

9/4/15  
Friday

# VA facing 900,000 applications for care

(One-third of those vets could be dead)

BY EMILY WAX-THIBODEAUX  
THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON — Despite promises for widespread reform, nearly 900,000 military veterans have pending applications to access health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the department's inspector general said this week in a scathing report which recommended a total overhaul of their record-keeping system that could take years.

One-third of those veterans are thought to be dead, but problems with the data makes it tough to know how many former troops were still struggling to get care, the report says. The VA has said it has no way to purge the list of dead applicants.

Over half the applications listed as "pending," as of last year do not even say when the applications were dated, and the Associated Press reported on Wednesday that investigators "could not reliably determine how many records were associated with actual applications for enrollment" in VA health care, the report said.

"Data limitations" prevent investigators from determining how many now-deceased veterans applied for health-care benefits or when.

Linda Halliday, the VA's acting inspector general, told the AP that the agency's Health Eligibility Center "has not effectively managed its business processes to ensure the consistent creation and maintenance of essential data."

The report also says VA workers incorrectly marked thousands of unprocessed health-care applications as completed. They may have deleted 10,000 or more electronic "transactions" over the past five years.

\* Whistle-blowers have been warning that more than

for the New Mexico VA Health Care System, said Thursday he was unable to provide an estimate of how many New Mexico veterans might have pending applications, but that NMVAHCS enrollment staffers are "working diligently to determine the number of affected veterans."

New Mexico has about 173,000 veterans, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Scott Davis, a whistle-blower and program specialist at the VA enrollment center in Atlanta, called the report "a step in the right direction," and said "reports like these will force the VA to change their culture."

He said he was "cautiously optimistic," but added that VA leaders responsible for problems needed to be held accountable. "The VA's past practice of deferring to the same management officials who caused the problem ... is both illogical and insulting to the veteran community."

Davis said he told the VA that 34,000 men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are losing their guaranteed five-year eligibility for VA service due to "systematic obstacles."

He said that combat veterans are not required to verify their income when applying for VA benefits. But the enrollment applications of 34,000 such veterans were delayed when the VA system classified them as pending.

VA spokeswoman Walinda West said Wednesday that the VA acknowledged publicly last year that the enrollment system management and data integrity and quality "are in need of significant improvement. VA realizes the issues surrounding the enrollment process are confusing to Veterans and our stakeholders."

As of June 30, VA has contacted 302,045 veterans by mail, asking them to submit required documents to establish eligibility, West said. To date VA has received 36,749

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\* Whistle-blowers have been warning that more than 200,000 veterans with pending applications for VA health care were likely deceased. The inspector general's report substantiated those claims.

Bill Armstrong, spokesman

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As of June 30, VA has contacted 302,045 veterans by mail, asking them to submit required documents to establish eligibility, West said. To date, VA has received 36,749 responses and enrolled 34,517 veterans, and outreach efforts are continuing, she said.

Journal staff contributed to this report