

VA Chief: 18 Vets Left Off Waiting List Have Died

BY MATTHEW DALY AND TERRY TANG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An additional 18 veterans in the Phoenix area whose names were kept off an official electronic Veterans Affairs appointment list have died, the agency's acting secretary said Thursday — the latest revelation in a growing scandal over long patient waits for care and falsified records covering up the delays at VA hospitals and clinics nationwide.

Acting VA Secretary Sloan Gibson said he does not know whether the 18 new deaths were related to long waiting times for appointments but said they were in addition to the 17 reported last month by the VA's inspector general. The announcement of the deaths came as senior senators reached agreement Thursday on the framework for a bipartisan bill making it easier for veterans

to get health care outside VA hospitals and clinics.

The 18 veterans who died were among 1,700 veterans identified in a report last week by the VA's inspector general as being "at risk of being lost or forgotten." The investigation also found broad and deep-seated problems with delays in patient care and manipulation of waiting lists throughout the sprawling VA health care system, which provides medical care to about 9 million veterans and family members.

Richard Griffin, the VA's acting inspector general, told a Senate committee three weeks ago that his investigators had found 17 deaths among veterans awaiting appointments in Phoenix. Griffin said in his report last week the dead veterans' medical records and death certificates as well as autopsy reports would have to be examined before he could say whether any of them were caused by delays in getting appointments.

The bill announced Thursday by Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., would allow veterans who wait 30 days or more for VA appointments or who live at least 40 miles from a VA hospital or clinic to use private doctors enrolled as providers for Medicare, military TRICARE or other government health care programs.

It also would let the VA immediately fire as many as 450 senior regional executives and hospital administrators for poor performance. The bill resembles a measure passed last month by the House but includes a 28-day appeal process omitted by the House legislation.

The bill is a response to a building national uproar over veterans' health care since a retired clinic director went public in April with accusations that management at the Phoenix VA had instructed staff to keep a secret waiting list to hide delayed care and

that as many as 40 patients may have died while waiting for appointments.

Veterans in Phoenix waited an average 115 days for appointments — five times longer than the Phoenix VA had reported, Griffin said. Investigators also have found long waiting times and falsified records covering them up at other VA facilities nationwide, Griffin said. His office is investigating more than 40 of the VA's 1,700 health care facilities nationwide, including 150 hospitals and 820 clinics.

"Right now we have a crisis on our hands and it's imperative that we deal with that crisis," said Sanders.

Both Sanders, the only self-identified socialist in Congress, and McCain, the GOP's presidential nominee in 2008, had introduced competing bills earlier this week. They announced their agreement on a compromise after two days of closed-door negotiations.



Seattle police investigate a shooting on the campus of Seattle Pacific University on Thursday.

DEAN RUTZ/SEATTLE TIMES/MCT

College Student Disarms Gunman At Seattle University; 1 Killed

BY MANUEL VALDES AND PHUONG LE
Associated Press

SEATTLE — A lone gunman armed with a shotgun opened fire Thursday in a building at a small Seattle university, fatally wounding one person before a student subdued him with pepper spray as he tried to reload, Seattle police said.

A student building monitor at Seattle Pacific University disarmed the gunman, and several other students jumped on top of him and pinned him down until police arrived at the Otto Miller building, police said.

A 19-year-old man died at the hospital. Three other people were injured. A critically injured 20-year-old woman was taken to surgery, Harborview Medical Center spokeswoman Susan Gregg said. A 24-year-old man and a 22-year-old man were in satisfactory condition. Gregg says one of those two men was not shot.

None of the victims was immediately identified.

Police said they had arrested one man. None of the victims at the hospital was the arrested man, Gregg said.

The afternoon shooting came a week before the end of the school year, and the situation was particularly tense when police initially reported that they were

searching for a second suspect. They later said no one else was involved.

The university locked down its campus for several hours, and it alerted students and staff to stay inside. Some students were taking finals in the same building as the shooter.

The school canceled classes Thursday evening, and it planned to hold a prayer service.

"We're a community that relies on Jesus Christ for strength, and we'll need that at this point in time," said Daniel Martin, president of Seattle Pacific University.

About 4,270 students attend the private Christian university. Its 40-acre campus is in a leafy residential neighborhood about 10 minutes from downtown Seattle.

Jillian Smith was taking a math test on the second-floor of Otto Miller Hall when a lockdown was ordered.

She heard police yelling and banging on doors in the hallway. The professor locked the classroom door, and the 20 or so students sat on the ground, lining up at the front of the classroom.

"We were pretty much freaking out," said Smith, 20, a sophomore. "People were texting family and friends, making sure everyone was OK."

Smith said they sat in the classroom for about 45 minutes before police came and escorted them out of the building. On the way, they passed the lobby where she saw bullet casings and what appeared to be blood in the lobby carpet and splatter on the wall.

"Seeing blood made it real," Smith said. "I didn't think something like this would happen at our school."

Ashley Springer, 26, was in a classroom with her professor and a few other students when a woman with a bullhorn came into the room and told them to lock the door, pull down the shades and turn out the lights.

Springer, a senior, called Seattle Pacific University "a really close community."

David Downs, a 22-year-old senior who is graduating next week, said he had just left campus 30 minutes before the shooting.

"I'm in utter shock," said Downs, who is a point guard on the university's basketball team. "It's so unbelievable to me that this could happen on our campus. It's the last thing I would have ever thought could happen here."

"It puts things in perspective," he said. "Anything can happen, even on a small Christian campus."

Threat On Bergdahl Led To Urgency

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Obama administration told senators it didn't notify Congress about the pending swap of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl for five Taliban officials because of intelligence the Taliban might kill him if the deal was made public.

That fear — not just the stated concerns that Bergdahl's health might be failing — drove the administration to quickly make the deal to rescue him, bypassing the law that lawmakers be notified when detainees are released from the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, congressional and administration officials said Thursday.

They spoke only on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

Since Bergdahl's release on Saturday, administration officials including President Barack Obama, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and National Security Adviser Susan Rice have said publicly that the key reason for the secret prisoner swap was evidence that Bergdahl's physical health was deteriorating after five years in captivity. But on Wednesday night, administration officials told senators in a closed session that the primary concern was the death risk if the deal collapsed.

At a news conference in Brussels on Thursday, Obama said he makes no apologies for recovering Bergdahl, and he said the furor in Washington over the exchange has made the matter a "political football." He appeared to be referring to potential danger to Bergdahl's life when he said that "because of the nature of the folks that we were dealing with and the fragile nature of these negotiations, we felt it was important to go ahead and do what we did."

GM Fires 15 Over Ignition-Switch

WARREN, Mich. (AP) — General Motors said Thursday that it has forced out 15 employees for their role in the deadly ignition-switch scandal and will set up a compensation fund for crash victims, as an internal investigation blamed the debacle on engineering ignorance and bureaucratic dithering, not a deliberate cover-up.

GM took more than a decade to recall 2.6 million cars with bad switches that are now linked to at least 13 deaths by the automaker's count.

"Group after group and committee after committee within GM that reviewed the issue failed to take action or acted too slowly," Anton Valukas, the former federal prosecutor hired by the automaker to investigate the reason for the delay, said in a 315-page report. "Although everyone had responsibility to fix the problem, nobody took responsibility."

GM CEO Mary Barra said more than half the 15 employees forced out were senior legal and engineering executives who failed to disclose the defect and were part of a "pattern of incompetence." Five other employees have been disciplined, she said. She didn't identify them.

The automaker said it will establish a compensation program covering those killed or seriously injured in the more than 50 accidents blamed on the switches. The amount of money that will be made available was not disclosed, but a Wall Street analyst estimated the payouts will total \$1.5 billion.

Man Eludes Capture In Police Killings

MONCTON, New Brunswick (AP) — Royal Canadian Mounted Police combed the streets and woods of this normally tranquil city Thursday in search of a man suspected of killing three officers in the deadliest attack on their ranks in nearly a decade.

The suspect, armed with high-powered long firearms, was spotted three times while eluding the massive manhunt that emptied roads and kept families hunkered in their homes in Moncton, an east coast city where gun violence is rare.

Dozens of police officers could be seen in a part of the search perimeter with their weapons drawn, some glancing around buildings. Others, including members of a tactical unit, were patrolling streets within the cordoned off area. Armored security trucks were also visible.

"Our search for the suspect is still ongoing," RCMP Cpl. Chantal Farrah told a news conference Thursday afternoon. "Our focus remains in the mountain north area."

Farrah urged residents to keep their doors locked. "Stay at home, bar your doors and be vigilant," she said. "I know it's hard for families. You are in your house, you are locked, you have your kids, you want to go outside. But the police are saying to stay in."

Israel Approves Settlement Construction

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel gave the final go-ahead Thursday to build nearly 1,500 homes in Jewish settlements, saying the construction was a response to the formation of the Palestinian unity government backed by the Islamic militant group Hamas.

The move triggered international criticism and deepened a rift between Israel and its Western allies. With Israel outraged at the world's embrace of the unity government, Israel's housing minister said the new construction was "just the beginning."

Israel has been sparring with its allies in Washington and Europe since Western-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas swore in the unity government Monday.

Israel has asked the world to shun the new government because it is backed by Hamas, which has killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings and other attacks in the past two decades. The European Union and the United States, along with Israel, consider Hamas a terrorist group.

State Governments May Be Expanding Wealth Gap

BY DAVID A. LIEB
Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — Lawmakers in many states have been trying to boost their post-recession economies by cutting income taxes, curbing aid to the long-term jobless or holding down the minimum wage. Some have pursued all of these steps.

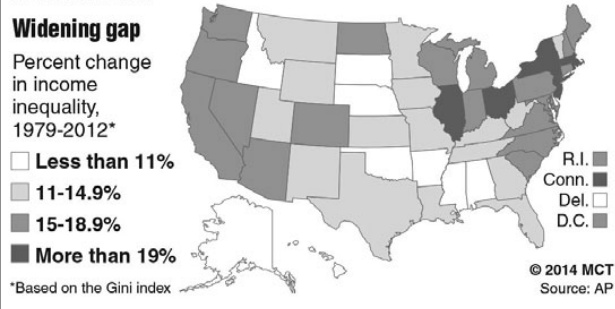
Whether such policies will spur businesses to expand as hoped isn't yet clear. But collectively, the actions could ease the financial burden for the states' most affluent residents while reducing the safety net for those at the bottom.

The shift may also contribute to a trend that is prompting growing national concern: the widening gap between the richest Americans and everyone else. The divergence has developed over four decades and accelerated in recent years.

Economic statistics show that incomes for the top 1 percent of U.S. households soared 31 percent from 2009 through 2012, after adjusting for inflation, yet inched up an average of 0.4 percent for those making less. Many economists are sounding alarms that the income gap, greater now than at

Increasing income inequality

Since 1979, states in the Northeast have recorded the largest increase in the wealth gap as fewer people control higher amounts of state income.



any time since the Depression, is hurting the economy by limiting growth in consumer spending.

Yet those concerns aren't resonating in some states. Last year, at least 10 states passed income tax cuts targeted at businesses or those in the top individual brackets. Several more already have cut taxes this year, including Democratic-led New York and Republican-led Oklahoma. Yet over the past three years, nearly one-fifth of the states have pared back unemployment benefits, and more cutbacks are under consideration.

The theory is that business owners are more likely to hire,

expand and drive economic growth when their own financial burdens are eased. But others contend that formula comes with side effects.

"What's happening at the state level is increasingly important, and, to many eyes, it appears to be moving things in one direction — towards greater inequality," said Matthew Gardner, executive director of the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a Washington-based tax research group.

The once-obscure income gap has become an issue in the 2014 elections as Democrats and Republicans differ over the best way to ensure

America fulfills its promise as a land of opportunity.

Economists point to a variety of factors contributing to the gap, from the shift toward foreign manufacturing to a growth in single-parent households. Federal policies also come into play.

But state governments also have an impact.

Since the mid-1970s, states as a whole have cut their top individual income tax rates by nearly one-fourth, while boosting state sales tax rates by almost half, according to an Associated Press analysis.

That has meant lower taxes for those earning the most and a bigger proportionate tax bite for those who spend more of their income on retail sales. Vermont, for example, has cut its top personal income tax rate from 17.5 percent to less than 9 percent while doubling its sales tax rate to 6 percent.

At the same time, states have scaled back some of the aspects of the financial safety net that keep low-income people out of poverty. The inflation-adjusted value of state welfare payments has been dropping in every state except Maryland and Wyoming and — even with federal food stamps included — leaves recipients below the poverty level in all states.

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