



## **AFGE Details How Vets Are Attacked Under Bush Administration**

AFGE VA Council First Executive Vice President Mary Jean Burke told lawmakers the federal government doesn't do enough to hire and retain veterans, and in some cases, veterans are being attacked by their own government.

Speaking before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity Sept. 6, Burke said outsourcing certain federal jobs such as security guards and ground maintenance hurts veterans. The Army's new physical requirements for police officers and security guards also hurt veterans because when these veterans were hired, they were either grandfathered or given waivers for physical requirements. And now the Army wants to force these requirements on veterans, many of whom are disabled.

Many veterans working for the Defense Department could also lose their jobs along with their years of service and retirement income because of the new DoD personnel system that enormously weakens veterans' preference.

Under normal Reduction in Force rules, for example, if there is a RIF at a depot, all employees including veterans would be in the same big competitive area to compete for jobs with those holding similar jobs at the depot. Under the DoD personnel system, however, if the department is to eliminate C-5 aircraft maintenance jobs, veterans who work on this aircraft won't be able to compete for retention with those working on F-16 aircraft as managers are allowed to limit the size of the competitive area along the line of so-called "product lines" or "lines of business."

## **Senate Bans Outsourcing Without Job Competition at VA**

AFGE scored another victory when the Senate Sept. 6 passed the 2008 VA spending bill that would prohibit VA from outsourcing work performed by more than 10 employees without first conducting a job competition.

AFGE won by a strong margin – 52 to 39 – with clear bipartisan support for curbing illegal contracting out. The House bill passed in June, however, doesn't have the same provision. The House and the Senate will have to go to conference to solve the issue.

VA has a long history of outsourcing jobs without first conducting a job competition. Many VA laundries around the country have been privatized even though VA has not been able to prove that it saved the taxpayers' money. The agency was also outsourcing jobs at VA cemeteries in Colorado, Washington State and New Mexico and in these cases, the work was being performed by more than 10 federal employees. Outsourcing these wage grade jobs works against veterans as many of them are able to become self supporting because of these jobs. Similar work in the private sector usually pays less than a living wage with little or no benefits.

## **Senate Gives VA \$6.5 Billion Above 2007 Level**

Under the 2008 Military Construction-VA spending bill, which passed the Senate Sept. 6, VA would get \$43 billion for veterans health care, which is \$6.5 billion above the 2007 level and \$3.6



billion more than the President's budget request.

AFGE applauded the Senate for its overwhelming support for VA, which needs a big increase in funding to better meet the needs of veterans and men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The House in June passed a similar version of the bill, which would provide \$43.2 billion and allow VA to hire 1,100 claims processors.

## **AFGE Officer Tells Congress VA Needs Mandatory Funding**

Speaking before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs July 25, AFGE National Secretary Treasurer J. David Cox called for mandatory funding for VA in order to end the chronic budget shortfalls and staffing shortages caused by the current political process of having to fight for discretionary dollars every year.

VA is the only major federal health care system that relies on discretionary funding. 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 supports a bill introduced by Rep. Phil Hare, D-Ill., in May to transform veterans' healthcare from a discretionary program to a mandatory program to ensure quality services for our country's veterans.

## **GAO to Investigate VBA Training Program**

The House Veterans Affairs Committee in August asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate whether employees at the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) have received enough training needed to do their jobs.

The committee's request was a result of AFGE's repeated calls for oversight of VBA training program. VBA has set unrealistic performance goals without providing employees with enough resources including training. It has refused to hire enough people to do the work, resulting in a huge backlog of claims that employees get blamed for.

VBA also lacks training standards that can be applied to VBA offices across the country. The current centralized training programs are much more like guidance than a national training plan, resulting in tremendous variations in quality among regional offices.

## **GAO: Staffing Shortages at VA Hurt Disabled Veterans**

A shortage of employment coordinators at 57 VA regional centers results in veterans not receiving services they need, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a new report released this month.

GAO said VA admitted the 74 employment coordinators deployed at VA regional centers is not enough to provide employment services to disabled veterans who need help looking for work. AFGE has been sounding the alarm on VA staffing shortages and has called for VA to hire more employees especially doctors and nurses to care for veterans. The union also works with lawmakers every year to make sure VA has enough funding to take care of veterans, the number of which is climbing because of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## **Outgoing VA Chief Cites War for Claims Backlog**

VA Secretary Jim Nicholson told Congress delays in disability claims processing are likely to continue as long as the nation is at war.

Speaking on Capitol Hill Sept. 18, Nicholson said 1,100 new claim processors have been hired since he became secretary in 2005, but the agency is still faced with a huge backlog of disability claims and delays of up to 177 days. VA expects more claims to be filed as a result of the war and hopes to cut processing times to 150 days or less.

“VA can influence the output – claims decided – of its work product, but it cannot control the input – claims filed,” he said.

AFGE has offered several suggestions to reduce the backlog, including hiring more claim processors and 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.