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(d) *Limitation on disclosure and use.* Records containing patient identifying information disclosed under this section may be disclosed only back to VA and used only to carry out an audit or evaluation purpose, or, to investigate or prosecute criminal or other activities as authorized by a court order entered under § 1.494 of this part.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7332(b)(2)(B))

COURT ORDERS AUTHORIZING DISCLOSURES AND USE

§ 1.490 Legal effect of order.

The records to which §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part apply may be disclosed if authorized by an appropriate order of a court of competent jurisdiction granted after application showing good cause therefore. In assessing good cause the court is statutorily required to weigh the public interest and the need for disclosure against the injury to the patient or subject, to the physician-patient relationship, and to the treatment services. Upon the granting of such order, the court, in determining the extent to which any disclosure of all or any part of any record is necessary, is required by statute to impose appropriate safeguards against unauthorized disclosure. An order of a court of competent jurisdiction to produce records subject to §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part will not be sufficient unless the order reflects that the court has complied with the requirements of 38 U.S.C. 7332(b)(2)(D). Such an order from a Federal court compels disclosure. However, such an order from a State court only acts to authorize the Secretary to exercise discretion pursuant to 38 U.S.C. 5701(b)(5) and 38 CFR 1.511 to disclose such records. It does not compel disclosure.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7332(b)(2)(D))

§ 1.491 Confidential communications.

(a) A court order under §§ 1.490 through 1.499 of this part may authorize disclosure of confidential communications made by a patient to a treatment program in the course of diagnosis, treatment, or referral for treatment only if:

(1) The disclosure is necessary to protect against an existing threat to life

or of serious bodily injury, including circumstances which constitute suspected child abuse and neglect and verbal threats against third parties;

(2) The disclosure is necessary in connection with investigation or prosecution of an extremely serious crime, such as one which directly threatens loss of life or serious bodily injury, including homicide, rape, kidnapping, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, or child abuse and neglect; or

(3) The disclosure is in connection with litigation or an administrative proceeding in which the patient offers testimony or other evidence pertaining to the content of the confidential communications.

(b) [Reserved]

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§ 1.492 Order not applicable to records disclosed without consent to researchers, auditors and evaluators.

A court order under §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part may not authorize qualified personnel, who have received patient identifying information from VA without consent for the purpose of conducting research, audit or evaluation, to disclose that information or use it to conduct any criminal investigation or prosecution of a patient. However, a court order under § 1.495 of this part may authorize disclosure and use of records to investigate or prosecute VA personnel.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§ 1.493 Procedures and criteria for orders authorizing disclosures for noncriminal purposes.

(a) *Application.* An order authorizing the disclosure of patient records covered by §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part for purposes other than criminal investigation or prosecution may be applied for by any person having a legally recognized interest in the disclosure which is sought. The application may be filed separately or as part of a pending civil action in which it appears that the patient records are needed to provide evidence. An application must use a fictitious name, such as John Doe, to refer to any patient and may not contain or otherwise disclose any patient identifying information unless the patient is the applicant or has

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given a written consent (meeting the requirements of §1.475 of this part) to disclosure or the court has ordered the record of the proceeding sealed from public scrutiny.

(b) *Notice.* The patient and VA facility from whom disclosure is sought must be given:

(1) Adequate notice in a manner which will not disclose patient identifying information to other persons; and

(2) An opportunity to file a written response to the application, or to appear in person, for the limited purpose of providing evidence on whether the statutory and regulatory criteria for the issuance of the court order are met.

(c) *Review of evidence: Conduct of hearing.* Any oral argument, review of evidence, or hearing on the application must be held in the judge's chambers or in some manner which ensures that patient identifying information is not disclosed to anyone other than a party to the proceeding, the patient, or VA, unless the patient requests an open hearing in a manner which meets the written consent requirements of §1.475 of this part. The proceeding may include an examination by the judge of the patient records referred to in the application.

(d) *Criteria for entry of order.* An order under this section may be entered only if the court determines that good cause exists. To make this determination the court must find that:

(1) Other ways of obtaining the information are not available or would not be effective; and

(2) The public interest and need for the disclosure outweigh the potential injury to the patient, the physician-patient relationship and the treatment services.

(e) *Content of order.* An order authorizing a disclosure must:

(1) Limit disclosure to those parts of the patient's record which are essential to fulfill the objective of the order;

(2) Limit disclosure to those persons whose need for information is the basis for the order; and

(3) Include such other measures as are necessary to limit disclosure for the protection of the patient, the physician-patient relationship and the treatment services; for example, sealing from public scrutiny the record of

any proceeding for which disclosure of a patient's record has been ordered.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§ 1.494 Procedures and criteria for orders authorizing disclosure and use of records to criminally investigate or prosecute patients.

(a) *Application.* An order authorizing the disclosure or use of patient records covered by §§1.460 through 1.499 of this part to criminally investigate or prosecute a patient may be applied for by VA or by any person conducting investigative or prosecutorial activities with respect to the enforcement of criminal laws. The application may be filed separately, as part of an application for a subpoena or other compulsory process, or in a pending criminal action. An application must use a fictitious name such as John Doe, to refer to any patient and may not contain or otherwise disclose patient identifying information unless the court has ordered the record of the proceeding sealed from public scrutiny.

(b) *Notice and hearing.* Unless an order under §1.495 of this part is sought with an order under this section, VA must be given:

(1) Adequate notice (in a manner which will not disclose patient identifying information to third parties) of an application by a person performing a law enforcement function;

(2) An opportunity to appear and be heard for the limited purpose of providing evidence on the statutory and regulatory criteria for the issuance of the court order; and

(3) An opportunity to be represented by counsel.

(c) *Review of evidence: Conduct of hearings.* Any oral argument, review of evidence, or hearing on the application shall be held in the judge's chambers or in some other manner which ensures that patient identifying information is not disclosed to anyone other than a party to the proceedings, the patient, or VA. The proceeding may include an examination by the judge of the patient records referred to in the application.

(d) *Criteria.* A court may authorize the disclosure and use of patient records for the purpose of conducting a criminal investigation or prosecution

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of a patient only if the court finds that all of the following criteria are met:

(1) The crime involved is extremely serious, such as one which causes or directly threatens loss of life or serious bodily injury including, but not limited to, homicide, rape, kidnapping, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, and child abuse and neglect.

(2) There is a reasonable likelihood that the records will disclose information of substantial value in the investigation or prosecution.

(3) Other ways of obtaining the information are not available or would not be effective.

(4) The potential injury to the patient, to the physician-patient relationship and to the ability of VA to provide services to other patients is outweighed by the public interest and the need for the disclosure.

(5) If the applicant is a person performing a law enforcement function, VA has been represented by counsel independent of the applicant.

(e) *Content of order.* Any order authorizing a disclosure or use of patient records under this section must:

(1) Limit disclosure and use to those parts of the patient's record which are essential to fulfill the objective of the order;

(2) Limit disclosure to those law enforcement and prosecutorial officials who are responsible for, or are conducting, the investigation or prosecution, and limit their use of the records to investigation and prosecution of extremely serious crime or suspected crime specified in the applications; and

(3) Include such other measures as are necessary to limit disclosure and use to the fulfillment on only that public interest and need found by the court.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7332(c))

§ 1.495 Procedures and criteria for orders authorizing disclosure and use of records to investigate or prosecute VA or employees of VA.

(a) *Application.* (1) An order authorizing the disclosure or use of patient records covered by §§ 1.460 through 1.499 of this part to criminally or administratively investigate or prosecute VA (or employees or agents of VA) may be applied for by an administrative, regu-

latory, supervisory, investigative, law enforcement, or prosecutorial agency having jurisdiction over VA activities.

(2) The application may be filed separately or as part of a pending civil or criminal action against VA (or agents or employees of VA) in which it appears that the patient records are needed to provide material evidence. The application must use a fictitious name, such as John Doe, to refer to any patient and may not contain or otherwise disclose any patient identifying information unless the court has ordered the record of the proceeding sealed from public scrutiny or the patient has given a written consent (meeting the requirements of § 1.475 of this part) to that disclosure.

(b) *Notice not required.* An application under this section may, in the discretion of the court, be granted without notice. Although no express notice is required to VA or to any patient whose records are to be disclosed, upon implementation of an order so granted VA or the patient must be afforded an opportunity to seek revocation or amendment of that order, limited to the presentation of evidence on the statutory and regulatory criteria for the issuance of the court order.

(c) *Requirements for order.* An order under this section must be entered in accordance with, and comply with the requirements of, § 1.493(d) and (e) of this part.

(d) *Limitations on disclosure and use of patient identifying information.* (1) An order entered under this section must require the deletion of patient identifying information from any documents made available to the public.

(2) No information obtained under this section may be used to conduct any investigation or prosecution of a patient, or be used as the basis for an application for an order under § 1.494 of this part.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§ 1.496 Orders authorizing the use of undercover agents and informants to criminally investigate employees or agents of VA.

(a) *Application.* A court order authorizing the placement of an undercover agent or informant in a VA drug or alcohol abuse, HIV infection, or sickle

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cell anemia treatment program as an employee or patient may be applied for by any law enforcement or prosecutorial agency which has reason to believe that employees or agents of the VA treatment program are engaged in criminal misconduct.

(b) *Notice.* The VA facility director must be given adequate notice of the application and an opportunity to appear and be heard (for the limited purpose of providing evidence on the statutory and regulatory criteria for the issuance of the court order), unless the application asserts a belief that:

(1) The VA facility director is involved in the criminal activities to be investigated by the undercover agent or informant; or

(2) The VA facility director will intentionally or unintentionally disclose the proposed placement of an undercover agent or informant to the employees or agents who are suspected of criminal activities.

(c) *Criteria.* An order under this section may be entered only if the court determines that good cause exists. To make this determination the court must find:

(1) There is reason to believe that an employee or agent of a VA treatment program is engaged in criminal activity;

(2) Other ways of obtaining evidence of this criminal activity are not available or would not be effective; and

(3) The public interest and need for the placement of an undercover agent or informant in the VA treatment program outweigh the potential injury to patients of the program, physician-patient relationships and the treatment services.

(d) *Content of order.* An order authorizing the placement of an undercover agent or informant in a VA treatment program must:

(1) Specifically authorize the placement of an undercover agent or an informant;

(2) Limit the total period of the placement to six months;

(3) Prohibit the undercover agent or informant from disclosing any patient identifying information obtained from the placement except as necessary to criminally investigate or prosecute

employees or agents of the VA treatment program; and

(4) Include any other measures which are appropriate to limit any potential disruption of the program by the placement and any potential for a real or apparent breach of patient confidentiality; for example, sealing from public scrutiny the record of any proceeding for which disclosure of a patient's record has been ordered.

(e) *Limitation on use of information.* No information obtained by an undercover agent or informant placed under this section may be used to criminally investigate or prosecute any patient or as the basis for an application for an order under § 1.494 of this part.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 7334)

§§ 1.497-1.499 [Reserved]

RELEASE OF INFORMATION FROM DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS CLAIMANT RECORDS

NOTE: Sections 1.500 through 1.527 concern the availability and release of information from files, records, reports, and other papers and documents in Department of Veterans Affairs custody pertaining to claims under any of the laws administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs. As to the release of information from Department of Veterans Affairs records other than claimant records, see §§ 1.550 through 1.558. Sections 1.500 through 1.526 implement the provisions of 38 U.S.C. 5701, 5702.

[32 FR 10848, July 25, 1967]

AUTHORITY: Sections 1.500 to 1.527 issued under 72 Stat. 1114, 1236, as amended; 38 U.S.C. 501, 5701.

§ 1.500 General.

(a) Files, records, reports, and other papers and documents pertaining to any claim filed with the Department of Veterans Affairs, whether pending or adjudicated, and the names and addresses of present or former personnel of the armed services, and their dependents, in the possession of the Department of Veterans Affairs, will be deemed confidential and privileged, and no disclosure therefrom will be made except in the circumstances and under the conditions set forth in §§ 1.501 through 1.526.

(b) A claimant may not have access to or custody of official Department of