

US lawmakers denounce delays for veterans at clinics

May 16 2014, by Dan De Luce

Angry US senators on Thursday demanded action over allegations that dozens of military veterans died due to protracted delays at medical clinics, grilling the head of the veterans department.

Eric Shinseki, the retired general who leads the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), faced tough questions from lawmakers at a hearing prompted by a scandal over secret waiting lists at a Phoenix hospital.

With the revelations threatening to turn into a major political headache for the White House, senators from both parties said delays for patients at [veterans'](#) hospitals have been flagged as a problem for years.

Saying she was "deeply disturbed," Democrat Senator Patty Murray warned that the long [wait times](#) had "dramatically shaken many veterans' confidence in this system."

Shinseki, who has served as the VA secretary since President Barack Obama took office in 2009, said he shared lawmakers' anger and was awaiting results of an inspector general's investigation.

"Any allegation like this... makes me mad as hell," Shinseki told the hearing. "But at the same time, it also saddens me."

The department faces charges that employees covered up long wait times at the Phoenix hospital and that the delays may have cost the lives of 40 patients.

Shinseki, a Vietnam veteran and former four-star US Army chief, promised action if the [allegations](#) are confirmed.

But a number of Republican lawmakers and some veterans' groups have called for his resignation.

Even some of Obama's fellow Democrats expressed exasperation that the secretary has not been able to turn around the department's poor track record.

Addressing Shinseki directly, Murray said: "We have come to the point where we need more than good intentions.... What we need right now is decisive action."

Obama has appointed one of his senior aides, Rob Nabors, to conduct an administration review over the allegations.

"While we get to the bottom of what happened in Phoenix, it's clear the VA needs to do more to ensure quality care for our veterans," Obama said in announcing the appointment.

Asked Thursday if Obama shared Shinseki's anger, White House spokesman Jay Carney said: "He certainly is concerned and angry about the allegations we've seen."

Loved ones suffered

At the hearing, Senator John McCain, a decorated Vietnam veteran, said the episode was a disgrace.

"We should all be ashamed," said McCain, who represents Arizona, where the scandal was first uncovered.

The Republican described hosting a town hall meeting in Phoenix where families of four veterans who died recently recounted horror stories as they tried and failed to secure medical treatment for their relatives.

"With tears in their eyes, they described how their loved one suffered because they were not provided the care they needed and deserved," he said.

"They recalled countless unanswered phone calls and ignored messages, endless wait times, mountains of bureaucratic red tape, while their loved one suffered debilitating and ultimately fatal conditions."

Congress may soon act to rein in the abuse. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor said the lower chamber will consider legislation next week giving the VA more flexibility to fire incompetent or negligent administrators.

But Cantor said that while Shinseki should be held accountable for failures of his department, "it is ultimately President Obama who must answer for what has occurred under his administration."

Meanwhile the Government Accountability Office released a report Thursday showing the VA lacks "accurate information" about wait times for outpatient medical appointments, and that poor response times "have resulted in harm to patients."

© 2014 AFP

Citation: US lawmakers denounce delays for veterans at clinics (2014, May 16) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-05-lawmakers-denounce-veterans-clinics.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--