

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



**VA Health Eligibility Center Atlanta, Georgia
May 4, 2017**

1. Summary of Why the Investigation Was Initiated

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) initiated an investigation following a complainant's report, dated May 30, 2014, of a lengthy discussion that allegedly took place between a VA public affairs officer and a VA Health Eligibility Center (HEC) program specialist attending the same conference and at which it was claimed that the HEC had "rebooted" the entire queue of veterans' pending applications to meet performance metrics. This alleged cleansing of pending applications would have likely affected more than 250,000 applicants.

During the same period, the VA OIG Office of Audits and Evaluations (OAE) received a congressional inquiry regarding allegations of mismanagement at the HEC and, together with the VA OIG Office of Investigations (OI), investigated.

2. Description of the Conduct of the Investigation

- **Interviews Conducted:** VA OIG interviewed 10 VA specialists and supervisors.
- **Records Reviewed:** VA OIG reviewed a VA email and information provided by a HEC program analyst.

3. Summary of the Evidence Obtained From the Investigation

Interviews Conducted

- The HEC program specialist stated that she worked in the Income Verification division of the HEC and knew nothing about the enrollment process. She further stated that she could not provide credible evidence to support the alleged deletion of veterans' applications. She also stated that she did not remember the VA public affairs officer or the alleged conversation she reportedly had with him and that led to the complaint. She named a HEC program analyst as a source for information related to the complaint.
- A HEC program analyst shared background information on HEC activities, including the procedures involved in the maintenance and processing of veterans' enrollment applications. She also gave a binder presumably with evidence supporting the allegation that veterans' applications were deliberately deleted or rebooted. She explained that HEC employees have the capability to delete transactions from the Workload Reporting and Productivity (WRAP) database. She also alleged that an Enrollment Eligibility Division (EED) administrative employee had shredded documents at the HEC.
- An EED employee gave VA OIG background information on HEC activities and stated

that the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has, on any given day, 150,000 pending applications nationwide. The employee stated that he/she was unaware of any deliberate deletion, manipulation, or “rebooting” of veterans’ applications. Primarily, the employee wanted to speak to the OIG about personnel morale and human resources issues at the HEC.

- An EED supervisor explained the online application process. When a veteran would mail in an application, mailroom staff would scan it into WRAP. The staff would then process the application in the Enrollment System (ES); once this task was completed, the veteran would be assigned a Priority Group (1–8) and his or her information would be sent to the preferred medical center. The EED supervisor indicated that this is a 5-day process starting from the time the application is scanned into the database. She stated that supervisors are the only staff who can delete transactions but they cannot delete scanned documents. She said she had been part of an internal investigation regarding an allegation that documents were being shredded. She recalled that this incident had taken place about 5 or 6 years before the OIG interview and had led to an informal investigation concluding that all of the paper documents had been placed in a storage closet. She stated that her supervisor had told her that everything was fine and the issue disappeared; she added that the allegation of shredding documents had not been proven.
- A supervisory program specialist stated that the HEC’s system was rebooted every third Saturday of the month. He alleged that statements made in a blog posted August 17, 2014 by a VA Central Office (VACO) official discounted the number of pending records at the HEC. The witness further stated that the HEC processed all of the mailed-in applications and some of the online applications. He explained that typically the online applications were routed to the facility where the veteran preferred to receive care. According to him, the HEC processed online applications for four facilities: VA medical centers in Atlanta, GA; Sioux Falls, SD; Black Hills, SD; and Fargo, ND. He stated that the HEC managed the enrollment system and that even though he was not involved in the day-to-day operations, he understood the process well enough for him to be able to pull data related to veterans’ enrollment for health care. He pointed out that the Administrative Data Repository (ADR) was a database containing information on veterans’ eligibility and enrollment.

The supervisory program specialist stated he had an issue with the language and interpretation of the blog post. For example, the interpretation of what’s a “true application” mentioned in the blog. He stated that the blog defined a true application as the number of veterans with or without an application date. He said that the data in the blog only stated whether an application was dated or not, adding that he did not agree with the language in the blog that stated the applications without dates were not true applications. He said that the blog stated if the application did not have a date, then that veteran did not apply for health care. As a result, the application was not a true application. He stated that was not an accurate statement. He said that he had the ability to locate an application without an application date in the system, which would show the veteran was deemed eligible for health care.

- The EED administrative employee stated that he received mail and emails daily from veterans. The information received was additional information provided by the veteran to complete his/her application. He explained that once he received this information, he printed a hard copy of the document (to work from), inputted the requested information into the system, and then, at the end of the workday, he would shred the copy document. He stated that once the information was gathered and entered into the system, there was no need to keep the printed hard copy. He also stated that he had never been instructed by management to shred applications and he was not aware of anyone rebooting the system to alter the workload.
- HEC senior leader 1 stated that, based on her knowledge, the program analyst in the Informatics division at the HEC had access to all of the systems used at the HEC, and every application was captured in the enrollment system. She further stated that she was not aware of any deleting capabilities or of any backlog of applications. She stated that she could not speak on the HEC's rebooting process.
- HEC senior leader 2 stated that all documents were imaged and made available in the WRAP database, which managed the intake of veteran applications and the assignment of workload for HEC enrollment specialists. She pointed out the difference between a transaction and a record, namely that a transaction can be deleted from the record. For example, if a veteran claimed on his/her record that he/she had been exposed to Agent Orange and the HEC later determined that the veteran did not meet the eligibility requirements for this condition, then the HEC employee would delete that transaction from the record but the change would be tracked in the history of the veteran's record.

She stated that changes were recorded historically and it was the clerks' job to make these changes (updates). She further stated that the record was never deleted because no one at the HEC had the capability to delete a record. She explained how all records were "owned" by the Identity Management System (IDM) in Tuscaloosa, AL. She stated that the IDM could make corrections to a record. For example, if IDM detected that a record was a duplicate, those two records were merged. She said that records were put in a pending status from the Veterans Information System and Technology Architecture (VistA). She stated that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) obtained information to determine if an enrollment decision could be made. If a decision could not be made because additional information was needed, then the record became pending in the enrollment system until the requested information was received. She described how the HEC processed applications within 5 days; otherwise, staff would call the veteran within 5 days to request the additional information. She stated that if the information were still pending within 30 days, the HEC staffers would mail a letter to the applicants concerned to request such information.

She stated that, in October 2011, the HEC mailed out 204,000 "buddy letters," a marketing strategy consisting of having currently enrolled veterans notify non-enrolled veterans of the health care services that are available to them. She added that many of the enrolled veterans misunderstood the letter and submitted the "buddy letter" as if they were enrolling for services, which caused duplicate records. She also stated that the HEC did not have the capability to close a pending enrollment application and that a record

could potentially remain pending forever if the documents needed were never received. She stated that VBA could close a claim after 365 days if a veteran did not file the required documentation in a timely manner, adding that the HEC, however, did not have that authority; therefore, an enrollment application could remain indefinitely in a pending status. She stated that employees who did not work in the Enrollment and Eligibility division of the HEC would not have firsthand knowledge of this process.

- HEC senior leader 3 stated that once documents had been scanned, they were transmitted to the WRAP database. She said that all of the paper applications were filed with EED. She further stated that records could not be deleted from the enrollment system; instead, the records would remain in a certain “stage.” She said this occurred because it was not the HEC’s practice to delete records. She explained that if there were a duplicate record, the duplicated record would not be deleted but instead placed in an inactivated status. The record may not be visible, but it could be retrieved. She could not explain the process involved in deactivating a record but stated that the front line staff validated the process.
- In an interview regarding the allegation of false information written in the August blog pertaining to the backlog of applications, the VACO official stated that before the blog was released, she had a conversation with her leadership team (HEC senior leader 2 and HEC senior leader 3), and that they had crafted the language of the blog. She added she was under the assumption that HEC senior leader 2 had conversations with HEC senior leadership, employees, and Informatics regarding the information that was presented to her about the backlog of applications. She stated that HEC senior leader 2 came to the table with the leadership team and they all discussed the best way to address the article published by Brad Schrade, Investigative Reporter, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, dated October 17, 2014, regarding the allegation that VA misled the public and veterans on the health care backlog. She said they had concluded, based on the information available at the time, that the application date was the best indicator to determine a true application for enrollment. She stated that since the August blog, the leadership team had conducted further research and analysis of additional records and found applications without dates that were enrollment applications. She also said that these new data were present in an updated blog in October 2014. She added that they would continue to work with the HEC’s Informatics team to conduct additional research following the initial data in the August blog.

Records Reviewed

- VA OIG reviewed a binder of documents, provided by a HEC program analyst, which was meant to support the allegation that veterans’ applications were deliberately deleted or rebooted. However, our review of the documents did not identify verifiable evidence of large-scale deletion of veterans’ applications.
- VA OIG reviewed an email sent to an OIG employee by the supervisory program specialist. The email explained that the absence of an application date does not prevent an application from being processed. In the email, the supervisory program specialist stated that a record could not simultaneously be in a pending status and in a deceased

enrollment status. He further explained that in November 2014, an analysis was completed by VBA that showed the number of possibly deceased veterans in a pending enrollment status was as high as 233,000.

- OIG conducted an audit of the HEC and documented its findings in Report No. 14-01792-510, Review of Alleged Mismanagement at VHA's Health Eligibility Center, September 2, 2015.¹ In summary, the audit determined the following:
 - o Procedures were inadequate to identify and implement necessary updates to the applicant's status.
 - o VHA and the Office of Information and Technology did not ensure that adequate business processes and security controls were in place for the WRAP tool.
 - o VHA did not adequately managed WRAP user permissions or document and review deleted transactions.
 - o The Office of Information and Technology did not provide proper oversight for the development, security, and data backup retention for WRAP.
 - o The HEC lacked controls to match WRAP and Enrollment System data to ensure the workload was properly managed.
 - o The HEC's enrollment system did not have the capability to distinguish between veterans who applied for healthcare benefits from veterans who applied for non-healthcare benefits.
 - o HEC employees incorrectly marked unprocessed applications.

4. Conclusion

The investigation did not uncover any evidence to substantiate the allegation that 250,000 eBenefits applications filed through the My Health Vet website were deleted to eliminate a backlog nor did it indicate that HEC employees engaged in conduct that was criminal in nature.

The OIG audit found that the HEC's backlog developed because the HEC did not adequately monitor and manage its workload and lacked controls to ensure entry of workload into the electronic system.

¹ OIG Report No. 14-01792-510, [Review of Alleged Mismanagement at VHA's Health Eligibility Center](#), September 2, 2015.

VA OIG referred the Report of Investigation to VA's Office of Accountability Review on October 12, 2016.



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