

VA scandal just keep coming

November 14, 2015

Nero fiddled while Rome burned. He's got nothing on the Veteran's Administration.

The VA has drowned itself in waste, cost overruns and hospital projects so far behind schedule that the Army Corps of Engineers has taken over the construction. Hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars have been wasted on capital projects gone bad.

Our VA outpatient clinic is a clear example of VA incompetence and sloth. Yes, there's a temporary facility up and running, years after the permanent one was scheduled to be built. The money was there — our money. It was like the VA couldn't find the time. Perhaps it simply had bigger projects to botch. We were down the list.

Stone and rebar are commodities. But the simultaneous lack of care for bone and heart compounds the VA's shame significantly.

While not building facilities, the VA also failed to keep up with our veterans' medical needs. Last year, the scandal broke that 57,000 veterans nationwide had waiting times of over 90 days for their first VA medical appointments. Another 64,000 appear to have never gotten an appointment after enrolling.

One might wonder how many VA administration heads rolled in the aftermath. You could count them on one hand.

In fact, USA Today reported this week that 156,000 VA employees received bonuses for their "work" in 2014. The total was \$143 million. The Cato Institute reports that the VA had 341,000 employees in 2014 and 48 percent received bonuses.

Last year, the Phoenix, Arizona, VA medical facility was the among the worst in the nation in terms of waiting times. It showed a backlog of 8,200 benefit claims, including 3,667 pending for more than 125 days. Administrator Sandra Flint received an \$8,348 bonus anyway. Auditors say that she's received \$53,000 in bonuses since 2007. And it was during her administration that staff hid wait time results from auditors.

Multiple news organizations are reporting that the bonuses may have been tied to those who falsified reports, though no charges have yet been filed. For instance, CBS news has reported that a social worker/whistle-blower in Chicago has told authorities that "multiple secret waiting lists" were kept at the Hines VA Medical Center "to make numbers look better for their own recognition and bonuses."

Putting veterans at risk for stupidity and ineptitude is unconscionable. Putting veterans at risk for bounty is felonious and should be investigated as such.

Is this *our* country?

It seems certain that local scrutiny will be applied to regional offices in light of this week's bonus scandal.

A quick look into the VA database shows dozens of bonuses paid to employees in Jacksonville. Gainesville had many more. And interestingly, they started out at about four times higher than bonuses paid in Duval. The district office where the administration of bonuses begins is, of course, in Gainesville.