



## **Bill Introduced to Restore Bargaining Rights at VA**

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) scored another victory when House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner, D-Calif., introduced a bill Nov. 6 to broaden the scope of collective bargaining, allowing health care workers to bargain over important workplace issues such as premium pay and mandatory overtime.

The current law allows VA employees to bargain and file grievances over working conditions except any matter concerning direct patient care, clinical competence and compensation. The bill, H.R. 4089, would repeal these exceptions.

VA has been abusing employees' rights as management interprets these exceptions very broadly, creating a big problem when it comes to workplace morale and patient safety. VA employees, for example, are not allowed to bargain over compressed work schedules for nurses even though it is widely available to nurses outside the VA and Congress passed legislation encouraging the VA to offer it.

Rep. Timothy Murphy, R-Penn., and Rep. Steven LaTourette, R-Ohio, co-sponsor the bill.

"We applaud Congressmen Filner, Murphy, and LaTourette for having the courage to stand with VA employees," said AFGE National President John Gage. "It was never the intent of Congress to grant collective bargaining rights for VA employees and then water them down with so many exceptions that

no workplace dispute could be bargained over."

## **AFGE Pushes for Major Changes at VA as Bush Nominates New VA Chief**

Following President Bush's decision to nominate retired Army Lt. Gen. James Peake as Veterans Affairs Secretary, AFGE is urging the new leadership to address the agency's weaknesses, including chronic budget shortfalls and staffing shortages.

"It is critical that we take this opportunity to accent our strengths and address the system's critical failures of chronic budget shortfalls, inadequate resources, and staffing shortages," said AFGE National Veterans Affairs Council President Alma Lee.

Specifically, the new leadership at VA must:

Re-establish Labor-Management Partnerships dissolved by President Bush when he took office in 2001.

Increase oversight of how funds are dispersed on the local and regional level.

Mandate nationwide standards for staffing at VA medical facilities so veterans do not need to be turned away or placed on long waiting lists.

Honor existing rules governing public-private job competitions to keep quality VA health care inside the agency without unnecessary reliance on costly outside contractors.

Peake was nominated Oct. 30 following the resignation of VA Secretary Jim Nicholson and will have to be approved by the Senate.

## **Alma Lee Re-elected as NVAC President for 6th Term**

Alma Lee was re-elected as the president of AFGE's National Veterans Affairs Council at the NVAC Convention in November to represent the largest bargaining council within AFGE representing more than 150,000 VA employees.

"I ask all of you, whoever you supported, to unite behind the elected officers as we continue the vital task of representing our employees in these most difficult times," Lee said after being re-elected. "The Union is not me, it is not you. It is US! WE are the Union! Let us never forget. WE are stronger together!"

Lee has been the council president since 1992.

Also re-elected were Council Treasurer Dorothy Jefferson and the three vice presidents: First Executive Vice President MJ Burke; 2nd Executive Vice President Oscar L. Williams Jr.; and 3rd Executive Vice President Bill Wetmore.

## **AFGE Calls on Congress to Hold VA Accountable for Recruiting, Retention Problems**

Speaking before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health Oct. 18, AFGE National Secretary Treasurer J. David Cox called on Congress to hold VA accountable for failing to fully and fairly implement provisions passed by Congress to help recruit and retain quality health care professionals.

Congress in the past five years passed several important bills that seek to provide competitive pay to doctors, nurses and dentists and to offer nurses flexible work schedules with less mandatory overtime. VA, however, allowed local facilities to ignore these new laws, forcing qualified workers out of VA and into the private sector.

For example, 77 percent of all Registered Nurses (RNs) resignations occur within the first five years, according to 2007 VA data. Other professions have equally high attrition rates: 71 percent for doctors, 77 percent for pharmacists, and 79 percent for Licensed Practical Nurses.

"Chronic staffing shortages result in other

significant costs," Cox said. "Since injured veterans cannot wait for replacements to come on board, VA medical facilities are increasingly relying on contract nurses and physicians as a stopgap solution, a very costly one at that."

## **AFGE Urges Lawmakers to Oppose Outsourcing Mental Health Care**

AFGE is urging the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs to oppose a bill that would authorize VA to contract with non-VA health care centers to treat veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In a Nov. 8 letter sent to Committee Chairman Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, AFGE argued that relying on outside health care providers is not the right approach considering VA's unrivaled expertise in veterans' care. VA's National Center for PTSD and its seven centers offer a level of expertise that is unmatched by any other organization. Driving veterans to outside entities is doing a disservice to them.

In order to meet the demand for services, AFGE suggests fixing chronic staffing shortages and offering better compensation packages to keep high-quality health care professionals. VA's funding should also be made mandatory so that VA doesn't have to fight with other agencies every year.

Veterans groups agree with AFGE. They oppose any provision that would allow VA to outsource the work of providing health care to veterans as VA doesn't have a good record of monitoring care provided by contract providers. Outsourcing the work also hurts VA's ability to maintain a full range of specialized services for veterans and to promote high quality care for veterans.

"We oppose any effort to allow the VA to contract out care when it can do a better and more cost effective job in its own system," said Carl Blake, Paralyzed Veterans of America legislative director. "Furthermore, by allowing the VA to send these veterans out of the system to receive their care, it effectively relieves itself of the obligation it has to these men and women."

The bill, S.38, was introduced in May with a hearing held in October and is still pending in Congress.