

US audit: 57,000 vets await initial medical visits

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This April 28, 2014 file photo shows the Phoenix VA Health Care Center in Phoenix. The Veterans Affairs Department says more than 57,000 patients are still waiting for initial medical appointments at VA hospitals and clinics 90 days or more after requesting them. An additional 64,000 who enrolled in the VA health care system over the past 10 years have never had appointments. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin, File)

More than 57,000 U.S. military veterans have been waiting for 90 days or more for medical appointments, the Veterans Affairs Department said in a wide-ranging audit released Monday. An additional 64,000 who enrolled for VA health care over the past decade have never been seen by a doctor, according to the audit.

The audit is the first nationwide look at America's biggest medical network in the uproar that began with reports two months ago of patients dying while awaiting appointments and of cover-ups at a VA center in Arizona. Examining 731 VA hospitals and large outpatient clinics, the audit found long wait times across the U.S. for patients seeking their first appointments with both primary care doctors and specialists.

The controversy over veterans' care could provide

Republicans with an issue to criticize Democrats ahead of congressional elections in November. It is also a headache for President Barack Obama, who had to accept the resignation of the Veterans Affairs secretary, Eric Shinseki, on May 30 and is actively seeking someone to replace him after the leading candidate pulled out, citing the prospect of a bitter confirmation hearing.

Shinseki, a former general, took the blame for what he decried as a "lack of integrity" in the sprawling system providing health care to U.S. military veterans.

The audit said a 14-day target for waiting times was "not attainable," given growing demand for VA services and poor planning. It called the 2011 decision by senior VA officials setting it, and then basing bonuses on meeting the target "an organizational leadership failure."

The audit said 13 percent of VA schedulers reported getting instructions from supervisors or others to falsify appointment dates in order to meet on-time performance goals.

Acting VA Secretary Sloan Gibson said the audit showed "systemic problems" that demand immediate action. VA officials have contacted 50,000 veterans across the U.S. to get them off waiting lists and into clinics, Gibson said, and are in the process of contacting an additional 40,000 veterans.

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