



Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General

Evaluation of Time and Attendance of a Full-Time Physician at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center Poplar Bluff, Missouri

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) received a hotline complaint concerning the time and attendance of a full-time physician. According to the allegation, a full-time physician at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center did not always adhere to time and attendance policies from January 11, 2004, through September 21, 2005, in fulfilling his VA appointment. Specifically, the allegation was that this physician came to work late, took long lunches, and left work early.

Results

We substantiated the allegation that the full-time physician exhibited a pattern of time and attendance abuse during his scheduled tour of duty at the VA medical center. We determined that the full-time physician requested, and received approval for, authorized absences involving:

- Thirteen instances related to illness without being charged for sick leave.
- Two instances when he was absent for more than 4 hours without being charged for annual leave.

In addition to the 15 instances when the full-time physician did not request sick or annual leave, he had repeated instances of tardiness, extended lunches, and early departures.

We were unable to evaluate the full-time physician's time and attendance practices from January 11, 2004, through August 15, 2004, because medical center officials did not document authorized absences during this period. The physician resigned from VA on September 21, 2005.

We recommended that the Medical Center Director continue to provide the necessary training and monitoring to ensure that appropriate time and attendance policies are followed.

Comments

The Medical Center Director agreed with the finding and recommendation in principle and provided acceptable improvement plans. (See Appendix A, pages 5–6, for the full text of the Director's comments.)

(original signed by:)

MICHAEL L. STALEY
Assistant Inspector General for Auditing

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of our evaluation was to determine if a full-time physician adhered to time and attendance policies and if medical center procedures provided reasonable assurance that these policies were followed.

Background

On October 6, 2004, we received a hotline complaint alleging time and attendance abuse by a full-time physician at the medical center. The allegation was that the physician came to work late, took long lunches, and left work early. The full-time physician was appointed to the medical center on January 11, 2004, with a tour of duty requiring him to work 40 hours per week from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The physician resigned from VA on September 21, 2005, at the time we started our review.

Scope and Methodology

Our review focused on whether the full-time physician was experiencing problems with tardiness, extended lunches, and early departures during the period from January 11, 2004, through September 21, 2005. This period of time represents the date the physician started working at VA and the date he resigned from VA.

To accomplish our objectives, we reviewed timekeeping documents, personnel and payroll records, and patient contact records. We also reviewed VA directives applicable to time and attendance policies for full-time physicians; and interviewed medical center staff and managers to obtain information concerning program policies and procedures.

Our assessment of internal controls focused only on those controls related to our audit objective of determining whether the allegations could be substantiated and was not intended to form an opinion on the adequacy of internal controls overall; we do not render such an opinion. In all other respects, the audit was conducted in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards.

Results and Conclusions

Time and Attendance Practices Needed To Be Monitored

Findings

Although VA established time and attendance policies for full-time physicians, medical center officials did not properly monitor them to ensure that the full-time physician met the employment obligation required by his VA appointment. During the period of August 16, 2004, through September 21, 2005, medical center officials authorized 44 absences for this physician. Fifteen of the 44 absences were authorized instead of requiring the physician to take sick leave or annual leave. The remaining 29 absences consisted of repeated instances of tardiness, extended lunches, and early departures. Medical center officials told us they authorized absences if the full-time physician worked more than 4 hours during the duty day. In addition, authorized absences were not always documented because the timekeeper was unaware of documentation requirements. Results of the review showed that the full-time physician did not always work the hours established by his VA appointment.

Time and Attendance Policies. Full-time physicians normally perform duty Monday through Friday with a basic work week of 40 hours per week. The normal work week consists of five 8-hour days, exclusive of the meal period. Full-time physicians are continuously subject to call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, unless granted authorized absences. Medical center officials believed they had the authority to authorize absences for tardiness or for absences of less than 4 hours a day; and that annual or sick leave should be charged for absences of more than 4 hours a day. VA time and attendance policy states that full-time physicians are charged a full day of leave when absent for any part of a day, unless the absence is excused by medical center officials authorized to approve leave.¹

Authorized Absences Were Granted Instead of Sick Leave or Annual Leave. We identified 13 instances when the physician requested and was granted authorized absences instead of being required to take sick leave. The physician's supervisor told us these authorized absences were approved because they were for less than 4 hours each. VA Directive 5011 requires the minimum sick leave charged for full-time physicians to be 1 calendar day and multiples thereof. Federal regulations define sick leave, in part, as a leave of absence when the employee: (1) receives medical, dental, or optical examinations or treatment; (2) is incapacitated for the performance of duties by physical

¹ VA Directive 5011, Part III, Chapter 3, "*Hours of Duty and Leave*," Section 9 B (1), dated April 15, 2002.

or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, or childbirth; or (3) provides care for a family member with a health condition.²

We identified two similar circumstances with the granting of authorized absences instead of annual leave. Specifically, the physician was scheduled to work from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. on December 6, 2004, and he reported to work at 12:40 p.m. On March 21, 2005, the physician was scheduled to work from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., and he reported to work at 12:25 p.m. He was granted authorized absences of 4 hours and 40 minutes and 4 hours and 25 minutes, respectively, rather than being required to take annual leave. The medical center's Chief of Staff told us if a full-time physician worked 4 or more hours during the scheduled 8-hour tour of duty, the physician would not be charged annual leave for the remaining portion of the day. The physician's supervisor believed these two authorized absences were granted due to their interpretation of the authorized absence policy.

Pattern of Excessive Tardiness, Extended Lunches, and Early Departures. Although the medical center's Chief of Staff discussed time and attendance issues with the physician in September and November 2004, the pattern of tardiness, extended lunches, and early departures continued in 2005.

Medical center officials discussed tardiness with the full-time physician on two separate occasions.

- The first instance occurred on September 21, 2004, when the physician notified the timekeeper he would be late because "...he was feeling lazy." The medical center's Chief of Staff counseled the physician the same day by informing him this was an unacceptable reason for tardiness and followed up with a memorandum.
- On November 8, 2004, the medical center's Chief of Staff and the Director of Primary Care documented the issue of excessive tardiness by the full-time physician on his annual proficiency report. The proficiency report noted that the physician experienced problems in the past with arriving to work on time but "...has shown improvement with tardiness and with remaining on duty throughout the day."

Our review of time and attendance records following the November 2004 proficiency report disclosed recurring instances of tardiness, extended lunches, and early departures by the full-time physician.

VA policy states that repeated instances of tardiness or unexcused absences during scheduled working hours will be considered a matter for disciplinary action.³ The

² Code of Federal Regulations, Title 5, *Administrative Personnel*, Chapter 1, "Office of Personnel Management," Part 630, Absence and Leave, Subpart D, Sick Leave, Section 401, Grant of Sick Leave, dated January 1, 2004, and January 1, 2005.

³ VA Directive 5001, Part III, Chapter 3, "*Authorized Absences*," Section 9 B (2), dated April 15, 2002.

Director of Primary Care believed disciplinary action was not taken against the full-time physician because of their interpretation of the authorized absence policy.

Absences Were Not Always Documented. Even though the medical center's Chief of Staff and Director of Primary Care documented excessive tardiness and absenteeism in the full-time physician's proficiency report, the absences were not recorded in official time and attendance records because the timekeeper was unaware of the requirement. We were unable to identify any record of absences or tardiness from January 11, 2004, through August 15, 2004. The timekeeper told us this occurred due to oversight. Medical center officials took prompt action to correct this deficiency by providing time and attendance-related training to the timekeeper in August 2004.

Conclusion

Because management practices for approving authorized absences were not always monitored, action needs to be taken to ensure that medical center managers follow time and attendance policies.

Recommended Improvement Action. We recommended that the Medical Center Director continue to provide the necessary training and monitoring to ensure that appropriate time and attendance policies are followed.

The Medical Center Director agreed with the finding and recommendation and stated that management actions will be continued to provide the necessary time and attendance training and monitoring. The improvement plans are acceptable, and we will follow up on planned actions until they are completed.

Medical Center Director's Comments

**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

Memorandum

Date: March 7, 2006

From: Director, John J. Pershing VA Medical Center

Subject: Evaluation of Time and Attendance of a Full-Time Physician at John J. Pershing VA Medical Center

To: Director, St. Petersburg Audit Operations Division (52SP)

I have reviewed the report on Time and Attendance of a Full-Time Physician at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center. I concur with the finding and recommendation in principle.

(Original Signed by:)

Nancy Arnold

Director

Medical Center Director's Comments

The following Director's comments are submitted in response to the recommendation in the OIG's Report:

OIG Recommendation

Recommended Improvement Action: We recommend the Medical Center Director continue to provide the necessary training and monitoring to ensure time and attendance policies are followed.

Concur with the recommendation that the Medical Center Director continue to provide the necessary training and monitoring to ensure time and attendance policies are followed.

Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center is in compliance with VHA Handbook 5011, Part III, Chapter 3, Title 38 Leave Program. MP-6, Part V, Supplement No. 2.2, Section 102.00 Time and Attendance Reporting defines the training requirements for unit timekeepers. Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center is in full compliance with these requirements. All unit timekeepers as well as certifying officials receive refresher training on an annual basis and all newly appointed timekeepers and certifying officials receive training within 30 days of their appointment. Pertinent information such as changes in regulations or updates are shared with timekeepers and certifying officials on a regular basis. The payroll liaison conducts two audits each calendar year on each time and leave unit to verify compliance with the regulations regarding time and attendance.

OIG Contact and Staff Acknowledgment

OIG Contact	Michael A. Raponi (727) 395-2422
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Acknowledgment	George Ayetin
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