



AFGE, NVAC Fight for More VBA Workers

The American Federation of Government Employees and its National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC) successfully lobbied lawmakers to hire more employees to process disability compensation and pension claims at the Veterans Benefits Administration.

The Bush administration wants to cut the days to process these claims from 167 to 125 but proposed in its 2007 budget to cut the number of employees processing the claims by 149. AFGE found it absurd and sought help from lawmakers. The House Committee on Veterans Affairs agreed with AFGE and proposed to add 200 new employees to process these claims.

AFGE and NVAC also raised concerns about the inadequate training VBA provides to its workers. AFGE's concerns were the focal point of a congressional hearing in March where VBA officials were grilled over the issue. AFGE is demanding VBA fully train their workers so they are able to serve veterans better. AFGE will continue to work to make sure employees get the tools they need to do their jobs. Our representatives will attend town hall meetings to be held in major cities between May and September by the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission to discuss benefits issues.

AFGE, NVAC Question Project HERO

AFGE and NVAC oppose VA's pilot project called Healthcare Effectiveness through Resource Optimization, or Project HERO, that

could lead to wholesale outsourcing of healthcare for veterans.

Currently, veterans are allowed to go to private doctors only in special circumstances. They are, for example, allowed to go to a private clinic or hospital if they live far away from VA facilities or if VA can't provide the specialty care they need. The use of private doctors is limited because they are much more expensive than VA doctors. Project HERO undermines the VA's research and development capability and its world class services that are well documented in the media. This costly project is happening when VA is facing budget constraints and doesn't have enough money to hire doctors and nurses needed to lessen its reliance on expensive private care.

VA has plans to carry out the pilot projects at four Veterans Integrated Service Networks -- 8, 16, 20, and 23 -- by the end of this year. AFGE will continue to raise our concerns with lawmakers to let them know the project does more harm than good for our veterans.

NVAC Seeks to Participate in BPR

NVAC is urging its locals to get involved in the VA's reorganization and consolidation effort called Business Process Reengineering.

A BPR pilot project is being conducted on nearly 10,000 laundry and food service positions across the country and is expected to be completed July next year. NVAC is asking VA locals to aggressively demand to be on the panels to make sure our voices are heard. The AFGE local president in Colorado has been

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included in a panel that analyzes the pros and cons of BPR at his location.

BPR is an alternative to outsourcing studies which are prohibited at VA unless Congress provides separate funding for them. While AFGE prefers BPR over outsourcing studies, we still have some concerns over how it will be carried out because BPR could result in closing of facilities and job losses.

VA has plans to apply BPR to 14 functions covering 36,000 positions. The pilot projects on laundries and food services, which started in May, are expected to be complete July next year.

AFGE, NVAC to File National Grievance, Appeal Regarding Doctors' Market Pay

AFGE and NVAC will file a national grievance with VA after the agency ignored the union's recommendations on doctors and dentists to be on the locality pay panels.

The Health Care Personnel Enhancement Act, enacted December 2004, established a new pay system for VA doctors and dentists. The law, which took effect January this year, requires that doctors and dentists be allowed to participate in the compensation panels that set market pay for each locality. AFGE is concerned because some panels have already come up with unfair rates.

AFGE also questioned the data VA used to set market pay. We filed a Freedom of Information Act request in January asking for the pay data the department gathered from different sources, including the Association of American Medical Colleges and Physician Executive Management Center. But VA in April denied AFGE's request, saying the items were copyrighted publications.

AFGE is filing an appeal of VA's refusal to give AFGE the pay data and surveys the department used to set locality pay.

NVAC Files Unfair Labor Practice Charge Over IT Reorganization

NVAC filed an unfair labor practice charge against VA for detailing information technology employees without bargaining with the council.

The charge was filed April 27 with the Federal Labor Relations Authority after VA refused to bargain on the issue and instead started detailing IT workers to the department's Chief Information Officer as part of its IT reorganization plan that requires transfers of budget, operations, and maintenance to the CIO office.

The detail of these employees is a refutation of the collective bargaining agreement Article 12. The council repeatedly demanded bargaining on the issue before the detail took place but VA went ahead with its plan.

Besides the transfer of IT employees, NVAC is also concerned that the centralization would take away the voices of frontline workers such as nurses who use computers to work with patients on a regular basis. AFGE has been talking to lawmakers about the issue.

NVAC files national grievance for VBA unfair performance standards

NVAC filed a national grievance on May 1 against VBA for imposing unfair and unreasonable performance standards for claim processing employees.

The grievance is in response to a VBA report indicating that 31 percent of about 3,000 Veterans Service Representatives failed to meet the performance standards. The council charged that VBA set performance standards that are unattainable, such as daily workload requirement. VBA failed to comply with the 2005 National Memorandum of Understanding that requires the agency to monitor employees' performance standards and make adjustments when necessary.