From: Raughter, John B.
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VAOIG blasts Philly regional office

Evidence is found of mismanagement, employee mistrust, data manipulation and hiding mail.

WASHINGTON (April 15, 2015) A report issued today by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General (VAOIG) has substantiated gross mismanagement, negligence and misconduct at the VA Regional Office (VARO) in Philadelphia.

Violations included the entering of false dates on veterans' benefits claims, altering results on quality reviews, hiding unprocessed mail, delaying the scanning and uploading of documents, and failing to provide a safe work environment for employees.

Michael D. Helm, national commander of The American Legion said the report's findings reinforced his serious concerns about the quality of operations at the Philadelphia VARO. He sent a team of Legion experts there on March 20 to hold a town hall meeting with local veterans, and meet with leadership from the regional office.

"The fact that VA's own inspector general is finding significant instances of mismanagement at the VA Regional Office in Philadelphia is extremely disturbing to say the least," Helm said.

"Like the previous scandals revealed last year, the serious deficiencies in Philadelphia do not appear to be limited to just one place. Complaints are coming in from VARO's in Oakland, Los Angeles, Little Rock, Baltimore, Houston and Honolulu. It is far past the time for VA to restore in earnest the trust that has been lost by the veterans, whom it was intended to serve."

Allison Hickey, VA's under secretary for benefits, has characterized the OIG's report as reflecting conditions that existed more than a year ago. "We disagree with that assessment," the VAOIG report stated. Despite having concluded its onsite investigation last August, the office continues to receive "additional allegations of wrongdoing from VARO staff."

Examples include a March 2015 complaint that reported a scheme to credit VARO staff for training they did not complete, and a December 2014 complaint that the mail situation at the Philadelphia VARO had gotten worse and alleged that VARO management continues to cover up the problem.

"It is unfortunate that VA leadership, when asked, failed to describe more accurately the situation in Philadelphia," Helm said. "Such important work that means so much to the quality of life for our veterans can't be handled so incompetently."

The Philadelphia VARO administers about $4 billion in benefits payments for about 825,000 veterans and family members.

On April 22, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs will hold a hearing: "Philadelphia and Oakland: Systemic Failures and Mismanagement."

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Media contacts: Washington - Marty Callaghan:202-263-5758/202-341-8900, mcallaghan@legion.org or Indianapolis – John Raughter 317-630-1350 / 317-441-8847, jraughter@legion.org . A high resolution photo of Nat. Cmdr.Helm is available at www.legion.org.