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Veterans Administration Commits to Better Maintenance of Medical Records

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Veterans in western New York State will have better access to their medical records under an improvement plan being implemented by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The plan comes in response to disclosures by four whistleblowers who reported shoddy management of medical files, which often rendered the files effectively lost or unavailable to the veterans or any health care professional.

The four employees, all medical record technicians at the VA's Western New York Healthcare System (WNYHS) in Buffalo, are Leon Davis III, Cathleen Manna, Tracy Harrison and Pamela Hess-Wellspeak. They disclosed that medical files – including cardiac records, dental records and Agent Orange registry records -- were randomly thrown in boxes rather than kept in any order, that many social security numbers were not properly attributed to the correct veteran name, and that mold-infested files were not handled properly to prevent further contamination and to ensure their restoration. As a result, veterans' medical records were often deemed unavailable.

The employees reported the problems to the Director of VA Health Care Upstate New York. Shortly thereafter, on January 27, 2012, the Director told the facility's Associate Medical Director to review the allegations. Later the same day, the Associate Medical Director reported back that his review "did not substantiate any of the concerns." The employees later filed a complaint with the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) and OSC required a thorough investigation by the VA. The VA investigation substantiated the majority of the employees' concerns and an improvement plan was put in place.

"All patients should have access to their medical records," said Special Counsel Carolyn Lerner. "These four employees should be commended for their persistence in resolving this problem."

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