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Report on Research Compliance Volume 15, Number 4. April 30, 2018 U. of North Texas Pays $13 Million, Changes Effort Reporting Process After FCA Allegations

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Time-and-effort reporting has felt like the bane of research compliance officials' existence for years. Pilots have been tried to replace this method of determining accurate salary payments, resulting in mixed assessments by federal officials. And now, for the third time, a university has agreed to a multimillion-dollar payment to settle allegations that its effort reporting system led to multiple violations of the False Claims Act (FCA).

Although previous settlements were the result of whistleblower suits, the $13.073 million payment the University of North Texas Health Sciences Center agreed to pay was triggered by UNTHSC's own disclosure to the government. The agreement was announced by U.S. Attorney Erin Nealy Cox of the Northern District of Texas on Feb. 16. UNTHSC issued a related statement on the same day.

In its announcement, UNTHSC said it discovered problems in 2015 and that these had occurred from Jan. 1, 2011, through Feb. 29, 2016. It notified the government of "errors" by a letter dated Jan. 10, 2017.

"Upon learning of the possible compliance issues, UNTHSC initiated an internal audit and investigation that reviewed approximately 120 NIH-funded research projects over the six-year time period and implemented immediate corrective actions," the statement said.

Neither the government nor UNTHSC responded to *RRC*'s request for details about the payments, including how late certifications were, what the inaccuracies were and how UNTHSC discovered them. It also is not clear what the $13 million is based on.

The government said UNTHSC "inaccurately measured, tracked and paid researchers for effort spent on certain NIH-sponsored research grants."

In particular, the government claimed UNTHSC "and certain of its principal investigators:

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