

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

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<http://oversight.house.gov>

May 10, 2019

Mr. Michael S. Heimall
Medical Center Director
Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center
50 Irving Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20422

Dear Director Heimall:

The Subcommittee on Government Operations is examining the care of veterans at the Washington, D.C. Veterans Affairs Medical Center (DC VAMC). We write to you regarding mental health, substance abuse, and suicide prevention treatment at this facility.

This week, there was a shocking report of a DC VAMC psychiatric patient who escaped from a locked area of the facility, traveled to Virginia, and abducted and assaulted a woman, resulting in his arrest. According to the report, after the patient crawled through the ventilation system into the emergency room, VA staff called the man a taxi cab, even while he was dressed in hospital scrubs and had an open wound. Further, the patient's family reportedly called the DC VAMC twice to notify staff of his escape, but "Medical Center staff declined to check the man's room after receiving the warning."¹

In addition, in February 2019, a constituent from the Chairman's district sought inpatient admission for drug withdrawal symptoms, anxiety, and pain management at the DC VAMC. The hospital declined to admit him and determined that appropriate treatment could be delivered in an outpatient setting. The veteran's wife found him dead of a gunshot wound in their home the following week.

In May 2017, Navy veteran Woodrow Reed died of a drug overdose in his car in the DC VAMC parking lot after an appointment at the medical center. Despite his family's pleas to staff to search for Mr. Reed, his body was not found for nearly two days. His sister, not medical center staff or police, eventually found his body.

Incidents such as these demand that we evaluate the care our veterans receive and ensure that steps are being taken to provide veterans with the medical services they need and deserve.

¹ *DC VA Medical Center Patient Escaped Psychiatric Unit*, NBC4 Washington (online at www.nbcwashington.com/investigations/DC-VA-Medical-Center-Patient-Escaped-Psychiatric-Unit-Charged-Assaulting-Woman-Virginia-509691491.html).

As Chairman and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, we request the following documents and information by May 24, 2019:

1. All policies and procedures for suicide prevention, including screening, implementation of safety plans for those identified at risk, and post-release care and monitoring, including policies on the timeframe and frequency for maintaining contact with individuals post-release;
2. All policies and procedures for maintaining the safety and security of patients residing in the inpatient psychiatric unit of the DC VAMC, including emergency procedures for situations such as attempted escapes;
3. A detailed description of all “telehealth” programs for mental health and substance abuse cases;
4. All documents outlining an internal review or evaluation conducted in response to the aforementioned May 2019 psychiatric patient’s escape, February 2019 suicide, and May 2017 overdose death of veterans following visits to the DC VAMC, and the status of any corrective actions from these reviews;
5. A list of local suicide prevention, mental health, and substance abuse clinics and organizations that the DC VAMC refers patients to for post-release care, and documents outlining your policies to appropriately vet and then achieve a coordinated referral process with these community providers;
6. The number by year of suicides and suicide attempts by veterans who have received care at the DC VAMC since January 2014;
7. The current staffing levels, number of vacancies, and attrition rates for DC VAMC mental health and substance abuse units, and the DC VAMC police force since January 2014;
8. A count of all whistleblower complaints arising from or about the DC VAMC, a count of those complaints found to have merit, and the complaints and reports related to those whistleblower complaints found to have merit, since January 2014;
9. The average estimated wait-time for veterans to schedule outpatient mental health appointments at DC VAMC over the past year;
10. A detailed description of the mandatory suicide prevention trainings for clinical and non-clinical staff, including DC VAMC police officers, and the completion rates for these trainings; and
11. A detailed description of all components of the VA’s “Whole Health” approach being incorporated at the DC VAMC facility.

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The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate “any matter” at “any time” under House Rule X.

An attachment to this letter provides additional instructions for responding to the Committee’s request. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Subcommittee staff at (202) 225-5051.

The Subcommittee appreciates the informative visit at the DC VAMC earlier this month and looks forward to continuing a collaborative relationship in support of the best care for our D.C. area veterans.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Gerald E. Connolly
Chairman
Subcommittee on Government Operations



Mark R. Meadows
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations

Enclosure

Responding to Oversight Committee Document Requests

1. In complying with this request, produce all responsive documents that are in your possession, custody, or control, whether held by you or your past or present agents, employees, and representatives acting on your behalf. Produce all documents that you have a legal right to obtain, that you have a right to copy, or to which you have access, as well as documents that you have placed in the temporary possession, custody, or control of any third party.
2. Requested documents, and all documents reasonably related to the requested documents, should not be destroyed, altered, removed, transferred, or otherwise made inaccessible to the Committee.
3. In the event that any entity, organization, or individual denoted in this request is or has been known by any name other than that herein denoted, the request shall be read also to include that alternative identification.
4. The Committee's preference is to receive documents in electronic form (i.e., CD, memory stick, thumb drive, or secure file transfer) in lieu of paper productions.
5. Documents produced in electronic format should be organized, identified, and indexed electronically.
6. Electronic document productions should be prepared according to the following standards:
 - a. The production should consist of single page Tagged Image File ("TIF"), files accompanied by a Concordance-format load file, an Opticon reference file, and a file defining the fields and character lengths of the load file.
 - b. Document numbers in the load file should match document Bates numbers and TIF file names.
 - c. If the production is completed through a series of multiple partial productions, field names and file order in all load files should match.
 - d. All electronic documents produced to the Committee should include the following fields of metadata specific to each document, and no modifications should be made to the original metadata:

BEGDOC, ENDDOC, TEXT, BEGATTACH, ENDATTACH, PAGECOUNT, CUSTODIAN, RECORDTYPE, DATE, TIME, SENTDATE, SENTTIME, BEGINDATE, BEGINTIME, ENDDATE, ENDTIME, AUTHOR, FROM, CC, TO, BCC, SUBJECT, TITLE, FILENAME, FILEEXT, FILESIZE, DATECREATED, TIMECREATED, DATELASTMOD, TIMELASTMOD,

INTMSGID, INTMSGHEADER, NATIVELINK, INTFILPATH, EXCEPTION,
BEGATTACH.

7. Documents produced to the Committee should include an index describing the contents of the production. To the extent more than one CD, hard drive, memory stick, thumb drive, zip file, box, or folder is produced, each should contain an index describing its contents.
8. Documents produced in response to this request shall be produced together with copies of file labels, dividers, or identifying markers with which they were associated when the request was served.
9. When you produce documents, you should identify the paragraph(s) or request(s) in the Committee's letter to which the documents respond.
10. The fact that any other person or entity also possesses non-identical or identical copies of the same documents shall not be a basis to withhold any information.
11. The pendency of or potential for litigation shall not be a basis to withhold any information.
12. In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(d), the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and any statutory exemptions to FOIA shall not be a basis for withholding any information.
13. Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552a(b)(9), the Privacy Act shall not be a basis for withholding information.
14. If compliance with the request cannot be made in full by the specified return date, compliance shall be made to the extent possible by that date. An explanation of why full compliance is not possible shall be provided along with any partial production.
15. In the event that a document is withheld on the basis of privilege, provide a privilege log containing the following information concerning any such document: (a) every privilege asserted; (b) the type of document; (c) the general subject matter; (d) the date, author, addressee, and any other recipient(s); (e) the relationship of the author and addressee to each other; and (f) the basis for the privilege(s) asserted.
16. If any document responsive to this request was, but no longer is, in your possession, custody, or control, identify the document (by date, author, subject, and recipients), and explain the circumstances under which the document ceased to be in your possession, custody, or control.
17. If a date or other descriptive detail set forth in this request referring to a document is inaccurate, but the actual date or other descriptive detail is known to you or is otherwise apparent from the context of the request, produce all documents that would be responsive as if the date or other descriptive detail were correct.

18. This request is continuing in nature and applies to any newly-discovered information. Any record, document, compilation of data, or information not produced because it has not been located or discovered by the return date shall be produced immediately upon subsequent location or discovery.
19. All documents shall be Bates-stamped sequentially and produced sequentially.
20. Two sets of each production shall be delivered, one set to the Majority Staff and one set to the Minority Staff. When documents are produced to the Committee, production sets shall be delivered to the Majority Staff in Room 2157 of the Rayburn House Office Building and the Minority Staff in Room 2105 of the Rayburn House Office Building.
21. Upon completion of the production, submit a written certification, signed by you or your counsel, stating that: (1) a diligent search has been completed of all documents in your possession, custody, or control that reasonably could contain responsive documents; and (2) all documents located during the search that are responsive have been produced to the Committee.

Definitions

1. The term “document” means any written, recorded, or graphic matter of any nature whatsoever, regardless of how recorded, and whether original or copy, including, but not limited to, the following: memoranda, reports, expense reports, books, manuals, instructions, financial reports, data, working papers, records, notes, letters, notices, confirmations, telegrams, receipts, appraisals, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, prospectuses, communications, electronic mail (email), contracts, cables, notations of any type of conversation, telephone call, meeting or other inter-office or intra-office communication, bulletins, printed matter, computer printouts, teletypes, invoices, transcripts, diaries, analyses, returns, summaries, minutes, bills, accounts, estimates, projections, comparisons, messages, correspondence, press releases, circulars, financial statements, reviews, opinions, offers, studies and investigations, questionnaires and surveys, and work sheets (and all drafts, preliminary versions, alterations, modifications, revisions, changes, and amendments of any of the foregoing, as well as any attachments or appendices thereto), and graphic or oral records or representations of any kind (including without limitation, photographs, charts, graphs, microfiche, microfilm, videotape, recordings and motion pictures), and electronic, mechanical, and electric records or representations of any kind (including, without limitation, tapes, cassettes, disks, and recordings) and other written, printed, typed, or other graphic or recorded matter of any kind or nature, however produced or reproduced, and whether preserved in writing, film, tape, disk, videotape, or otherwise. A document bearing any notation not a part of the original text is to be considered a separate document. A draft or non-identical copy is a separate document within the meaning of this term.
2. The term “communication” means each manner or means of disclosure or exchange of information, regardless of means utilized, whether oral, electronic, by document or otherwise, and whether in a meeting, by telephone, facsimile, mail, releases, electronic

message including email (desktop or mobile device), text message, instant message, MMS or SMS message, message application, or otherwise.

3. The terms “and” and “or” shall be construed broadly and either conjunctively or disjunctively to bring within the scope of this request any information that might otherwise be construed to be outside its scope. The singular includes plural number, and vice versa. The masculine includes the feminine and neutral genders.
4. The term “including” shall be construed broadly to mean “including, but not limited to.”
5. The term “Company” means the named legal entity as well as any units, firms, partnerships, associations, corporations, limited liability companies, trusts, subsidiaries, affiliates, divisions, departments, branches, joint ventures, proprietorships, syndicates, or other legal, business or government entities over which the named legal entity exercises control or in which the named entity has any ownership whatsoever.
6. The term “identify,” when used in a question about individuals, means to provide the following information: (a) the individual’s complete name and title; (b) the individual’s business or personal address and phone number; and (c) any and all known aliases.
7. The term “related to” or “referring or relating to,” with respect to any given subject, means anything that constitutes, contains, embodies, reflects, identifies, states, refers to, deals with, or is pertinent to that subject in any manner whatsoever.
8. The term “employee” means any past or present agent, borrowed employee, casual employee, consultant, contractor, de facto employee, detailee, fellow, independent contractor, intern, joint adventurer, loaned employee, officer, part-time employee, permanent employee, provisional employee, special government employee, subcontractor, or any other type of service provider.
9. The term “individual” means all natural persons and all persons or entities acting on their behalf.