The American Legion

For God and country

OFFICE OF THE
NATIONAL COMMANDER

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Shinseki Must Go

By Daniel M. Dellinger

A career soldier and Vietnam veteran, General Eric Shinseki has served his country well. His patriotism and sacrifice for this nation are above reproach.

His record as the head of the Department of Veterans Affairs, however, tells a story of bureaucratic incompetence and failed leadership.

As national commander of the nation's largest veterans service organization, it is with great sadness that I call for the resignations of Secretary Shinseki, Under Secretary of Health Robert Petzel and Under Secretary of Benefits Allison Hickey.

The disturbing reports coming from the Phoenix VA Medical Center are just one of what appears to be a pattern of scandals that have infected the entire system. It has been more than 20 years since The American Legion has called for the resignation of a public official. It's not something we do lightly.

We do this because of people who have been failed by the system.

James Pert served as a Marine in Vietnam. Diagnosed with skin cancer, diabetes and Post Traumatic Stress, he died as he waited for a medical appointment at the Phoenix VA Medical Center.

"How could they treat him so badly, when he served his country so honorably?" his widow, Sandy Pert, said to the International Business Times.

The interview came on the heels of a shocking CNN report that administrators at the hospital kept a secret waiting list, which included veterans waiting more than 200 days for an appointment. Not surprisingly, more than 40 veterans may have needlessly died while waiting. The other list – the one that was not kept secret, according to Dr. Sam Foote –included only patients that would be seen in the next 15 days, a reasonable period intended to make executives look good and earn generous bonuses for the top brass.

More disturbing is that this is not isolated to the Grand Canyon State. More reports of "fixed" scheduling are coming from places like Fort Collins, Colo., and Cheyenne, Wyoming.

During my testimony to a congressional subcommittee last month, I mentioned reports of patients' deaths at the Pittsburgh, Atlanta and Jackson, Miss., VA Medical Centers. While unconnected to phantom waiting lists, these deaths could also be classified as negligent.

But back to Mrs. Pert. She deserves an answer, just like all affected veterans and their loved ones deserve the very best care that this nation has to offer.

I have directed The American Legion System Worth Saving Task Force to conduct a townhall meeting at American Legion Post 41 in Phoenix on May 13. All those affected by VA's reckless bureaucracy are welcome to attend. All are welcome to tell their stories on a new platform set up at www.legion.org.

The Legion System Worth Saving Task Force will follow the townhall meeting with a visit to the Phoenix VA Medical Center on May 14-15. As national commander of The American Legion, I was able to meet with President Obama in the Oval Office a few weeks ago. I expressed The American Legion's strong concerns about service at the VA. I also discussed the unacceptable benefits backlog and poor access to facilities with Shinseki. My staff has met with top VA officials. We have found the meetings far less than satisfactory and the answers not very forthcoming. In fact, the secretary didn't seem to fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation and, at the time, didn't feel anybody needed to be replaced. If it were a private institution or if the executives were still in the military, they would be relieved of duty.

VA's senior leaders didn't seem to realize that one great tragedy of these delays and needless deaths is that they undeniably besmirch the compassionate work of thousands of dedicated VA employees and the outstanding care that many facilities provide. A few years ago, The American Legion was lauding the VA for its great care and we hope to do so again. Unfortunately, we do not see VA enacting the culture change that it so desperately needs with the current leadership in place. Senior VA leaders have isolated themselves from the media and, more importantly, from answering to their shareholders, America's veterans.

We look forward to hearing the results of the VA Inspector General's report and The American Legion welcomes Sen. Bernie Sanders' intention to hold hearings based on the IG's findings.

Like the mythical bird for which the city is named, the Phoenix VAMC needs to rise from the ashes of its bureaucratic ineptitude and provide the medical care worthy of the veterans it was built to serve.

As Mr. Pert's widow told the IB Times, "We were married for 33 years. My heart is broken. I just can't understand."

Neither can we.

Although putting Phoenix VA director Sharon Helman and two other senior executives on administrative leave is a step in the right direction, VA clearly has a widespread problem that goes beyond the misbehavior of three people. Moreover, VA has been dragging its feet in dealing with the backlog of disability claims and modernizing its records. The private sector would never tolerate such inefficiency and callousness. Neither should veterans.