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Phoenix VA staff placed on leave

American Legion agrees with secretary’s decision, calls for speedy and thorough investigation into allegations of secret waiting list.

WASHINGTON (May 2, 2014) -- Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki granted a request by his own VA Office of Inspector General, and has placed Phoenix VA Health Care System director Sharon Helman and two others on administrative leave, effective May 1.

Helman faces allegations that she was aware, and defended the use of, a secret list of patients who waited many months for the scheduling of medical appointments; the list has been linked to as many as 40 patient deaths at the Phoenix VA Health Care System, according to a CNN report.

“Putting the director and other staff who may have been involved with this issue on administrative leave is a step in the right direction,” American Legion National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger said. “We don’t want VA to spend weeks on end collecting information on these allegations, and the Office of Inspector General needs the ability to do its work without distraction. The American Legion expects a thorough, fair and timely investigation that will report verifiable facts.

“Our veterans need to know exactly what happened in Phoenix, why it happened, and who was responsible. If the allegations are found to be true, the Legion expects Secretary Shinseki to hold individuals accountable for specific actions that may have resulted in preventable deaths.”

Besides Helman, Shinseki also placed the Phoenix VA facility’s associate director, Lance Robinson, on administrative leave, along with a third employee whose name was not released.

“These allegations, if true, are absolutely unacceptable,” Shinseki said in a May 1 statement, “and if the Inspector General’s investigation substantiates these claims, swift and appropriate action will be taken.”

The same day Helman and her colleagues were placed on leave, Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., wrote a letter to Shinseki regarding VA’s delayed actions in preserving possible evidence related to the Phoenix allegations.

Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, asked Shinseki to provide information about an “interim list” at the Phoenix facility, why it was created, when it was destroyed, who authorized its destruction, and the legal basis for doing so. He asked VA to respond by May 7.