

Calls mount for VA head's resignation in wake of damning report on US veteran care

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Calls mounted Thursday for the resignation of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric Shinseki following the release Wednesday of a preliminary report by the VA Inspector General showing that VA officials falsified records to hide the amount of time US veterans have waited for medical appointments. More than 100 members of Congress have demanded Shinseki's resign, with growing numbers of Democrats joining Republicans calling for his ouster.

White House press secretary Jay Carney said Thursday that President Obama wants to see the results of the inspector general's inquiry into the charges as well as an internal audit Shinseki is conducting. However, a White House official speaking on condition of anonymity told CNN that the VA secretary, who has been placed on "probation" by the administration, remains on "thin ice" with the president.

The VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) interim report reveals that patients waiting for treatment at the Phoenix Veteran's Hospital waited an average of 114 days for an initial appointment. This finding grossly exceeds the averages reported by the hospital's officials, who likely cooked the books in order to receive awards and salary increases based on the false numbers.

The report comes amidst an outpouring of public accusations and controversy surrounding the hospital, which has been accused by its own doctors of at least 40 preventable deaths purportedly resulting from the delays in health care service to veterans. The scandal has already led to the resignation of leading VA officials.

The veteran organization Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America called the OIG report "damning and outrageous," adding, "The VA's problems are broad and deep, and President Obama and his team

haven't demonstrated they can fix it."

Shinseki stated in an official release that he respects the report of the OIG and found its findings to be "reprehensible." He said he has already placed several Phoenix administrators on leave and ordered the immediate triage of the 1,700 untreated veterans who were not placed on the electronic waiting list. He also said he has directed VA to complete "a nationwide access review" to ensure a full understanding of policy and procedure. News reporters have found that the number of staffers working on electronic scheduling at Phoenix have increased from two to six.

A rare late-night hearing was held Wednesday before the House Veterans Affairs Committee into the scandal. VA Assistant Secretary for Health Thomas Lynch testified before the hearing, which began around 7:30 p.m. and ended shortly before midnight. Committee chair Rep. Jeff Miller (Republican of Florida) last week ordered subpoenas to produce the testimony of VA figures, including Lynch.

Miller and others are calling for a criminal investigation of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Senator John McCain told reporters that "if these allegations are true people should be going to jail, not just resigning their positions."

Growing numbers of Congressional Democrats facing difficult campaigns in the mid-term elections have joined the call for Shinseki's resignation. The number of Senate Democrats calling for his ouster reached 11 on Thursday, following statements Wednesday evening urging his resignation by two of the most imperiled House Democrats—Ron Barber (Arizona) and Carol Shea-Porter (New Hampshire).

These impassioned calls for the nation to "do right" by America's veterans come from politicians who have overwhelming supported the wars in Afghanistan and

Iraq that have killed thousands of soldiers, and left tens of thousands more with post-traumatic stress disorder, without limbs and with other debilitating injuries.

The VA OIG report is only the latest in a long series of warnings to VA officials to improve the scheduling methods that have left veterans without treatment. The OIG reports that since 2005 it has issued a total of 18 reports identifying on both national and local levels “deficiencies in scheduling resulting in lengthy waiting times and the negative impact on patient care.”

These are warnings that the VA has not heeded, especially in the Phoenix Health Care System (HCS). The newest report substantiates “serious conditions at the Phoenix HCS,” where the OIG not only found that 1,400 veterans had not yet been scheduled for a primary care appointment, but that a further 1,700 did not even appear on the facility’s electronic waiting list. The OIG stated that such practices leave these veterans at risk of being “forgotten or lost in the Phoenix HCS’s convoluted scheduling process.”

These findings also reveal that VA officials have provided false numbers in their annual statistics, which claimed in 2013 that the average wait time for a primary care appointment was a mere 24 days, with only 43 percent waiting more than 14 days for their initial appointment. Not only did the OIG find this average number to be 91 days less than the sample they collected of 226 veterans, but they also found that approximately 84 percent of these patients waited longer than 14 days.

The fact that multiple types of scheduling practices were identified at the Phoenix HCS led the OIG to conclude that “secret” wait lists have been created by local officials. This practice has been found in other VA hospitals outside of Phoenix. The OIG has meanwhile announced that it has increased the number of VA health care facilities it is investigating to 42 nationwide.

In Florida, Governor Rick Scott is filing a lawsuit against the VA in order to gain access to facilities that have denied the entrance of inspectors. The VA hospital in Gainesville, Florida reportedly placed three employees on leave after an audit found the names of more than 200 veterans on a handwritten list. News has also been released that the commander in charge of the US Army main hospital at Fort Bragg, North Carolina was relieved of command and that three other officials

were suspended over problems with patient care. A colonel in charge of active-duty Womack Army Medical Center was also dismissed on Tuesday.



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