



VA Ordered to Pay Hundreds of Workers Saturday Premium Pay

In response to the American Federation of Government Employees' (AFGE) protest, an arbitrator May 30 ordered the Department of Veterans Affairs to give back pay dating to January 2004 to hundreds of Veterans Health Administration employees previously determined by VA to be eligible for Saturday Premium Pay.

VA had added these employees – 10 occupations – to the list of workers eligible for premium pay since early 2006, but the workers never received it.

The arbitrator's decision is part of a series of grievances and protests filed by AFGE to demand that all VHA employees working on Saturdays be paid Saturday Premium Pay. VA has refused to provide Saturday Premium Pay to all healthcare workers as it narrowly interprets the definition of the terms “direct patient-care services” and “services incident to direct patient-care services” as stated in a 2003 law. The agency came up with only 22 occupations, leaving more than 800 others ineligible. AFGE filed a grievance and the arbitrator in 2005 sided with the union, forcing VA to come up with a new list. A year later VA came up with 10 more occupations, at which point AFGE filed another protest demanding more occupations be listed.

VA is in the process of determining which of the remaining 863 occupations should be added to the list. The May 30 decision also requires VA to include AFGE in the determination process before any decisions to include or exclude any occupations are made. It also orders the agency to provide AFGE with the 863 occupations' job descriptions which VA uses to determine eligibility.

VA, however, is appealing the decision with the Federal Labor Relations Authority.

Filner Supports Effort to Restore Bargaining Rights at VA

AFGE has received support from several lawmakers including that of House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, D-Calif., to fix a 1991 law to make it clear that the union can bargain over important workplace issues.

The law, 38 USC 7422 which governs personnel issues at VA, allows VA employees to bargain and file grievances over working conditions except any matter concerning direct patient care, clinical competence, and compensation. Increasingly, however, VA management is interpreting these exceptions very broadly, which poses a big problem when it comes to patient safety. VA employees, for example, are not allowed to bargain over staffing ratios and mandatory overtime for nurses and doctors even though VA hospitals are severely understaffed.

The problem is getting worse now that VA managers are increasingly asserting 7422 themselves instead of requesting a 7422 ruling from the Under Secretary of Health as required by law. AFGE is now working to get a co-sponsor of the bill that would allow changes to Sec. 7422.

Senate Panel, House Give VA Largest Budget Increase in 77 Years

The House June 15 passed the 2008 appropriations bill for the Department of Veterans Affairs, providing an increase of \$6.7 billion above the 2007 level, the largest increase in funding for veterans health care in 77 years.

The \$43.2 billion in discretionary spending for VA is \$3.6 billion more than the White House requested. It is also \$1 million more than the amount asked for in the 2008 budget blueprints that came out of the House and Senate Budget Committees in March. The Senate Appropriations Committee June 14 passed its version of the bill proposing similar increases for the agency. It is unclear when the full Senate is going to take up the bill.

Bill to Make VA Funding Permanent Introduced

AFGE's effort in fixing VA's funding process took a step closer to becoming a reality when Rep. Phil Hare, D-Ill., in May introduced a bill that would make VA funding mandatory.

The union has been invited to testify on the issue before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee July 25. AFGE supports the bill to transform veterans' healthcare from a discretionary program to a mandatory program to ensure quality services for our country's veterans. Every year, VA's ability to provide timely services to veterans depends on how well it competes for funding. GAO in September last year found that VA's budget estimates were based on unrealistic assumptions, errors, and insufficient data. AFGE is circulating the support-VA-assured-funding postcards, which the union is asking its members to send to President Bush and lawmakers.

VA Committed to Hiring More Vets for Cemetery Jobs

VA has agreed to hire more veterans and in-house workers in response to AFGE's concern that many cemetery jobs have been contracted out.

During a June 7 meeting with AFGE Assistant General Counsel Jacqueline Sims and Legislative Representative Marilyn Park, VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs William Tuerk said he is committed to hiring more in-house workers especially veterans, who currently fill four out of five cemetery jobs.

AFGE in February sent Tuerk a letter calling for VA to immediately stop direct conversions of federal jobs to contractors without job competitions at VA cemeteries in Colorado and New Mexico. Outsourcing national cemetery jobs works against veterans as many of them are able to become self-

supporting because of these wage grade jobs.

AFGE Calls for Fair Compensation for Front-Line Workers

You'd think that if you perform exceptionally well, you'll get a bonus, right? Well, that's not always the case at VA. High performers at VA don't always get bonuses, and even if they do, the amount is ridiculously small compared with those given to their bosses.

The VA hospital in Minneapolis, for example, recently spent three-quarters of its bonus budget on managers while front-line workers get something as little as a \$50 bonus or a coffee card. This is indeed an agency wide problem. VA in fiscal 2006 doled out \$3.8 million in bonuses to its executives, paying the highest average bonuses among Cabinet agencies with some senior executives getting bonuses of \$33,000 each. This was happening even though the backlog of disability claims was rising as more soldiers returned home from Iraq and Afghanistan. AFGE is urging VA to narrow the bonus gap between its executives and rank-and-file workers.

AFGE Offers Solutions to Reduce Claims Backlog

AFGE Legislative Representative Marilyn Park spoke on behalf of VA employees at a House-sponsored roundtable discussion May 23 on how to tackle the huge backlog of veterans' disability benefits claims.

The war in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in more disability benefits claims filed, exacerbating the problem that has plagued the agency for years. Along with other participants, Park offered a number of suggestions on how to eliminate the backlog, one of which involved having one person handle a claim from start to finish through all appeals to avoid a situation where a new representative has to relearn a claim several times.

Park also talked about the need to recruit and retain employees and the need for more consistent training and performance standards. She asked that the career ladder for claim processors be automatically raised to the GS-11 level to align them with those doing the same job at other agencies. Currently, the VA claim processors can go as far as GS-10 and have to take a test to get promoted to GS-11.