

# DAILY NEWS

## 40 U.S. veterans die while on Phoenix VA hospital's cost-cutting secret wait list: report

**The “sham list” was part of an elaborate scheme by top-level management to doctor patient wait times, CNN reports. Patients had to wait as long as 20 weeks to see primary care physicians despite some having life-threatening conditions, including Thomas Breen, a Navy vet who died of Stage 4 bladder cancer.**

BY [Melanie Greenwood](#)

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Thursday, April 24, 2014, 9:29 AM

At least 40 U.S. veterans have died waiting for medical appointments at Phoenix Veterans Affairs Health Care system — including many placed on a secret waiting list.

The list was part of a complex cost-cutting scheme set up by Veterans Affairs managers in Phoenix aiming to hide the fact that between 1,400 and 1,600 sick veterans were forced to wait up to 21 months to see a doctor, according to whistle-blowing retired top VA doctor and high-level sources.

Internal emails reveal managers at Arizona’s VA hospital knew about the practice and even condoned it.

Retiring Dr. Sam Foote, who spent 24 years with the VA system, [told CNN](#) that the Phoenix VA worked off two patient appointment lists.

The “official” list shows the VA was offering timely appointments within 14 to 30 days. Foote called this a “sham list” because there was another secret document where waits were much longer.

“The scheme was deliberately put in place to avoid the VA's own internal rules. They developed the secret waiting list,” [he said](#).

According to Foote, the elaborate plans involved shredding evidence to hide the long list, with VA officials instructing staff to not make veterans’ appointments in the computer system.



CNN Sam Foote, a former Phoenix VA doctor, has turned whistle-blower, alerting the VA Office of the Inspector General to the long wait times.

Instead, [Foote explained](#), when a veteran sought an appointment, "They enter information into the computer and do a screen-capture, hard-copy printout. They then do not save what was put into the computer — so there's no record."

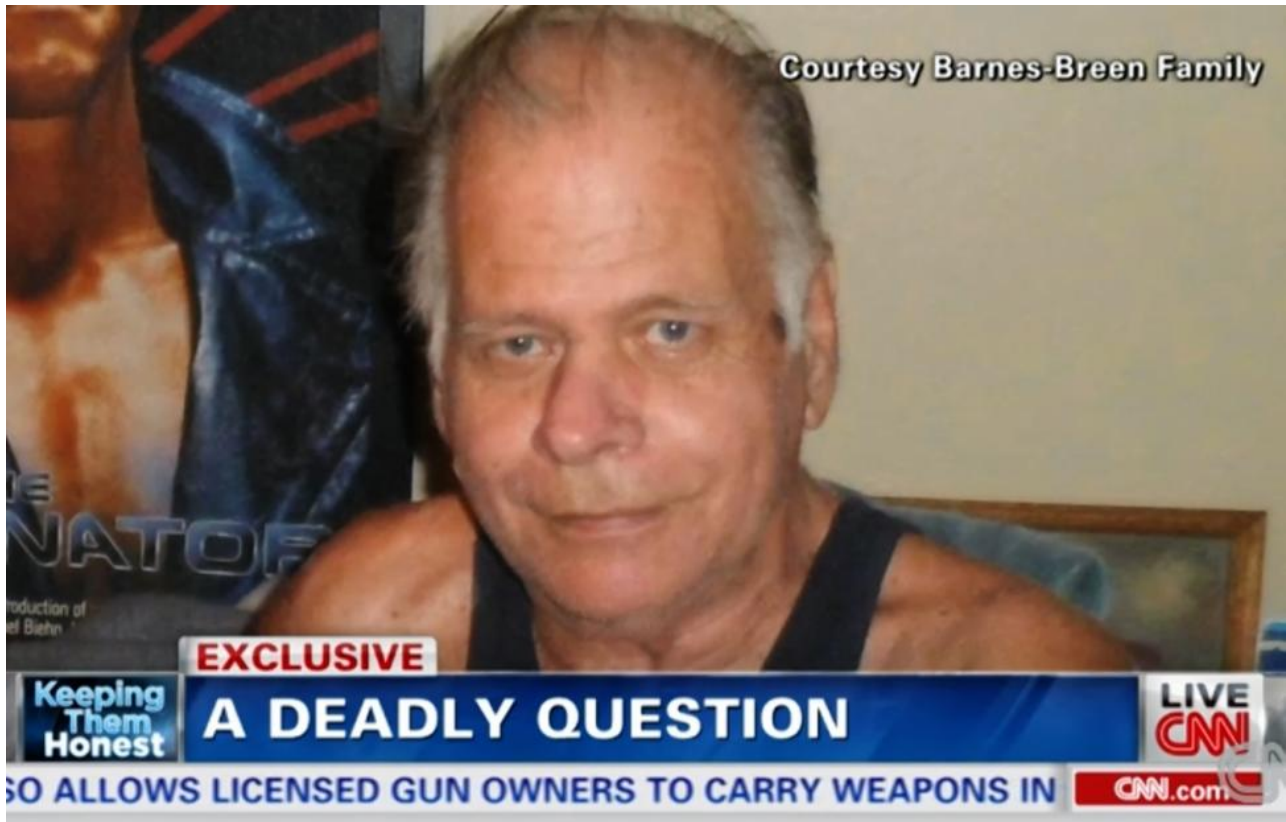
That hard copy is then placed into a secret electronic waiting list, Foote said, with the paper data being shredded. He also revealed that patients wouldn't be taken off the secret list until their appointment time was within 14 days or less —giving the appearance that the VA was improving waiting times.

"I feel very sorry for the people who work at the Phoenix VA. They all wish they could leave 'cause they know what they're doing is wrong," [Foote said](#), noting that many employees are afraid to speak out about the process.

Other high-level VA staff confirmed Foote's description to CNN.

For Navy veteran Thomas Breen, 71, the wait on the secret list ended tragically.

He was rushed to Phoenix VA emergency room in September 2013 with blood in his urine and a history of cancer. The family obtained a VA chart stating his case was deemed urgent with "one week" to see a doctor, but was sent home.



CNN 71-year-old Navy vet Thomas Breen died of Stage 4 bladder cancer. He went to the VA hospital in September, but his family wasn't contacted about an appointment to see a doctor until a week after his death.

His son Teddy Barnes-Breen and daughter-in-law Sally called daily to get Breen into a doctor, but were told they were should be patient. Breen died on Nov. 30 and his death certificate showed the cause was Stage 4 bladder cancer.

Sally said the VA finally called on Dec. 6 to confirm Breen's appointment.

"At the end is when he suffered. He screamed. He cried. And that's somethin' I'd never seen him do before, was cry. Never. Never. He cried in the kitchen. 'Don't let me die,'" [Sally said](#).

CNN obtained emails from July 2013 showing top management, including Phoenix VA Director Sharon Helman, was aware of wait times and the electronic off-the-books records. They also showed that some patients were waiting 6-20 weeks to get their first appointment with a primary care physician.

Footo sent letters to the VA Office of the Inspector General detailing the secret electronic waiting list and veteran deaths. Foote confirmed IG inspectors have interviewed him about the allegations.

"It is disheartening to hear allegations about Veterans care being compromised," [the agency said in a statement to CNN](#). "We have conducted robust internal reviews since these allegations

surfaced and welcome the results from the Office of Inspector General's review. We take these allegations seriously."



Ross D. Franklin/AP The Veterans Administration hospital in Phoenix.

Footo says the entire secret list and the reason for its existence was planned and created by top management at the Phoenix VA to avoid detection of the long wait times by veterans.

"This was a plan that involved the Pentad, which includes the director, the associate director, the assistant director, the chief of nursing, along with the medical chief of staff — in collaboration with the chief of H.A.S.," [he said](#).

The U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee in Washington is investigating the VA as well as veteran healthcare delays countrywide.

Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, has demanded the VA preserve all records in anticipation of a congressional investigation.

Congress has now ordered all records in Phoenix, secret or not, be preserved, including that of Thomas Breen.

<http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/health/40-veterans-die-va-hospital-secret-wait-list-report-article-1.1767284>