



Delays in Care Threaten Health and Safety of Veterans, New VA Whistleblower Says

Doctor says he was removed from position at VA hospital after complaining.

By **AARON GLANTZ AND JIM AVILA** May 9, 2014, 2:11 AM 4 min read

May 9, 2014 — -- With criticism mounting on Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki over [allegations that veterans in Phoenix died](#) while waiting for care, another whistleblower has stepped forward with documents alleging he witnessed incidents that together pose “a substantial and specific threat to the mental health and safety of our veterans.”

In an exclusive interview with ABC News and [the Center for Investigative Reporting](#), Dr. Jose Mathews said he was removed from his position as chief of psychiatry at the VA hospital in St. Louis after he complained that other psychiatrists were counseling veterans for as few as three hours a day.

“The workday started late and it ended early,” he said. “We are taking care of veterans who underwrite our freedom. It’s completely unacceptable and unethical.”

In a federal whistleblower complaint filed with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, Mathews said his superiors exhibited a “disregard for veteran care and safety” at the St. Louis hospital, citing emails he wrote to hospital administrators asking them to investigate two allegedly preventable deaths, an inpatient suicide attempt, and a veteran who was turned away from care.

In each case, he said, his efforts were rebuffed.

The VA St. Louis Health Care System sent this response as we were on the air: “We take these allegations seriously. The St. Louis VA Medical Center leadership is aware of and is addressing the alleged issues. VA is committed to providing the best quality of care that all our nation’s Veterans need and deserve.”

'They Are Punishing Me'

Mathews provided an internal document and extensive email exchanges with his superiors to ABC News and CIR showing he was removed from his post after he says he complained about how few veterans psychiatrists were actually seeing. He says that resulting delays in care led to a logjam.

His statements come as the Department of Veterans Affairs is under fire from members of Congress and veterans advocates over allegations that VA officials in Arizona, Colorado and Texas manipulated wait time data or maintained secret lists to obscure lengthy wait times for medical care.

Brian Turner, an appointment scheduler at the VA in San Antonio, Texas, told ABC News that he was trained not to record the fact that veterans were undergoing two-year waits to get an appointment.

“I notified other clerks and the supervisors asking ‘What are we doing?’” he said. “Are we doing anything wrong?”

At a town hall meeting hosted by Sen. John McCain in Phoenix this afternoon, open pain and anger was on display, from families who lost loved ones while waiting for medical appointments at the VA.

“They have no business,” said Sally Barnes Breen, who took care of her father-in-law, Thomas Breen, one of 40 patients at the Phoenix VA who died before seeing a doctor.

Breen, a Navy veteran, died of bladder cancer, two months after he was promised someone would call him back.

The move came as the House Veterans Affairs Committee voted to subpoena Eric Shinseki, asking for emails that allegedly discuss the destruction of a secret list of veterans waiting for care at the VA hospital in Phoenix.

The Center for Investigative Reporting has found that in the decade after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the VA made wrongful death payments to nearly 1,000 families, including 246 deaths linked to delays in providing needed treatment and care.

The American Legion, the nation's largest veterans' group, has called for Shinseki's resignation.

Mathews said the VA needs to do more to hold doctors and hospital administrators accountable.

"There are good people who want to do the right thing," at the VA, he said, but they're not the ones in charge, at least at the hospital in St. Louis, where he works.

He still comes to work every day at the VA, but he's been demoted -- literally assigned to an office in the basement -- where he performs compensation and pension exams.

"They are punishing me," he said, but it is the veterans who suffer, "and it is the tragic life experiences I heard as a psychiatrist that has motivated me to continue to fight."

This story was produced by the Center for Investigative Reporting and ABC World News. See more veterans coverage from CIR at cironline.org/veterans. Reach the reporter at aglantz@cironline.org and follow him on Twitter at [@Aaron_Glantz](https://twitter.com/Aaron_Glantz).