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Legion: VA secret list “abhorrent”

Report says at least 40 patients died while waiting for appointments at Phoenix VA medical center that was hiding information.

WASHINGTON (April 24, 2014) -- The Department of Veterans Affairs medical center in Phoenix has been keeping a secret list of patients with long-delayed appointments, a practice which has been linked to the deaths of at least 40 veterans, according to an April 23 report by CNN.

The secret list kept by the Phoenix Veterans Affairs Health Care System was part of a cover-up created by VA managers to hide the fact that more than 1,400 veterans were forced to wait many months to see a doctor, according to CNN’s interview with a retired VA doctor, Sam Foote, who worked at the facility for 24 years.

American Legion National Commander Daniel M. Dellinger said if the allegations are true, the secret list in Phoenix “is one of the most abhorrent acts ever committed in VA history.”

The American Legion is meeting with top VA Central Office officials in Washington today to discuss the issue and the department’s response to it.

Dellinger is sending a team of American Legion experts to Phoenix next month to give local veterans a chance to discuss the quality of their VA health care. The team, part of the Legion’s System Worth Saving Task Force, will also conduct a two-day site visit to the Phoenix medical center where they will interview administrators, medical staff and patients.

Dr. Foote told CNN that the Phoenix hospital also maintains a “sham” list that it shares with VA’s Central Office in Washington, which falsely indicates Phoenix has been providing timely appointments for its patients.

“If this is all true, it is a new low in a string of breakdowns at VA medical centers – Columbia, S.C.; Augusta, Ga.; Jackson, Miss.; the list goes on – that have caused the needless deaths of individuals who served this country with honor,” Dellinger said.

“We’re going to find out what happened in Phoenix,” he added. “We are going to find out who was responsible for this secret list and if they are still working for VA. These preventable deaths keep mounting, and yet we see not a single VA manager being held accountable. The American Legion will work with Congress and the VA Central Office to find out exactly what has been happening, and why. It is not sufficient for VA to simply say it’s going to try to do better next time, without holding people accountable.”

The CNN report only fuels criticism about the department’s reputation for a lack of accountability among senior leadership, Dellinger said. “Preventable deaths, construction delays, cost overruns, gaming the system, over-medicating our veterans – where does it all end? This issue must be addressed at every level.”

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