterward, the agency’s next leaders built in layers of bureaucracy and paperwork to ensure that nobody would ever have the same freedom to steal.

Seventy years after Forbes was gone, the place was still wrapped in that red tape.

That was clear on the day that Kenneth Kizer — a reformer appointed by President Bill Clinton — arrived at VA’s health service.

“I had to approve reimbursement of a secretary … purchasing a cable for her computer. I think it was something like $11 or $12,” Kizer said. There was a form. He had to sign it personally. “Here I’m running this multibillion-dollar organization with — at that time — 200,000 employees. And I’m having to approve reimbursements for somebody.”

Kizer set out to change that. He cut back on staffing at VA headquarters in Washington and at regional headquarters. He cut out layers in the chain of command. And he embraced the idea that statistics could allow the agency’s leaders to peer around those middlemen and see the bot-
Once a bureaucratic success story, VA was undone by a culture of coverups.

TOP: The first Veterans Bureau director, Charles R. Forbes, standing at left with glasses at a staff conference, took kickbacks, leading the agency’s next leaders to build in layers of bureaucracy and paperwork. LEFT: Somewhere underneath Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, the fact that clerks were cheating the system was lost. RIGHT: President Obama confirmed Friday that he had accepted Shinseki’s resignation.
tom from the top.

If patients at a certain hospital were waiting too long for appointments, the leaders wouldn’t have to wait for the news to travel from a scheduling clerk to a supervisor, from the supervisor to a chief, from the chief to the hospital director, from the hospital director to the region, and from the region to Washington.

Instead, Washington could just watch the numbers and see for itself.

In theory.

Today, 15 years after he left VA, Kizer said he’s frustrated to see that one of his solutions — that numbers-based system — became the problem itself. Instead of alerting the bosses to problems in the field, it has been perverted to cover them up.

“The measures have become the end,” Kizer said in a phone interview from California, “as opposed to a means to an end.”

Today, even after a massive influx of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans that increased the number of VA patients by nearly 2 million, the VA health system still does many things well. The satisfaction rate for patients who have been treated by VA is over 80 percent.

But in many places, veterans were waiting too long to get the care they need.

“When you actually get in the room with a doctor, it’s okay. But it’s what it takes to get to that point that I think is the problem,” said Stewart Hickey, national executive director of the veterans service group AMVETS. “You’re sick today. Three weeks from now, you’re either cured or you’re dead.”

One great test of any bureaucracy is whether it can effectively deliver bad news to the top of its chain of command.

In recent years, the VA health system started to fail that test.

“That’s what, to me, makes this event so shocking,” said W. Scott Gould, who spent four years as Shinseki’s second in command. Gould left VA last year. Gould said that Shinseki tried hard to show he was open to bad news. Three times a year, in fact, Shinseki spent a solid week meeting with regional VA medical directors.

That was 63 separate four-hour interviews, every year. But, apparently, his message of openness wasn’t enough: In those hours of meetings, nobody told Shinseki what so many people in his system apparently knew.

“I find it shocking that anyone could believe that they were expected to dissemble” about performance measures, Gould said.

This is how the system was failing: As VA’s patient load grew, new layers of middle management slowly reappeared. And all the way at the bottom of VA’s 12-level chain of command were the schedulers — the ones who actually had to match veterans with doctors.

There were too many of the veterans. There were too few of the doctors.

So what should they do?

One choice was to tell the truth — tell the computer how long veterans were actually waiting for an appointment. That was
what Shinseki said he wanted, 12 levels up and miles away in Washington.

But, according to people with experience in scheduling, it was often the opposite of what lower-level bureaucrats wanted. In some cases, local officials’ bonuses depended on the numbers looking good. So, at some point years ago, they began asking clerks to change the numbers — with practices like “zeroing it out.” Cheating was made easier by VA’s ancient computer systems, designed decades ago.

For many clerks, the choice between the bureaucrats they knew and the secretary they didn’t was obvious.

“They would say, ‘Change the “desired date” to the date of the appointment,’” said one employee knowledgeable about scheduling practices at a VA medical center. The employee, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation, decided to go along with those requests. Fighting the order to lie wasn’t worth it.

“You know, in the end, the veteran got the appointment that was available anyway,” the employee said. “It didn’t affect the veteran’s care.”

In 2005, federal auditors found evidence that clerks were not entering the numbers correctly. By 2010, the problem seemed to be widespread. The VA health service sent out a memo listing 17 different “work-arounds,” including the one that Turner was taught in Texas. Stop it, VA said.

They didn’t. By 2012, in fact, one VA official told Congress that he wasn’t sure how to force people to send in the real numbers.

“Because of the fact that the gaming is so prevalent, as soon as something is put out, it is torn apart to look to see what the work-around is,” said William Schoenhard, who was then the deputy undersecretary for health for operations and management, an upper mid-level official that VA employees call the “Dushom.” “There’s no feedback loop.”

That was the key. There was no feedback loop. The system that had been set up to let the top of VA’s bureaucracy watch the bottom was no longer working. It was sending back science fiction, and VA’s top brass seemed either ignorant of the deceptions or powerless to stop them.

In the past week, federal auditors provided stark evidence of the problem that VA’s leaders had missed. The auditors had studied 226 veterans who got appointments at the VA medical center in Phoenix. The official data showed they waited an average of 24 days for an appointment. In reality, the average wait was 115 days.

Afterward, Shinseki called that finding “reprehensible.”

But to the doctor who used to run VA’s Phoenix emergency room, the findings were no surprise. Katherine Mitchell said that the ER was often overburdened by patients with non-urgent problems who simply couldn’t get an appointment with their regular doctors.

Mitchell said she was shifted to another job at VA after complaining about
inadequate staffing and other problems with care in Phoenix. She said Shinseki’s long experience in the Army had not prepared him well for VA.

“In the military, if you say, ‘Do something,’ it’s done,” said Mitchell, who has spent 16 years at VA. “I suspect that he wasn’t aware that in VA, it’s not like that. If you say, ‘Do something,’ it’s covered up. It’s fixed by covering it up.”

Now, VA’s leaders have been faced with a startling failure. The bureaucracy below them wasn’t telling them the truth about wait times. The numbers system they set up to go around the bureaucracy wasn’t, either.

The only answer, now, has been to send people out to VA clinics to talk to schedulers, face to face. Before the auditors went out, they were warned they might hear evidence that clerks had been cheating the system.

“If this occurs, remain calm,” VA counseled auditors in a memo. It suggested follow-up questions. “Have you brought this to anyone’s attention? If needed, follow up with: What has been the response?”

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Greg Jaffe and Alice Crites contributed to this report.
Evidence of climate change laps at Norfolk’s feet

VA successes undone by culture of coverups

‘We lost our place, so now this is the place we got.’

Once a bureaucratic success story, VA was undone by a culture of coverups

His intentions were good, but Shinseki failed VA system by putting too much trust in employees
The biggest backlog in the federal government

by David A. Fahrenthold

In an obscure corner of the federal bureaucracy, there is an office that is 990,399 cases behind. That is Washington’s backlog of backlogs — a queue of waiting Americans larger than the populations of six different states. It is bigger even than the infamous backups at Veterans Affairs, where 526,000 people are waiting in line, and the patent office, where 606,000 applications are pending.

All of these people are waiting on a single office at the Social Security Administration.

Social Security is best-known for sending benefits to seniors. But it also pays out disability benefits to people who can’t work because of mental or physical ailments. And it runs an enormous decision-making bureaucracy to sort out who is truly disabled enough to get the checks — and who is trying to game the system.

Within Social Security, this backlogged office handles appeals of appeals. In most of its cases, the applicants have already been turned down twice by lower-rung officials who didn’t think they were disabled enough.

If they appeal to this office, they can plead their case in person, before a special kind of Social Security judge.

The judge is supposed to read the applicant’s medical records and ask questions about medications, limitations and levels of pain. There

ABOVE LEFT: Thomas Snook and Carol Pennock are Social Security judges who hear appeals over disability benefits.
ABOVE RIGHT: Patrick McGarvey, 48, of Riegelsville, Pa., waited seven years for approval of his disability benefits.
are 1,445 of these Social Security judges, which means its in-house legal system is larger than the entire regular federal court system — district and appeals courts and the Supreme Court put together.

When they make a ruling, they must decide whether someone is truly unable to hold any job.

That is slow work, made slower by a pileup of outdated rules and oddball procedures. The judges’ official list of jobs, for instance, is a Depression-era relic last updated in 1991. It still includes “telegram messenger” and “horse-and-wagon driver” — not exactly growth industries. It doesn’t mention the Internet at all.

These judges fell behind when Gerald Ford was president. And they never caught up. Along the way, their office has become a bureaucratic parable — about what happens when the machinery of government cannot keep up with its good intentions.

In this case, the system became, in effect, too big to fix: Reforms were hugely expensive and so logistically complicated that they often stalled, unfinished. What’s left now is an office that costs taxpayers billions and still forces applicants to wait more than a year — often, without a paycheck — before delivering an answer about their benefits.

The experience of fighting this backlog can feel desperate and futile to people on both sides of the judge’s bench.

“I had two claimants on my docket this past month. … They died. They died. Waiting for a hearing,” said Carol Pennock, a Social Security judge based in Miami.

She worried that the two women might have improved if they’d lived long enough to be awarded disability benefits. In an especially absurd twist, even death didn’t remove one of those women from Social Security’s backlog. The woman had a child who might receive the woman’s disability benefits post-mortem. So Pennock said she had to hold a hearing to decide if a dead person was legally disabled.

“I really wonder if what we’re doing is effective at all. If it helps at all,” Pennock said, after a day of hearing cases and trying to reduce her share of the backlog. “If, based on the amount of evidence we get, my decision is any better than flipping a coin.”

A list of ailments

“She suffers from coronary artery disease, as well as depression, schizophrenia, migraines,” said the lawyer, a man with close-cropped hair whose firm advertises
for frustrated Social Security applicants on the Internet. Also, he said, “she suffered an injury at work,” falling in a way that hurt her side.

In a small, spartan courtroom in Miami, this lawyer was laying out the maladies of a 52-year-old woman, who sat beside him in a gray zip-up sweatshirt. He was not done.

The woman also had a torn shoulder tendon, he said. And back pain. “Rules out any work,” the lawyer said, summing up the effect of these conditions.

The woman, a former Transportation Security Administration screener, had applied for disability benefits two years ago. She was scraping by without a paycheck, living with her mother and taking money from her brothers. And waiting. Now, at last, she would see a judge.

“Financially, I’m very stressed out,” the woman said outside the courtroom. Normally, Social Security hearings like this one are closed to the public. But the woman allowed a reporter to attend hers on the condition that her name not be used. “I can’t do anything at all,” she said. “I rely on too many people.”

The judge for her case was Timothy Maher, a lawyer who had been on the bench for six years. This was his second case of the afternoon. The first had been a burned-out cocaine addict who rambled incoherently. His case remains undecided.

Now, an hour later, Maher was on to a new person’s constellation of troubles. The woman’s attorney had listed seven different ailments — any one of which might render her legally disabled. Maher started with the coronary artery disease.

“I don’t get treatment” for it, the woman told him.

“You’re not taking any medication for that?”

“No, sir.”

Maher asked the woman about her daily routine.

“I swim a lot,” the woman said. “When I have tension, I go out . . . and swim.”

There were now six different ailments that might render this woman disabled. The judge mentally crossed heart disease off the list and moved on to the others.

“There’s a pretty good chance you don’t have a terrible heart condition” if you’re swimming that much, Maher said later, in an interview after the hearing was over.

The process

The waiting list at this Social Security office is emblematic of a class of terrible
backlogs across the bureaucracy. Some of the others move even slower. The average case at this Social Security office will take 422 days to decide, but an appeal at the VA will take 957 days. A patent application usually waits more than 800 days for a decision.

At Social Security, however, the experience of waiting in the backlog can be especially painful — because disability applicants typically have little or no income while they wait.

“It’s a nightmare,” said Patrick McGarvey, 48, a former pharmaceutical-plant worker from Riegelsville, Pa., who suffers from problems in his back and neck. He spent seven years waiting before he was granted disability benefits in 2012, bouncing between judges and appeals.

“You have no money coming in. The bills are piling up, and your credit is shot, instantly. It’s just maddening. There’s nothing you can do. There’s nothing at all you can do,” he said. Even two years later, McGarvey is still digging out of his financial hole.

On Thursday morning, his power was turned off.

For former workers declared disabled, the average monthly benefit is $1,145, which equals $13,740 annually (those with no work history receive less). The best estimate of the amount the government spends during the lifetime of a disabled beneficiary is $300,000.
For those seeking disability benefits, the process works like this: First, a person fills out an application and tells Social Security how to track down their medical records.

Then state-government officials — paid by Social Security — read the paperwork and may also order an examination by an independent doctor. Then the officials decide if the person is disabled.

At this first step, there are about 633,000 cases waiting for an answer. Each decision takes 109 days. By Social Security’s standards, this is classified as “no backlog at all.”

At the end of this step, 32 percent of cases are approved for benefits. The rest can appeal.

If they do, most of them go on to the second step. (In 10 states, applicants can skip to the third.) Another official reads the paperwork again and decides if the first official was wrong.

There are about 170,000 people waiting on this step. The average wait time is 107 days. Only about 11 percent of the applications are approved.

The rest can appeal — and demand to see a judge in person. Eventually.

The judges they see are
appointed for life and earn between $118,000 and $165,000 per year. They are the moral centerpiece of this system: a symbol that the government intends to apply the old American ideal of due process before the law to the vast new caseloads of the American welfare state.

They are also the system’s biggest problem — a 40-year-old clog in the pipe.

“The only time they say ‘Yes’ is after two teams of actually trained people say ‘No,’” said Richard Pierce, a law professor at George Washington University who has become one of the system’s biggest critics.

Pierce believes that the government should eliminate the judges altogether and just let the bureaucrats with the paperwork decide. He said that the main thing these hearings bring to the process — that face-to-face interaction between judges and applicants — often adds only pathos, not useful information.

“What they are, are lawyers who don’t know diddly s--- about medicine, have no training whatsoever,” Pierce said. “They call ’em judges. They wear black robes. They don’t have the slightest idea what . . . they’re doing.”

**Skepticism from the bench**

The judge asked the woman in the gray zip-up sweatshirt why she stopped working.

“I got schizophrenic toward the end,” the woman said, recounting her last days at the TSA. “And one day I decided to just quit. I resigned.”

Maher, the judge, had spent three hours reading this woman’s medical records. That reading had left him skeptical. Her mental health tended to stabilize when she was being treated.

“Can you picture yourself going back to work?” he asked her.

“I try to,” the woman said. “The only
BIG BACKLOGS WAITING TO BE PROCESSED

The amount of disability claims pending at the Social Security Administration in 2014 is larger than case backlogs at other federal agencies, but processing times are not as long.

** Problems arise **

At Social Security headquarters, officials say their enormous backlog is mainly caused by factors outside their control.

First, they say, there was a surge of new disability applications, from broken-down baby boomers and people left jobless by the Great Recession. The judges’ incoming caseload surged from 589,449 in fiscal 2008 to 810,715 in fiscal 2014.

At the same time, Social Security officials say, in some years Congress sent them hundreds of millions of dollars less than they asked for in funding. Last year’s government shutdown also idled most of their operation for more than a week, letting cases pile up.

“We have a proven track record of getting the job done when we have adequate and sustained funding,” said Glenn Sklar, who runs the office that oversees the judges, formally called the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review. “We just haven’t had adequate and sustained funding for the past few years.”

This may be a slight overstatement of the office’s track record.
Indeed, it has been running behind since at least 1975, when Congress complained about a “huge backlog” of 103,000 cases. After that, the backlog rose and fell from year to year. But mainly it rose: to 160,000 by 1990. Then to 311,000 in 2000.

Along the way, Congress toyed with imposing deadlines on judges but decided not to risk rushing them. Social Security tried to impose systemwide reforms, but they often fizzled because of the logistics of changing something so big.

By 2008, the backlog had hit 760,000, and the wait time had stretched to 514 days.

In response, Social Security decided to try a simpler approach. It would push the judges to work faster and decide at least 500 cases a year.

“How many cases could you do in a day? You know, if you’ve got a well-run office, you could probably do three cases a day. That’s 15 a week. You average that out, it takes you to above 500 to 700 cases a year,” said Michael Astrue, who ran Social Security from 2007 to 2013. He said that an expert judge should be able to handle one case — start to finish — in 21/2 hours. He added: “These cases generally don’t take very long.”

Judges complained about harassing e-mails from their bosses. But the push worked, aided by other reforms: a shift from paper to electronic records and the expansion of hearings by video link.

The backlog fell to 705,000 in 2010. The wait time dropped, too, eventually falling below a year.

But a problem appeared.

The problem was rooted in a flaw in the system. Judges complain that saying “yes” is a lot easier — and faster — than saying “no.” A negative decision often requires a lengthier write-up, which goes through all the different ailments that might have rendered this person disabled. That means 10 pages of text to prepare for a future appeal. A “yes” decision is rarely appealed. So, they say, it takes less writing.

“So, what happens when you’re pressed for time? You end up paying cases,” said Thomas Snook, a judge who has worked in the Miami office for 17 years and has been active in the judges union.

During the push for speed, Snook said, he had been rushed into a decision he regrets. The applicant was a man who claimed disability because part of his leg had been amputated. Snook was skeptical because of something in the file: The man had been convicted of attempted murder. Twice. Which seemed pretty good evidence that he was capable of physical exertion.

Snook rejected the case at first, but then a higher-level appeals judge sent it back. On the second go-round, a medical expert testified that the man was debilitated by depression. There were other cases waiting. He caved.

“Now, why did I pay it?” Snook said. “I could have taken the time to make it clear the guy wasn’t depressed. But ... I was under a lot of pressure to move it along, and I gave up. And I’m human.”

Across the system, judges approved
more than half of the cases they saw — up to 62 percent, according to Social Security’s figures. Congressional investigators found 92 judges were even more generous: They had been saying yes to 90 percent of their appeals.

Some of them didn’t seem to be giving these cases a lot of deep thought.

“During claimant’s testimony, snoring is heard in the background. Attorney: ‘I just want to put on the record … that it appears as though the administrative law judge is sleeping at the moment;’” read Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) during a House hearing this year. She was questioning a West Virginia judge named Harry C. Taylor and reading a transcript of a 2009 hearing where Taylor allegedly fell asleep at the bench. “No response. The [judge] apparently continues sleeping.”

“Ma’am, I don’t recall the specifics of that hearing,” Taylor said. Between 2005 and 2013, the House oversight committee found, Taylor repeatedly decided more than 1,000 cases per year — and he approved about 94 percent of the cases that came to him. That meant he handed out a total of $2.5 billion in benefits. The House committee said Taylor had been suspended for 14 days at one point for sleeping on the bench. But Social Security records seem to indicate that Taylor is still serving as a judge. He declined to comment for this story.

As the decades passed — and officials struggled to make big fixes in the system — judges say they were also troubled by a number of other unfixed flaws.

They were small things. But they made slow work slower.

For one thing, the system requires most judges to read all the medical records themselves, without the help of a dedicated clerk. That leaves them digging for valuable information in reams of hospital jargon and doctors’ chicken scratch.

“You look for the shape of the words. … It looks like, well, that could be ‘severe,’ and that could be ‘anxiety,’” said Jessica Pugrud, a judge based in Billings, Mont. Pugrud said in an average week, she might go over 3,700 pages of medical records. She drinks five-hour energy shots on the bench so she doesn’t nod off after late nights of reading.

“I’ve had times [where] I look at my notes, and my handwriting would get really small and trail off,” Pugrud said. “So I wasn’t quite asleep, but I was getting there.”

Another problem in the system is the government’s enormous, outdated list of all of America’s jobs.

That book is the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. It lists a “web worker” as someone who repairs fishing nets (a heavy-duty job, the book says, fit only for the strong and able). Its flaws mean judges must sometimes burn extra time, asking vocational experts to look in the old book for jobs that have parallels in the modern economy.

Social Security officials say they’re working on a replacement. It might be

Today, Social Security officials seem to have backed off their push for faster decisions. They’ve now limited all judges to 720 cases a year and imposed new checks to make sure the “yes” decisions are as well thought-out as the “noes.”

Today, judges approve just 44 percent of cases, a marked decline. At the same time — even as the agency has hired dozens more judges — the backlog has reached its highest level in history. It increased by 13,000 people in the first half of this month alone.

The head of this office was asked: When does he expect the backlog will be gone?

“I don’t have those numbers in front of me,” Sklar said. “And certainly it’s going to be very closely tied to Congress.”

The end?

In the Miami courtroom, Maher called the vocational expert on a speaker phone. The judge laid out a long list of conditions that a hypothetical job would have to meet in order for someone like this woman to hold it.

No heavy lifting or repetitive arm-raising (because of her shoulder). No contact with the public (because of her mental conditions). Did that job exist?

“Yes, sir,” the expert said. He read off names and code numbers from the 23-year-old book. “Housekeeper, 323.687-014... Mail sorter, 209.687-026... Cleaner, 381.687-018.”

The judge wasn’t finished. He added another condition. Was there any job that would fit all those conditions and allow someone to miss one day a month for health flare-ups?

No, the expert on the phone said.

“If I find against you, you have the right to an appeal,” Maher told the woman when the hearing ended. “The appeal will cost you nothing.”

Afterward, Maher said he would spend at least four hours writing up his decision, which would mean he spent at least seven hours on this case alone.

“Sisyphus,” he said.

Outside the courtroom, the woman in the gray sweatshirt said she was optimistic that Maher would award her benefits at last. But if not, she said, “I’m going to have to appeal it.”

If she did, the next step would be Social Security’s Appeals Council, where other judges would read her file and decide if Maher had made a mistake.

That would mean another wait, in another backlog. There are 150,383 people waiting for Appeals Council decisions. The average wait there is 374 days.

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Conservative Catholics see victory on gay, divorce

The biggest backlog in the federal government

**DISABILITY CLAIMS CLOGGING THE SYSTEM**

Last year, 2 million new disability claims were filed with the Social Security Administration, which decides whether a claimant is disabled and thus eligible for benefits. Of those, 1.2 million, or about 62 percent, have not been completed. That's up slightly from 2013, when 58 percent of the claims were pending.

Despite a push for speed, the average claim is still waiting nearly six months.

Some claimants — often adds only pathos, not useful information — can plead their case in person, but 80 percent of the cases require a lengthier write-up, which goes through all the evidence that he was capable of physical exertion.

A judge for her case was Timothy Maher, a Social Security judge based in Miami. When they make a ruling, they must decide whether the person is disabled. Officials decide if the person is disabled.

There are about 170,000 people waiting on this massive and emotional search called off a search for the teen who was scraping by without a job, she said, summing up the effect of these conditions. "I don't have those numbers in front of me," Sklar said, recounting her last days at the TSA. "And one day I just knew that my life was over." The judge for her case was Timothy Maher, a Social Security judge based in Miami. When they make a ruling, they must decide whether the person is disabled. Officials decide if the person is disabled.

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In June, NASA finished work on a huge construction project here in Mississippi: a $349 million laboratory tower, designed to test a new rocket engine in a chamber that mimicked the vacuum of space.

Then NASA did something odd. As soon as the work was done, it shut the tower down. The project was officially “mothballed” — closed up and left empty — without ever being used.

“You lock the door, so nobody gets in and hurts themselves,” said Daniel Dumbracher, a former NASA official who oversaw the project.

The reason for the shutdown: The new tower — called the A-3 test stand — was useless. Just as expected. The rocket program it was designed for had been canceled in 2010.

But, at first, cautious NASA bureaucrats didn’t want to stop the construction on their own authority. And then Congress — at the urging of a senator from Mississippi — swooped in and ordered the agency to finish the tower, no matter what.

The result was that NASA spent four more years building something it didn’t need. Now, the agency will spend about $700,000 a year to maintain it in disuse.

The empty tower in Mississippi is evidence of a breakdown at NASA, which used to be a glorious symbol of what an American bureaucracy could achieve.
In the space race days of the 1960s, the agency was given a clear, galvanizing mission: Reach the moon within the decade. In less than seven, NASA got it done.

Now, NASA has become a symbol of something else: what happens to a big bureaucracy after its sense of mission starts to fade.

In the past few years, presidents have repeatedly scrubbed and rewritten NASA’s goals. The moon was in. The moon was out. Mars was in. Now, Mars looks like a stretch. Today, the first goal is to visit an asteroid.

Jerked from one mission to another, NASA lost its sense that any mission was truly urgent. It began to absorb the vices of less-glamorous bureaucracies: Officials tended to let projects run over time and budget. Its congressional overseers tended to view NASA first as a means to deliver pork back home and second as a means to deliver Americans into space.

In Mississippi, NASA built a monument to its own institutional drift.

The useless tower was repeatedly approved by people who, in essence, argued that the American space program had nothing better to do.

“What the hell are they doing? I mean, that’s a lot of people’s hard-earned money,” said David Forshee, who spent 18 months as the general foreman for the pipe fitters who helped build the tower. Like other workmen, he had taken pride in this massive, complicated project — only to learn that it was in mothballs.

“It’s heartbreaking to know that, you know, you thought you’d done something good,” Forshee said. “And all you’ve done is go around in a damn circle, like a dog chasing his tail.”

Creating a vacuum

Seven years ago, when the tower still seemed like a useful idea, the governor came to the groundbreaking. So did a congressman. Two senators. On a hot morning in August 2007, next to a canal full of alligators, somebody laid down AstroTurf and
clean dirt over the sandy Mississippi soil. The dignitaries stood on the fake grass. They stuck gold-painted shovels into the fake earth.

They said they were starting one of the greatest journeys in human history.

Right here — at a 30-story tower rising out of the woods — NASA would test the rockets that would take Americans back to the moon. And then even farther, on to Mars.

“You who live in Mississippi and who work at this space center will see that frontier opening,” said Shana Dale, who was then NASA’s second-in-command. “You’ll hear it, too: the rumble of moon-bound rockets being tested here. The thunder of possibility; the roar of freedom.”

This tower was intended to test a rocket engine called the J-2X. The plan was for a spacecraft to carry this engine, un-lit, up out of the Earth’s atmosphere. Then the engine would ignite and propel the spacecraft toward the moon.

But before NASA stuck an astronaut on top of that idea, it wanted to test the engine. In the near-vacuum at the edge of space, would the whole thing vibrate, crack or blow apart?

There was only one way to know.

“You have to fake the vacuum,” said Dumbacher, the former NASA official.

To do that, NASA had to create a giant pressure cooker on stilts. Workers would build a sealed metal container, big enough to hold a school bus. Then they would install it in the middle of a 300-foot-tall steel tower, reinforced to resist 1 million pounds of upward thrust from a rocket.

Then they would put the rocket engine in the container. Seal the door. Suck out the air. And light the fire.

At the beginning, NASA projected that the tower would cost $119 million. It was supposed to be finished by late 2010.

**Giving up on the moon**

Back in Washington, it wasn’t long after the groundbreaking that NASA officials began to hear about problems with the project.

For one thing, the estimated cost increased to $163 million. To $185 million. Then beyond that. NASA’s inspector general said the design contractor, Jacobs Engineering Group, blamed changes in the design, plus unforeseen increases in the cost of labor and steel.

NASA paid the higher price. The builders kept building.

“I don’t think the contractors were attempting a scam. I think, in all honesty, that they did not understand the magnitude of the job,” said one former senior NASA official who was familiar with the project. “I know people involved as human beings. I do not think they were trying to take advantage” of NASA, the former official said.

Jacobs declined to comment.

At NASA, as at other large government agencies, this was an old institutional vice: making a big purchase, then letting the cost get bigger and bigger. Studies had
found that when NASA projects ran way late or way over budget, the agency rarely took the hard step of killing them.

**Paying and paying**

“The [International] Space Station was sold as an $8 billion program. It ended up costing $100 billion. The Webb telescope was sold as a $1 billion program. It’s now up to $8 billion,” said Lori Garver, who served as the No. 2 official at NASA from 2009 until last year. “It usually works out for them,” she said, meaning the contractors get paid, even when they raise the price.

Decision-making about NASA was twisted, she said, because of a mismatch between its huge funding and its muddled sense of purpose. “There’s no ‘why’ ” in NASA anymore, Garver said.

Instead, she said, there was only a “how,” a sense that something big still needed to be done. “And the ‘how’ is all about the [construction] contracts and the members of Congress.”

At the same time that the test stand was

“It's heartbreaking to know that . . . you thought you'd done something good,” said David Forshee, who spent 18 months as the general foreman for the pipe fitters who helped build the tower. “And all you've done is go around in a damn circle, like a dog chasing his tail.”
NASA’s mothballed test towers

Earlier this year, NASA put a brand-new, $349 million tower meant to test-fire rocket engines – in “mothballs” without using it once. The agency was already paying to maintain five other disused test stands, some idle since the 1990s.

**Reason for declining use:**
- Designed for Constellation rocket program, which was canceled in 2010.
- Diminished need to test large propulsion systems.
- Diminished need to test “hypergolic” rocket engines.
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*The size of the circle represents the annual maintenance cost*
busting its budget, NASA had a much bigger problem to deal with. The whole effort to return to the moon — a suite of projects called “Constellation,” which included the A-3 tower and the engines it was meant to test — was falling deeply behind.

That program had begun in 2004, with a call from President George W. Bush. “We will undertake extended human missions to the moon as early as 2015,” Bush said then.

But its funding never matched its ambitions. The nation’s ETA on the moon was repeatedly pushed back. By 2009, a study commissioned by President Obama found that — at its current budget — NASA might not get a man back to the moon until the 2030s.

“They were trying to do more work than they had money to do. And they tried to make it up by slipping” the due date further and further into the future, said Norman R. Augustine, a former chief executive of Lockheed Martin, who led the study.

What was left was a choice, he said. “We have to decide in this country whether we want a jobs program,” he said, “or a space program.”

Finally, in early 2010, Obama made a stunning announcement.

He wanted to give up on the moon. In fact, he wanted to scrap the entire Constellation program, including the rocket engines that the Mississippi tower was meant to test.

At that point, NASA officials said, about $200 million in federal money had been committed to the Mississippi project. But the thing was still nowhere near done. In fact, officials said, it might need another year and a half of work.

What was left was a choice.

“If it didn’t look like we were going to use it again, I would have stopped it right there. Just to save the money,” said Douglas Cooke, the NASA official who was tasked with making that decision. He was a lifer, 35 years in.

In the spring of 2010, Cooke was not ready to kill the tower.

After all, Obama had only proposed killing the Constellation program. Congress hadn’t signed off. In fact, lawmakers already were howling, outraged that home-district projects might be cut. What if lawmakers decided to save that rocket engine that fired in space after all?

Just to be safe, Cooke kept it going. “If we just stopped work on it, in the middle, it was going to be a pretty high recovery cost, to go back and restart it,” he said. “So we just decided to go ahead.”

Keeping eyes on the prize

In Mississippi, construction continued without a break. To the workers on the ground, the test stand was looking like a major achievement — a demonstration of what NASA and America and they were capable of.

First, they put up the steel. There was 4 million pounds of it, with holes for 450,000 bolts — a thicket of metal so dense that workers joked about a “bird test.” Any
bird that tried to fly straight through it would conk into a beam.

For workers, the job was hard because the structure was naked. No ladders. No railings. No floors. To build it, they had to stand on the bare skeleton itself, high enough in the air that the swinging steel blended in with the passing clouds.

“You’re standing on a steel beam 100 feet in the air,” said James Blackburn, whose company, then called Lafayette Steel Erector, worked on this phase of the project. “The crane is swinging, one of these large steel members is coming toward you. … As the clouds are moving by, this piece is moving at you, your brain easily gets confused.”

After the steel went up, the workers attached the sealed metal container. The hardest part to build was the 120,000-pound door. It had to swing open to let the rocket engine in, then swing shut and hold up under 40 pounds per square inch of pressure from the atmosphere outside.

“You stop and realize 40 psi is — what’s 40 times 144?” Jasper Reaves asked aloud at American Tank & Vessel, in the basement of a grand mansion in Mobile, Ala.

“Five thousand two hundred sixty
pounds” per square inch, said William Cutts, the company’s chief executive, working the calculator.

“… per square foot,” Reaves, the chief engineer, finished the sentence. “That’s a hell of a lot of pressure on this thing.” Reaves gestured toward a photo of the door, crosshatched with a grid of steel bars. It looked like the door to a supervillain’s jail cell. “So that’s all to make the door keep its shape.”

Just the paint job was enormous. It took two days for a man hanging in a “spider basket” to paint one wide stripe from bottom to top. Then he moved over a few feet and started at the bottom of another section.

But the payoff would be enormous, too.

Years later, they would have touched the thing that touched the thing that put humans on another planet.

“I mean, you talk about something neat,” said Brent Anthony, who spent days inspecting the stand, hanging in a basket that swung unnervingly in the breeze. “You’re talking about building something that’s going to help us go to Mars.”

In the final years of the project, however, word began to filter out on the job site. The thing they were working on might not be needed after all. Not for Mars. Not for anything.

“Yeah, yeah. It was a pretty strange feeling. To know that we were working on a project that, you know, seemed like that was just the local politician’s pet project but didn’t necessarily fit into the national scheme. Well, I don’t think the rank and file really had a morale issue with that. You know, to them, it was another construction project,” said Joel Ellis, a contractor who helped install the pipes on the stand.

For Ellis personally, the key was to take pride in the work, even if the work wasn’t ever used. “There’s no sense in dwelling on it,” he said.

Sealing the tower’s fate

In the summer of 2010, Congress saved the tower in Mississippi for good.

It happened without anybody mentioning the project’s name aloud.

“This is a big day for America,” said then-Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Tex.), as it was about to happen. Hutchison was speaking in July 2010 at a meeting of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

“We’re doing the right thing for America. For our economy. For our creativity,” she said. “For our science. And for our security.”

Hutchison was announcing a new compromise with the White House that would finally settle the fight over Constellation. Constellation was dead. Instead, the senators were telling NASA to build something that they had just made up: a “Space Launch System” (jokers at NASA call it the “Senate Launch System”).

The new plan for NASA was, as usual, long on “how” and short on “why.”

The senators were clear about what
they wanted NASA to do: keep some Constellation-era projects going, with all their salaries and spending, and try to integrate them into a new system.

But what was the goal of all that? The moon was off the table. Instead, NASA is now focused on a less impressive rock: an asteroid. Sometime in the 2020s, NASA wants to capture one about the size of a house, and then have astronauts zoom up and examine it. This was not a mission chosen to captivate the world’s imagination. It was a mission chosen to use the leftovers that Congress had told NASA to reheat. (Mars remains a distant goal: At the earliest, NASA might get there in the 2030s.)

At first, the Senate’s new plan looked bad for the tower in Mississippi. At best, it now would be a project built on spec: erected in the hope that someday NASA might return to the idea of a giant rocket engine that fired in a vacuum.

But in the committee room, Hutchison was still talking.

“I move that the following amendments to the NASA reauthorization bill be adopted,” she was saying. “Wicker Two, as modified. Wicker Three … and Wicker Four,” Hutchison said.

“All those in favor?” said Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.), the committee chairman.

Everybody said aye.

“Opposed?”

Nobody said anything.

“It does appear to the chair that the ayes have it,” Rockefeller said.

“Sherlock Holmes, you are,” Hutchison said.

And that was it. “Wicker Three” was an amendment sponsored by Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.). His amendment said NASA “shall complete construction and activation of the A-3 test stand with a completion goal of September 30, 2013.”

That language was included in the bill that passed the committee. Then the Senate, then the House. In October 2010, Obama signed it into law.

“Administrations come and go. I think it makes sense not to leave a partially constructed asset sitting there,” Wicker said this month in an interview in a hall outside the Senate chamber. “I do believe, a decade from now, we’ll look back and see that it has been used in a very positive way.” He did not name a specific NASA program that he believed would use it.

In a separate interview this year, Hutchison — who is now retired — said she couldn’t remember how Wicker managed to get his amendment included in that compromise.

So how did he do it?

In the Capitol hall, the senator burst out laughing.

“Just talented legislating,” he said, and then walked away.

Test stand, at a standstill

Work on the tower finally concluded this past summer. By then, the project had cost $349 million, which was nearly three times the original NASA estimate. Con-
struction had lasted almost seven years, which was 3½ years longer than first expected.

But at last, the A-3 test stand was done.

Or mostly done.

“A-3 could not be used for testing right now, if we wanted to,” said Dumbacher, the NASA official, who left in July to become a professor at Purdue University. He said instruments still need to be installed, and the pressure vessel needs to be tested to see if it would hold a vacuum.

How much work would it take to get it ready?

“Probably another two to three years, I would guess,” Dumbacher said. (A current NASA spokesman gave a slightly shorter time frame, saying that “probably less than two years would be required.”) But, he said, Congress had assured NASA behind the scenes that this stage of completion would be enough to satisfy lawmakers. So construction work ended on June 27, and workers began the job of mothballing the stand.

The dignitaries did not come back to see that.

“There was no ceremony,” a NASA spokesman said.

The fact that the tower was going to be mothballed was revealed in an inspector general’s report in January.

For now, the stand does not seem likely to be needed anytime soon. NASA says it has no rockets, even in development, that would require the kind of test this tower does.

So the tower stand has taken its place on NASA’s long list of living dead. Last year, the agency’s inspector general found six other test stands that were either in “mothball” status or about to be. Some hadn’t been used since the 1990s. Together, those six cost NASA more than $100,000 a year to maintain.

Forshee, the pipe-fitting foreman, had no idea. He had left the tower job years ago, had gone to work in Montana and then had come back to Mississippi to build a firehouse. But he had kept a jacket with the NASA logo, which he had been given on the tower project. He savored the idea that his kids might one day see an American walk on Mars and know that their father helped make it possible.

Then, in July, Forshee got an odd job offer. Could he come to Stennis Space Center to work on a new rocket test stand?

Forshee was confused. Didn’t he just build one of those?

“They told me, ‘Hey, you know, they mothballed A-3.’ I said, ‘What?’ ” he recalled in an interview at the bar at a restaurant in this industrial city of Gulfport. “And they said, ‘Yeah, they’re gonna do this one’ ” instead, he said.

It turned out that the engines required for the new Space Launch System needed a new test stand, with no vacuum involved. So NASA is renovating another stand just a short distance away from the A-3, called the B-2. That project is supposed to cost $134 million.
Forshee is a tea party supporter, somebody who hates for government money to be misspent. And here, he sees, it was misspent on him. After his interview, he called a reporter back to be sure he had it right.

“They’re just saying they spent $350 million for no reason?” he asked.

Yes, he was told.

“Well,” he said. “Nice.” (He took the job at the new test stand anyway, to be sure the work stayed with his union local: “If we don’t do this work, then they’re going to give it to Local 60 out of New Orleans.”)

NASA would not allow a reporter to visit the disused tower up close. The only way to see it at all was to pay $10 at the visitor center and take the official Stennis Space Center bus tour.

On the tour, the guide drove by several test stands left over from the glory days of the 1960s, and recounted how exhaust billowed and the earth shook. The bus drove by the B-2 stand, now under construction.

Then the bus passed a skeletal, white-painted tower, alone in the distance.

“The one to the left there is called the A-3,” the guide said.

“So what does that one do?”

“It actually does not have a customer,” the guide said. “So it’s just kind of hanging out right now.”

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The following correction was published on Sunday, December 22, on page A2:

CORRECTIONS

- A Dec. 16 Page One article about NASA spending $349 million to complete a now-mothballed rocket-engine test tower in Mississippi incorrectly described the pressure that the door of a sealed vessel on the tower, used to mimic the vacuum of space, was designed to resist. The door was designed to resist 40 pounds per square inch of internal pressure, not external pressure from the atmosphere. The story also incorrectly quoted American Tank & Vessel chief executive William Cutts, who helped design the vessel, in giving a total figure for how many pounds per square foot the door was designed to resist. It is 5,760 pounds per square foot, not 5,260.
Despite uselessness, tower was repeatedly approved

NASA's $319 million monument to its drift

Construction of test tower continued after select project was shelved.

For one thing, the estimated cost of the project increased from $250 million to $319 million. For another, the project suffered from prolonged delays. The original estimate was for completion by 2007. The project was not completed until 2010.

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