

Whistleblowers say Veterans Choice program used to reduce crucial services at VA hospital

Feb. 22, 2016

CINCINNATI – For veterans, the July 2014 Veterans Choice Act was intended to reduce wait times at Veterans Affairs hospitals by providing billions to pay for outside options for care. But former and current medical staff at the Cincinnati VA have told the Scripps Washington Bureau and WCPO that some hospital leaders there see this separate pool of money as an incentive to make their own books look good by slashing medical staff and eliminating services available to veterans inside the hospital.

The Veterans Choice program, created in response to a scandal in which veterans died while still on waiting lists for VA appointments, was meant to supplement care. But whistleblowers say the Cincinnati center used the program as a way to reduce crucial services. And veterans told Scripps reporters they had no choice but to take outsourced healthcare, which created long delays as the veterans got caught in a “bureaucratic abyss” and a cycle of miscommunication.

“There’s no question that the expenses go down if you don’t take care of people,” said Dr. Richard Freiberg, the Cincinnati VA’s former head of orthopedics and one of 34 whistleblowers to have come forward during the investigation.

House Veterans Affairs Committee sources say they are investigating complaints from employees at other VA hospitals who say that those hospitals are also using the Choice program to shift costs, though the committee has not yet verified those claims.

The full story is available on WCPO.com. It is the second in a series of reports; the first Feb. 16 [story](#) outlined the questionable practices at the very top echelons of leadership at the VA center in Cincinnati and the wider region.

About Scripps

[The E.W. Scripps Company](#) (NYSE: SSP) serves audiences and businesses through a growing portfolio of television, radio and digital media brands. Scripps is one of the nation’s largest independent TV station owners, with 33 television stations in 24 markets and a reach of nearly one in five U.S. households. It also owns 34 radio stations in eight markets. Scripps also runs an expanding collection of local and national digital journalism and information businesses, including podcast industry leader [Midroll Media](#) and over-the-top video news service [Newsy](#). Scripps also produces television shows including “[THE LIST](#)” and “[The Now](#),” runs an award-winning investigative reporting newsroom in Washington, D.C., and serves as the long-time steward of the nation’s largest, most successful and longest-running educational program, the [Scripps National Spelling Bee](#). Founded in 1878, Scripps has held for decades to the motto, “Give light and the people will find their own way.”

Media contact:

Ellen Weiss, Scripps Washington Bureau, 202-408-2756, ellen.weiss@scripps.com

Kari Wethington, The E.W. Scripps Company, 513-977-3763, kari.wethington@scripps.com