



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Semiannual Report to Congress #84

November 25, 2020

Adam Roy:

This is Adam Roy with the Office of Communications in the VA Office of Inspector General in Washington, DC. Joining me today is Inspector General Michael J. Missal to discuss the OIG's accomplishments in the final half of Fiscal Year 2020 and to get a glimpse of what he sees as the challenges ahead for Fiscal Year 2021.

Many of the OIG's recent successes are chronicled in the 84th Semiannual Report to Congress that was released recently and is available on our website: va.gov/oig. The report covers the OIG's oversight of VA programs and operations from April 1 to September 30, 2020 and details the many OIG activities during these six months.

Mr. Missal, what story does the semiannual report tell about the OIG's recent oversight activities?

IG Missal:

Adam, it tells a great story. The Semiannual Report to Congress highlights the productivity of our office in the second half of Fiscal Year 2020. It shows the significant impact we had on veterans, their families, and caregivers, as well as for taxpayers. We issued 182 reports and other publications during the last six months and opened 172 criminal investigations. Our investigations, inspections, audits, reviews, evaluations, and our other work identified more than \$3.1 billion in monetary impact, resulting in a return on investment of \$34 for every dollar expended on OIG oversight.

Adam Roy:

This has been an extraordinary reporting period. The COVID-19 pandemic was in full force, VA was struggling to manage the spread of the disease within its facilities while protecting its own workforce and expanding into its Fourth Mission of helping the nation with state and community healthcare needs during the pandemic, and the OIG was tasked with figuring out how to continue its increased oversight responsibilities safely within a new technological environment. Can you speak to those challenges?

IG Missal:

Yes, it really has been an extraordinary time and I am proud that our office continued to meet our mission of effective oversight without missing a beat. First, I want to recognize the dedicated work of VA personnel during these challenging times. I am also immensely proud of the hard work of the OIG staff to help improve VA programs and operations during this pandemic. OIG personnel adapted to the

VA Office of Inspector General

SAR #84 PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

current environment and continued to focus on issues with the greatest potential impact on veterans, their families and caregivers, VA personnel, and taxpayers.

The need for effective oversight during these challenging times has never been greater. Given the current conditions, it was necessary for our office to expand its priorities, as well as in the number of reports that assessed how COVID-19 has affected VA's programs and operations.

Despite these challenges, the quantity, quality, and impact of our reports were impressive. While the number of reports and monetary impact are important on a quantitative basis, the qualitative impact is at least as important. Our collective work has led to significant improvements in the programs and operations across VA. In this past fiscal year, we made 1,653 recommendations that will help VA improve its programs and operations for veterans.

Adam Roy:

How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the VA OIG's oversight priorities?

IG Missal:

In some ways it has. Given that COVID-19 changed the way VA operates and how veterans receive services and benefits, we had to quickly pivot our priorities to assess these changes. Our first COVID-19 project, on the access to VA medical centers and their preparedness for the pandemic, was published in March 2020, just eight days after our Office of Healthcare Inspections conducted its first site visit.

Since then, we have either published or are in the process of publishing more than 20 COVID-related reports covering the impact of the pandemic on cancelled appointments, the Veterans Crisis Line, personal protective equipment inventory, telehealth and tele-mental health, urgent care operations, and the emergency reserve of medications and supplies.

Continuing our work without a pause during a pandemic has required greater adaptability and perseverance by OIG personnel. Our staff reduced its on-site travel by conducting virtual site visits whenever possible, conducting interviews virtually, and working to minimize the time required of senior VA leaders and key personnel responsible for critical pandemic responses. We have also been innovative in the use of data analytics to better prepare and predict the areas in which we should focus our oversight work.

Adam Roy:

Can you share a few specific examples of the OIG's work over the past six months?

IG Missal:

Sure, our criminal investigators achieved noteworthy results in a number of criminal investigations, including a guilty plea in July by former VA nursing assistant Reta Mays to seven counts of second degree murder and one count of assault to commit murder in connection with the deaths of eight

VA Office of Inspector General

SAR #84 PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

veterans at the Louis A. Johnson Medical Center in Clarksburg, West Virginia. They also obtained a guilty plea by former Fayetteville, Arkansas, VA pathologist Dr. Robert Levy whose misdiagnoses while he was impaired led to incorrect diagnoses and treatment decisions that resulted in the deaths or serious injury of about 600 veterans at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks.

Another momentous criminal case involved the arrest of Georgia businessman Christopher Parris who was attempting to sell \$1.8 billion in personal protective equipment that did not exist to VA. I believe this is the largest COVID-19-related case brought by the Department of Justice to date and the largest monetary impact of a single investigation brought by our criminal investigators that I can recall.

Aside from all the COVID-related projects we continued our multifaceted assessment of VA's conversion to a new electronic health record system, which is the largest contract in VA's history. This program alone is projected to cost more than \$10 billion and take 10 years to fully implement. We also issued significant reports on veteran suicide, mental health, and VBA's quality insurance programs for disability compensation benefits. We further expanded our healthcare inspection work to include Veterans Integrated Service Networks, or VISNs, in our Comprehensive Health Inspection Program.

Adam Roy:

Looking forward, what are your priorities for Fiscal Year 2021?

IG Missal:

Looking forward, we will clearly need to continue focusing on COVID-19-related projects and the eventual recovery efforts, given the impact it is having on VA. In addition, VA is modernizing a number of its major systems, including electronic health records, supply chain, and financial management. We are proactively looking at all of these to ensure their implementation is effective. We continue to prioritize a number of areas, including veteran suicide, mental health, women veterans' issues, procurement, community care, privileging and credentialing, staffing, IT, and contracting. In all of our work, we assess leadership and governance, as deficiencies in either can result in serious issues. We will continue to be proactive to ensure we are looking at high-risk areas and use data analysis and modeling to make our work more informed and targeted.

In addition, we will continue to execute our strategic plan that focuses on five core goals: first improving the quality, management, efficiency and delivery of health care in VA facilities and the community; second ensuring veterans and their families receive accurate benefits in a timely manner; third promoting the sound stewardship of taxpayer funds and helping to reduce the risk of fraud, waste, and abuse; fourth assessing the effectiveness of leadership and governance; and fifth analyzing the quality of VA's infrastructure systems, including information technology, data security, and financial management that support VA's operations.

Fiscal Year 2020 showed us the benefits of being nimble and reacting quickly to any changes or developments at VA. I am grateful and proud to have a dedicated staff guided by our core principles of

VA Office of Inspector General

SAR #84 PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

independence, transparency, objectivity, and fairness. We look forward to continuing our work with VA, Congress, veterans service organizations, and others affected by VA's actions as we address the enormous challenges facing the department.

Adam Roy:

Inspector General Missal, thank you for your time today.

OIG podcasts are produced by the Office of Communications. You will find podcasts and all VA OIG published reports at va.gov/oig. Visit our website for more information on the Semiannual Report to Congress and the OIG's Strategic Plan. Report fraud, waste, abuse, or possible criminal activity on our website or call the OIG hotline at 1-800-488-8244.