

**ADMINISTRATIVE SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATION
BY THE VA OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
IN RESPONSE TO ALLEGATIONS
REGARDING PATIENT WAIT TIMES**



**VA Medical Center in West Palm Beach, Florida
Updated February 29, 2016**

1. Summary of Why the Investigation Was Initiated

The investigation was conducted in response to three separate complaints:

- A confidential complainant informed a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) employee that the VA Medical Center (VAMC) West Palm Beach engaged in “gaming” veterans’ desired dates for appointments.
- Another confidential complainant, who is a veteran and an employee, confirmed that schedulers use the “next available date” as a veteran’s “desired date” for an appointment.
- A third anonymous complainant contacted the VA OIG Hotline in June 2014 and alleged that the chief of staff and the director at the VAMC West Palm Beach pressured Medical Administration Service (MAS) staff and the chief of MAS to adjust the patients’ desired appointments for gastrointestinal (GI) test consults because these patients were waiting for appointments beyond the 30-day measure and this would cause a decrease in management’s bonuses.

2. Description of the Conduct of the Investigation

- **Interviews Conducted:** VA OIG staff interviewed two complainants, the director of VAMC West Palm Beach, a MAS official, a former MAS official, and a random sample of employees, which included MAS supervisors and schedulers.
- **Records Reviewed:** VA OIG staff reviewed (in addition to an email forwarded by one of the complainants) facility certifications of compliance with scheduling processes, Clinic Appointment Availability Reports (CAARs) for VAMC West Palm Beach, from October 2012 through June 2014, and the facility director’s performance appraisals and awards for fiscal years 2012 and 2013.

3. Summary of the Evidence Obtained From the Investigation

Interviews Conducted

General Scheduling Practices

- In June 2014, VA OIG staff interviewed the first complainant, who stated that VAMC West Palm Beach was engaged in gaming appointment desired dates.
- The second complainant stated that he/she was a veteran and an employee at the facility, then advised that MAS schedulers use the next available date as a veteran’s desired date.

- Another employee stated that it was common practice to use the next available appointment date as a veteran's desired date. She said that her leads and supervisors taught her how to game the system. She would receive emails from her supervisor if she scheduled a veteran outside of the 14-day desired date and was told to fix the appointment in the system. She believed the direction to game the system came from the MAS Chief, but did not provide more specific information or supporting documentation. The employee provided the name of a medical support assistant (MSA) who was willing to be interviewed.
- Three schedulers who were randomly selected to be interviewed stated that VAMC West Palm Beach used the next available date as a veteran's desired date, in order to game the 14-day desired date policy. This policy requires veterans to receive an appointment within 14-days of the date they would like for an appointment (desired date). The MAS staff believed that the MAS Chief knew about this method of scheduling veterans for appointments but did not provide any evidence to corroborate this belief. In addition, the MAS clerks said that VAMC West Palm Beach still uses the above method to schedule appointments.
- Three MAS supervisors and managers who were selected to be interviewed stated that the MAS leads, who are first-level supervisors, provided training to MAS schedulers along with peer training. They also stated that second-level MAS management was aware that leads and MAS clerks used the clinic's next available date as a veteran's desired date in order to game the 14-day desired date policy. Neither MAS mid-level managers nor MAS senior management were aware of or ordered MAS staff to game veterans' desired dates. MAS management confirmed that VAMC West Palm Beach did not use the Electronic Wait List because they used non-VA care to address access issues.
- The associate director of the VAMC West Palm Beach advised via email that there were 266.5 MAS and 460 VAMC West Palm Beach employees who have scheduling privileges.
- An MAS official stated that VAMC West Palm Beach management did not direct MAS staff to game wait times.
- The VAMC West Palm Beach director stated that she had received the memo issued by William Schoenhard, the then-Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). She stated that MAS reviewed the scheduling process; ensured schedulers were properly trained; and reviewed the examples in the memo with staff. She was unaware of any inappropriate scheduling and never condoned it. She also acknowledged that she completed the annual certifications required under VHA Directive 2010-027.

GI Scheduling Practices

- A VA OIG Hotline referred an anonymous complaint to the investigators on June 20, 2014, alleging that VAMC West Palm Beach leadership pressured the MAS Chief and staff to adjust the patients' desired appointment dates for GI colon test consults because

these patients were beyond the 30-day wait time measure and this would cause a decrease in management's bonuses.

A former MAS official denied that VAMC West Palm Beach management pressured her to change GI appointments. She also stated that any MAS scheduler who manipulated wait times did so without management guidance.

Records Reviewed

- An email sent by the director to VAMC West Palm Beach staff, which was provided by an anonymous source, thanked them for their work and claimed that "Access" to VAMC West Palm Beach for new and established patients was at the 95 percent level for scheduling appointments within 30 days. The email did not indicate that the director condoned the failure to follow VHA policy or that she was aware that staff were not in compliance with the policy.
- A review of CAARs for VAMC West Palm Beach from October 2012 through June 2014 showed that MAS schedulers used the clinic's next available date, instead of a veteran's desired date. VA OIG staff specifically reviewed Primary Care and Mental Health Clinics, which revealed that a majority of the CAARs showed that MAS schedulers engaged in the above practice, in violation of VHA Directive 2010-027.
- Documents showed that the VAMC West Palm Beach certified compliance with VHA Directive 2010-027.
- A review of performance appraisals and awards for fiscal years 2012 and 2013 revealed that the VAMC West Palm Beach director did not receive bonuses or performance ratings solely based upon facility access levels.

4. Conclusion

The investigation substantiated that MAS schedulers were using the clinic's next available date as a veteran's desired date and changed appointments that fell outside of the 14-day desired date policy outlined in VHA Directive 2010-027. Schedulers did not understand the overall effect of gaming access on department resource allocations. A review of CAARs corroborated the use of the next available date as a patient's desired date. VAMC West Palm Beach schedulers violated VHA Directive 2010-027 when they used the clinic's next available date, instead of a veteran's desired date, to meet the 14-day goal, resulting in inaccurate veteran access assessments for VAMC West Palm Beach.

The investigation did not substantiate that VAMC West Palm Beach management directed schedulers to game appointment times or that the MAS Chief was pressured by VAMC West Palm Beach management to change GI appointments. A review of the director's personnel file provided no indication that any bonuses or appraisal ratings were tied solely to facility access levels.

The investigation also found no indication that VAMC West Palm Beach staff inappropriately destroyed any records.

The OIG referred the Report of Investigation to VA's Office of Accountability Review on September 29, 2014.



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