



AFGE Details VBA Training Debacle on Capitol Hill

AFGE National Secretary-Treasurer David Cox told lawmakers that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is plagued with training deficiencies that lead to a backlog of claims and lessen employees' chances of passing the skills certification test.

Speaking before the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs on Sept. 13, Cox said VBA lacks training standards that can be applied to VBA offices across the country. The current training tools and centralized training programs are much more like guidance than a national training plan, resulting in tremendous variations in quality among regional offices. To provide Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) with refresher training on "Duty to Assist," for example, the only guidance given to the trainer is a set of four topics and the requirement that it last one hour.

"Flawed training and performance standards lead to processing delays and more appeals, and most important, impact every veteran filing a claim with VBA," Cox testified. He added that supervisors facing tremendous pressure to clear backlogs are also likely to sacrifice training for production numbers.

Cox offered a number of recommendations including creating a joint labor/management team to develop a formal national training plan with a

clearly defined curriculum, developing a cadre of effective trainers with formalized training skills, and making continuing education mandatory to allow employees to keep up with new laws, regulations and court decisions.

In May, AFGE filed a national grievance against VBA for imposing unfair and unreasonable performance standards. We are now in the process of selecting the arbitrator for the case.

AFGE Fights Merger of VA, University Hospitals

AFGE is fighting efforts to merge VA hospitals with medical school hospitals as the union believes it would jeopardize VA's scarce health care dollars and services to veterans.

VA has been working with the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) to replace the current VA hospital with a new facility that will be used by both VA and the university. The agency has plans to use this joint venture as a model for future mergers elsewhere. AFGE opposes the Charleston VA-MUSC project because it will divert scarce VA dollars to a non-VA facility and make it more difficult to ensure that VA health care dollars go to veterans. Veterans will also have to wait even longer for care than they do now as they will be sharing the queue with non-veterans. In addition, the union agrees with the veterans groups that co-location of the two facilities will severely diminish



veterans health care especially the medical specialties such as prosthesis, traumatic brain injury, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

To make things worse, VA has so far left front line health care workers out of the process despite several requests from AFGE.

VA has been trying to push this project forward and was successful when the House in September passed a 2007 VA construction authorization bill that would provide \$70 million for the Charleston VA-MUSC project. AFGE shared its concerns about this project with Senate authorizers, and fortunately, the Senate's version of the bill didn't have that provision. Now the issue will have to be resolved in conference later this year. AFGE and its physician members in Charleston will continue to make management and lawmakers aware of the potentially harmful effects on veterans.

Master Agreement Renegotiations Continue

Master Agreement renegotiations between AFGE's National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC) and VA continue to go on with agreement on five articles so far. There are about 80 more to go.

NVAC has been in negotiation with the agency since June and has signed off on several articles including Employee Rights, Governing Laws and Regulations, Recognition and Coverage, and Labor Management Cooperation.

The Master Agreement covers workplace rules for 150,000 VA employees AFGE represents. The current contract, signed in 1997, is one of the most worker-friendly contracts in the government.

12 Unions Join AFGE to Pressure Congress Not to Repeal Ban on Outsourcing Studies

Twelve labor unions are joining AFGE in its fight against the Bush administration's and some lawmakers' plan to lift the current spending ban on the use of scarce health care dollars for expensive outsourcing studies.

The unions on Sept. 25 wrote to the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees asking them not to repeal the decades-old ban. The Veterans Health Administration, by law, is not allowed to conduct outsourcing studies without separate funding from Congress because health care dollars should be used only to care for veterans. But the Bush administration and some lawmakers have been trying to lift the ban. AFGE last year successfully fought to block the complete repeal of the spending ban.

“These cost comparison studies fail to produce taxpayer savings and target jobs held mostly by disabled veterans, women and minorities,” said the unions in the letter to the committees' chairmen and ranking members. “Last year [the Government Accountability Office] found that VA lacks the mechanisms to track the costs of privatization studies. Clearly, it is not in the interest of veterans and taxpayers to give VA permission to divert scarce health care dollars to these studies.”

AFGE Offers Liability Insurance to Members

Just like anybody, federal employees are vulnerable to accusations and false allegations ranging from insubordination to medical mistakes. It takes only one angry supervisor, one failed assignment or one upset patient to wreck federal employees' professional lives and financial health.

As lawsuits against federal employees are increasing at an alarming rate, AFGE is offering the Professional Liability Insurance program that has been developed exclusively for its members. For \$11 a pay period, benefits include \$100,000 for defense costs, \$1 million to pay for judgements against you, and \$10,000 for accidental death while on the job. Please refer to the policy for all the details.

For more information and application, go to the Member Benefits section of the AFGE Web site at www.afge.org or call 1-800-236-1154.