



(February 8, 2016)

In order to further improve the lines of communication and to respond to the concerns between the National VA Council and you our members, I have established a National VA Council Briefing. This NVAC Briefing will bring you the latest news and developments within DVA and provide you with the current status of issues this Council is currently addressing. I believe that this NVAC Briefing will greatly enhance the way in which we communicate and the way in which we share new information, keeping you better informed.

Alma L. Lee
National VA Council, President

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**In This Briefing: Colorado Springs clinic 'lied and heads need to roll'**

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The Gazette Reports:

Workers at the Colorado Springs Department of Veterans Affairs clinic gave delayed care to hundreds of veterans and in some cases falsified records to make the situation appear better than it was, a report from the VA's internal watchdog found.

The VA had acknowledged long wait times at the clinic, but not to the scope found by the agency's inspector general. Investigators found that 68 percent of veterans appointments they reviewed took more than a month to get care.

"We reviewed 150 referrals for specialty care consults and 300 primary care appointments," the VA's inspector general said in the Thursday report. "Of the 450 consults and appointments, 288 veterans encountered wait times in excess of 30 days."

In more than 10 percent of the cases surveyed, investigators found, workers at the Floyd K. Lindstrom Clinic off Fillmore Street made false entries into an appointment database to make it seem like patients were getting timely care.

A federal lawmaker from Colorado Springs said the report aired "dirty laundry" that requires a House hearing.

"They lied and heads need to roll," Colorado Springs Republican U.S. Rep. Doug Lamborn said Thursday night. "I'm furious."

Investigators said in one case schedulers delayed adding a patient to a database for more than a month, making a 45-day wait look like two weeks.

"For 59 of the 288 veterans, scheduling staff used incorrect dates that made it appear the appointment wait time was less than 30 days," the report said.

For 28 veterans waiting for a primary care appointment, scheduling shenanigans showed they were given same-day appointments, but in reality waited an average of 76 days, investigators found.

A VA spokesman in Denver said he was reviewing the report. Denver VA officials responded to the document in December, concurring with the findings, documents say.

Lamborn said he had earlier been given "personal assurances" by the agency that they would fix the Colorado Springs clinic, which turned out to be false.

He said he was grateful for the inspector general's work.

"It's almost impossible from the outside to figure out when the books are being cooked," Lamborn said.

Colorado Democratic U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet lambasted the VA in a statement.

"It is intolerable that investigations continue to uncover these unacceptable practices at the VA. Our veterans deserve better," Bennet said.

Bennet said the VA must do more to control its workers and give veterans timely care.

"It's clear from this report that we must continue to demand accountability at the VA and that strong oversight is still essential," he said.

Wait times at the Colorado Springs clinic looked bad using numbers issued before the investigation. Delays for care quadrupled in one year. In November 2014, about 8 percent of local veterans waited more than a month for care, and more than 32 percent of veterans waited more than a month last November.

VA officials have blamed delayed care on hiring problems and a lack of staff, but never revealed the existence of an Inspector General's investigation nor that waiting times could be double than what they acknowledged.

Local veteran's advocates were alarmed by the report's findings.

"We're not going to turn the VA around," said retired Air Force Chief Master Sgt. William Galvan who leads a local effort to house homeless veterans on a ranch near Calhan.

Jay Magee, who runs Pointman Ministries to help veterans in crisis, said long wait times and red tape drive younger veterans from the Colorado Springs clinic, including veterans in need of mental health treatment.

"It's a sad state of affairs when you have to convince somebody that they have to try again," Magee said.

Army veteran Dennis McCormack said he knows many employees at the Colorado Springs clinic who are frustrated with chronic understaffing and bureaucratic pressure to meet unrealistic goals.

"They are stuck between a rock and a hard place," he said.

Natalie Merckens, the VA's associate health care director for eastern Colorado, told The Gazette in November that the VA is trying to cut the waits by opening the doors of the Colorado Springs clinic six days a week.

"We will have Saturday clinics and make sure we get anyone with a clinical need that's critical in to see a doctor," she said.

The report found that the VA also wasn't working to get veterans in need of care help from private physicians. Congress approved insurance-like "Veterans Choice" care in 2014 to help alleviate long waits.

But in Colorado Springs, clinic workers delayed adding scores of veterans to a list that would have gotten them private care - impacting 229 of the 450 cases reviewed, the report said.