

**Department of
Veterans Affairs****Memorandum**

Date: July 23, 2014

From: Assistant Inspector General for Investigations (51)

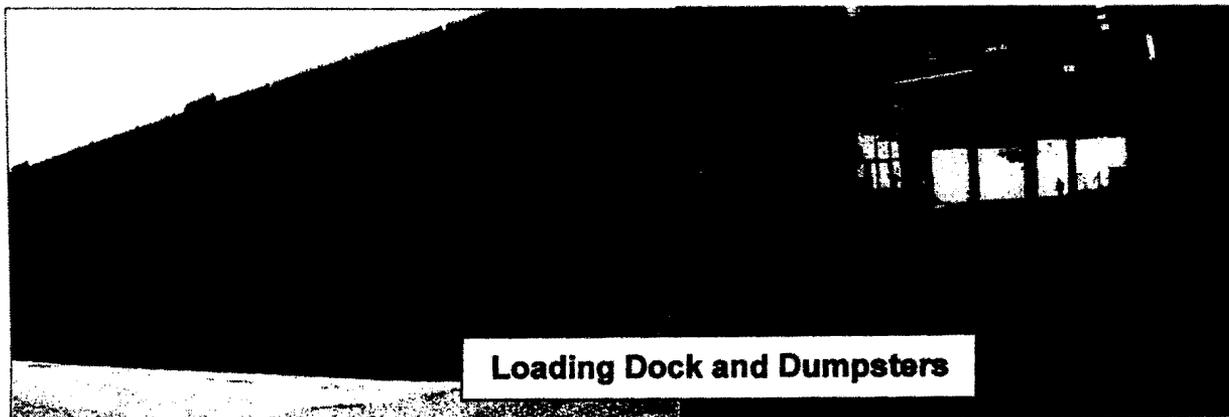
Subj: Management Implication Notification - Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)
(2014-03651-IQ-0127)

To: Under Secretary for Benefits (20)

This memorandum contains information on facility conditions at the VA Regional Office's space at 4700 Wissahickon Avenue, Philadelphia, PA, which are in direct violation of VA OSH Directive 7700. While assisting OIG Office of Audits and Evaluations in interviewing VBA employees in that office space, VA employees told us, and by our own observations, we learned of unacceptable conditions within this building, which reportedly have adversely impacted employee health, morale, and productivity.

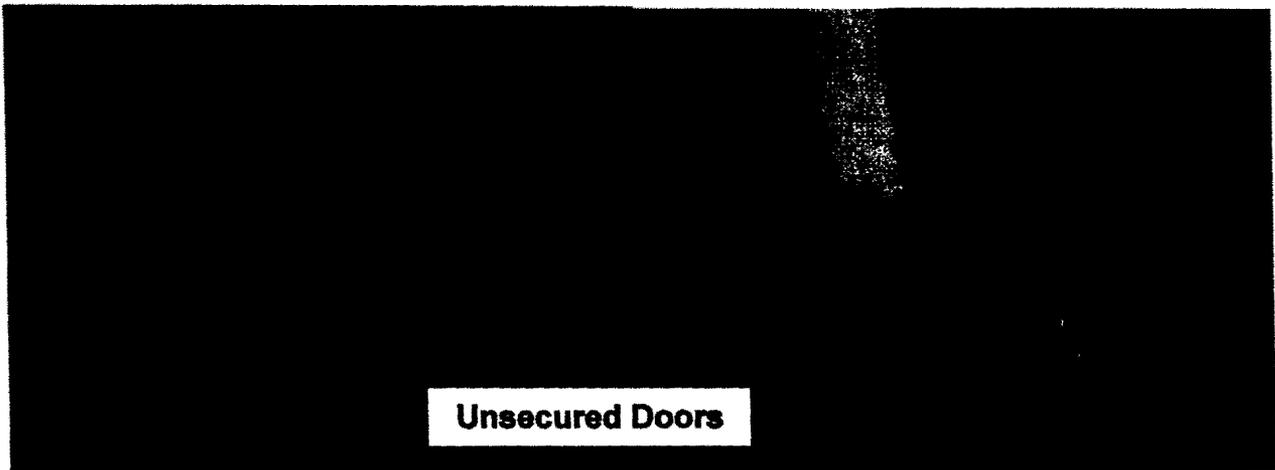
VA policy states that Under Secretaries shall ensure compliance with VA's OSH directives and handbooks, as well as ensure a safe and healthful work environment. It also requires a compliance with occupational safety and health requirements contained in Federal laws, regulations, executive orders, VA directives, and labor-management OSH agreements. VA Directive 7700, dated February 11, 2009.

The VBA call center shares a warehouse built in 1928 with various other Federal, public, and private employers. It is located in an industrial, economically depressed, high-crime area. A registered sex offender even lists this as his address. To enter the property from one of the access points, employees must walk through a loading dock, and one employee told us that she was almost hit by a vehicle as she entered the building through this loading dock.

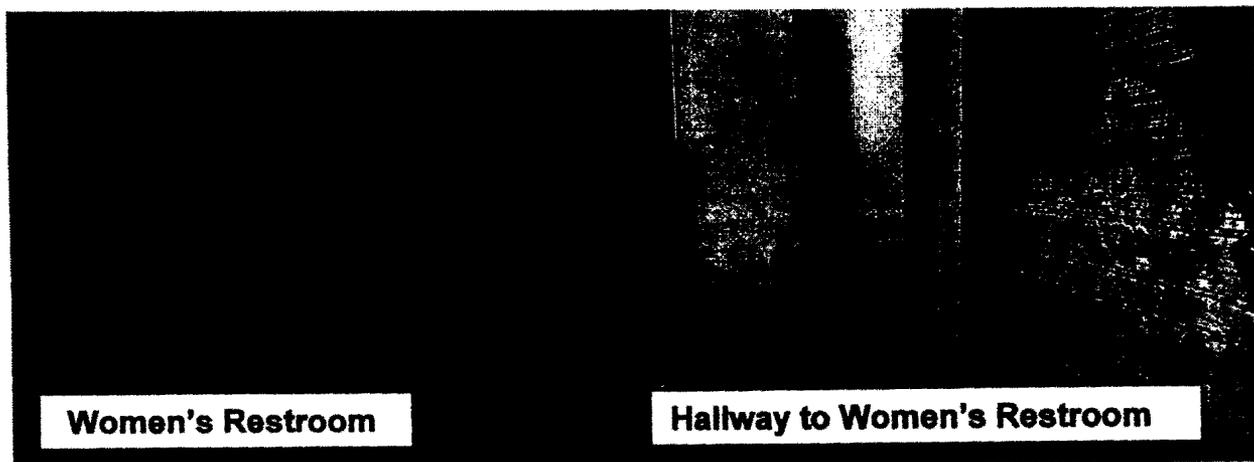


VBA employees need a badge to enter their space; however, it is located within an unsecured building, allowing anyone to follow an employee into VBA's space. Doors appear to be completely unsecured in the majority of areas near VBA's space. There have

been reported thefts of a VA laptop and money from VBA's space. The security officer told us that he told his superiors that there were security concerns within the building, and employees told us that at any given time, there was only one security officer on the premises.

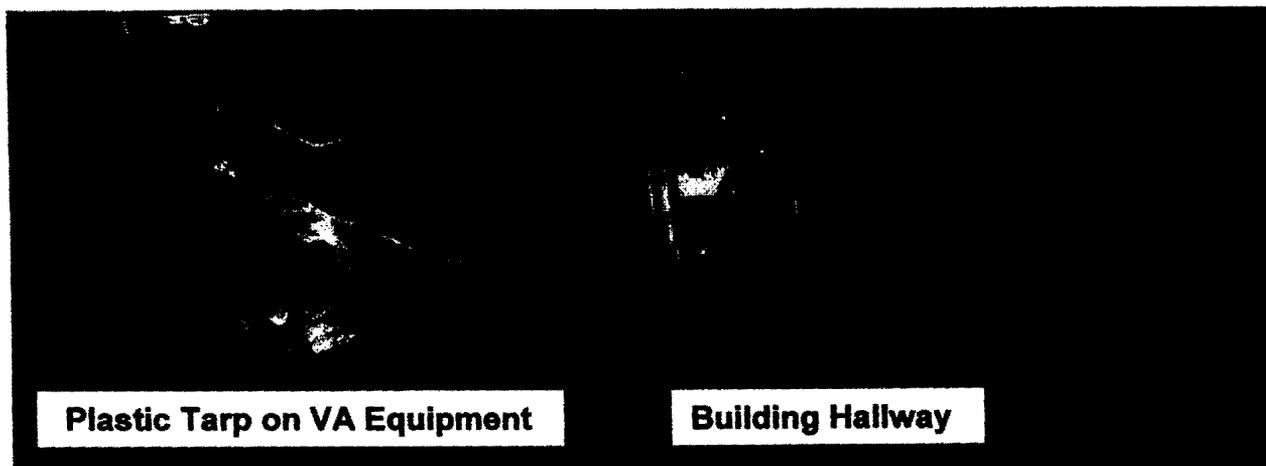


There are no restrooms restricted to VBA use and VBA employees use the same bathrooms used by non-VA rehabilitation patients in the building who periodically use these restrooms for bathing or other activities. One female employee said that she was told to dress down and wear baggy clothes when using the gym equipment and that she should be careful around the rehabilitation patients, as some can be overly attentive, aggressive, or violent. One women's restroom is located in a rundown darkened area of the loading dock, and female employees, to include those who are pregnant, must walk adjacent to the loading dock to get to this restroom. Employees said that temperature control during the colder months in the warehouse is so poor that they can see their breath crystalize and fingernails turn blue at their workstations. They also report that the hallways leading to the restrooms are unheated, as are the restrooms because of broken heaters. Consequently, employees report wearing winter coats to the restroom during their closely-monitored restroom breaks in cold weather.



Moreover, VBA's space has a false ceiling, numerous ceiling tiles are missing, and we clearly saw from inside VBA's space to the non-VA area. VBA's space contains veterans' personally identified information (PII), which could be easily accessed from the non-VA space through the false ceiling or unsecured doors. We found VBA's space and the building damp, dank, smelly, musty, and moldy, and employees told us that they witnessed infestations of vermin and gnats in their working areas. Moreover, noise pollution in which every noise echoes and reverberates and flickering overhead lights in the conference rooms serve as distractions to the employees.

VBA call center supervisors keep plastic tarps near employee work stations to cover VA equipment when it rains to avoid water damage from the leaking roof. More than one employee told us that once they moved into this building, they began suffering from various health problems as a result of the stale air and environment. OIG investigators noticed a difference in their breathing abilities, after spending only a few days there. EPA refers to this as "sick building syndrome," described as situations in which building occupants experience acute health and comfort effects that appear to be linked to time spent in a building. www.epa.gov/iaq/pdfs/sick_building_factsheet.pdf,



GSA's Sustainable Facilities Tool website, <https://sftool.gov/>, describes indoor environmental quality (IEQ) as the conditions inside a building and that studies show an increase in worker productivity when improvements are made to a space's IEQ.

We suggest that you take whatever immediate action is necessary to ensure that this VBA workspace complies with VA's OSH directives and handbooks, as well as ensure a safe and healthful work environment and that the space complies with occupational safety and health requirements contained in Federal laws, regulations, and executive orders. Further, ensure that all veteran records are adequately protected.

Please contact me at (202) 461-4526, if you have any questions or require additional information.

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