Midwest VA Hospitals Also Had Secret Waiting Lists

John Milburn, Associated Press

The problems with delayed care and unauthorized wait lists that caused a furor at a Veterans Affairs healthcare campus in Arizona existed at several facilities in the Midwest, but in much smaller numbers, VA officials said in letters to two U.S. senators.

The Department of Veterans Affairs maintained 10 such "secret waiting lists" of military veterans in need of care at facilities in Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Indiana, the letters said. They also said at least 96 veterans waited more than 90 days for treatment at seven facilities in those states, including 26 in St. Louis and 19 in Columbia, Missouri.

The letters said that eight of the 10 lists "served to complement authorized lists to more fully support Veteran care and access." But the two other lists, including one at the Wichita facility, "placed Veterans at risk."

The information about conditions in the VA's Heartland Network was sent to U.S. Sens. Pat Roberts and Jerry Moran of Kansas late last week, as the VA released a summary of 216 site-specific audits detailing widespread falsification of waiting list records and unreported treatment delays at VA facilities nationwide. In that release, the VA did not reveal any information about conditions at individual sites.

The VA is conducting a system-wide investigation after it was found that the Phoenix VA Health Care System had about 1,700 veterans in need of care on secret waiting lists, and another that had 1,400 waited over 90 days for primary care appointments. The scandal led to the resignation last week of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki.

Roberts said Tuesday he wanted more answers about conditions at the Robert J. Dole Veterans Administration Medical Center in Wichita and the other facilities. One letter said 21 veterans waited longer for 90 days for care in Wichita; the second put that total at nine. Roberts said he had earlier been assured by VA officials there were no such problems at the hospital.

"My top priority is who is on that secret list and what is the status of their care?" Roberts said.

The letters were sent to the senators by Francisco Vasquez, director of the Dole medical center, and Dr. William P. Patterson, the director of the VA's Heartland Network. The two senators said they forwarded the information in the letters to the VA's Office of Inspector General.

The letters were first reported Monday by The Wichita Eagle. They both said the practices had been "immediately discontinued" and veterans were being contacted to ensure they are receiving the proper level of care, the letter said. It added that investigations into the issues are "ongoing."

Officials from the Wichita VA didn't immediately respond to questions Tuesday from The Associated Press.

The 61 hospitals or clinics in the VA's Heartland Network serve Kansas, Missouri and parts of Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky. The veterans who waited for care longer than 90 days included 14 in Poplar Bluff, Missouri; 12 in Kansas City; eight in a facility serving eastern Kansas and another eight in a facility serving the southern parts of Illinois and Indiana.

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