



Official Time: Time Well Spent

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ABOUT OFFICIAL TIME



AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO



Why Official Time Works

You've heard the saying: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That is the beauty of official time.

Official time ensures federal employees have a voice at the worksite to resolve disputes, address issues of discrimination or retaliation, and propose

improvements in the workplace. The cost of official time amounts to just one-tenth of one percent of all of the salaries and benefits paid to federal employees in a given year. That is a small price to pay for such a huge return on investment.

Some lawmakers are pushing to end official time, claiming it wastes taxpayer dollars and impedes service delivery. Nothing is further from the truth.



What is Official Time?

Official time is the practice in which federal managers and employees work together to make government more efficient, productive, and just. Union representatives can only use official time to:

- **Create safe working conditions.** Union representatives help identify health and safety hazards in the workplace. When the workplace is safe, workers tend to use less sick leave and workers' compensation benefits.
- **Protect employees from discrimination and retaliation.** Union representatives use official time to defend employees who have been discriminated against or face retaliation for blowing the whistle on mismanagement.
- **Resolve disputes proactively.** Union representatives meet with managers on official time to resolve workplace problems before they escalate into costly litigation.
- **Negotiate contracts.** Having an agreed-upon labor-management contract benefits both the employer and employees. For example, a contract establishes an agreement that sets working conditions and serves as a reference when disagreements arise. It also makes the costs associated with employment more predictable.
- **Represent their co-workers in grievances and disciplinary actions.** Due process is crucial in a democratic society. It is definitely needed in the federal government as seen from the thousands of cases AFGE has won in which federal employees have been wrongfully disciplined or fired. Through official time, AFGE union representatives were able to get these employees back to work quickly.



Union Reps are NOT Allowed to Use Official Time to:

- Recruit members
- Attend internal union meetings
- Elect union officers
- Participate in partisan political activities

Who Pays for Official Time?

The federal government covers the cost of official time activities because, under federal law, unions must provide fair representation to all employees at the worksite – not just those who pay dues.

Without the government offsetting this expense, union members who belong to the union would be supplementing services provided to co-workers who don't pay dues. That is

like providing life insurance to everyone at the work site, even though only half of employees actually pay for coverage.

The federal government is an open shop, meaning employees are not required to join the union or pay union dues.

Since the union must provide representation to everyone, and both the agency and the workforce benefit from union services, Congress agreed with bipartisan support that the government should pay for the cost of the union representing employees who haven't joined the union.



Compared to other Government Expenses, Official Time Costs Little

To put things in perspective, we compared the cost of official time to other government spending:

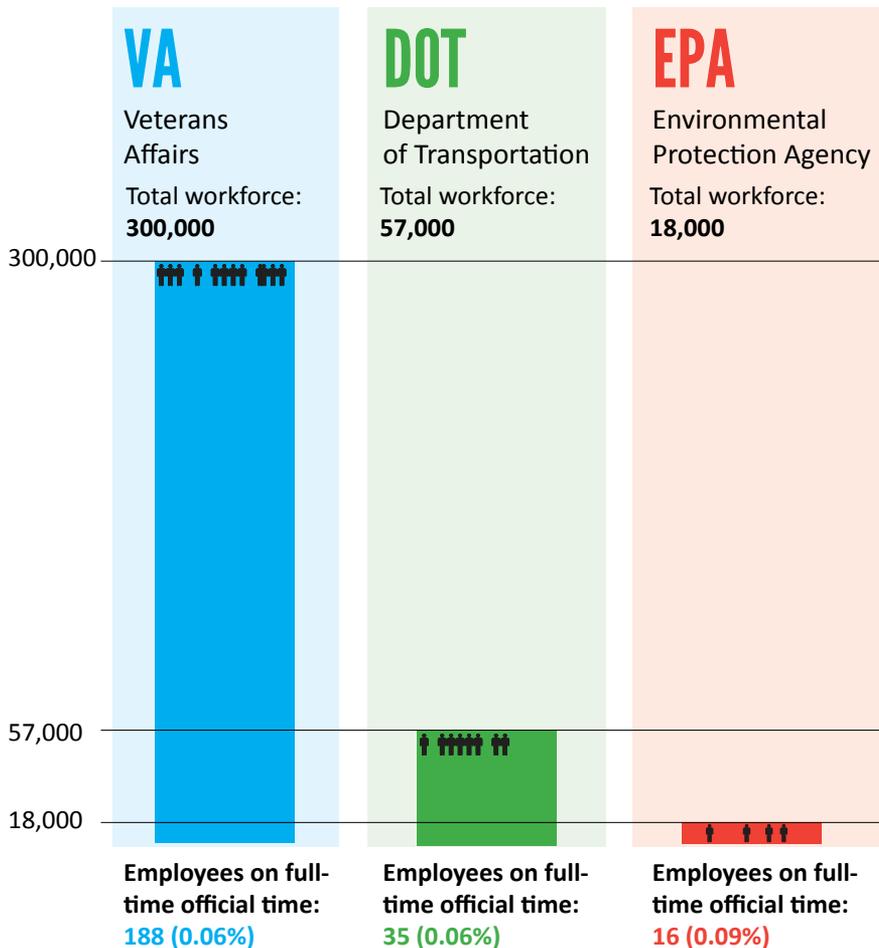
- **\$157 million:** official time cost in FY2012
- **\$360 billion:** the amount the Pentagon spent on service contractors in FY2012. According to a 2012 report by the Project on Government

Oversight, contractor employees cost three times more than an average DoD civilian employee doing the same job.

- **\$7 billion:** annual tax breaks for the oil and gas industry. The big five oil companies—BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, and Shell—made a combined profit of \$93 billion in 2013, or \$177,000 per minute. Fortune magazine ranked ExxonMobil as the most profitable company in the world in 2013.
- **\$1.2 billion:** farm subsidies. According to the Government Accountability Office, Congress could save that amount per year by limiting the subsidies affluent farmers can receive each year.

How Many Federal Employees are Authorized Full-Time Official Time?

The number of employees on full-time official time is very small compared to an agency's workforce. For example, the VA has about 300,000 employees in 1,812 facilities in every state as well as U.S. territories, and only 0.06% (188) work full time to help make the agency more effective and maintain a high-performing workforce.



What Do Agency Managers Say About the Use of Official Time?



Helping Federal Employees Work

As official time is used to maintain the morale, fairness, and well-being of workers, it is important to remind ourselves who these federal employees are and what kind of services they provide to the country. Here are a few examples:

- **VA doctors and nurses** who take care of our wounded veterans.
- **Food inspectors** who ensure your meat and poultry are safe.
- **Police officers** who keep criminals off the streets.
- **Correctional officers** who protect the public from some of the most dangerous prison inmates in the country.
- **Fire fighters** who risk their own lives to save others.
- **Border patrol agents** who protect the borders and intercept drug smugglers.
- **National Institutes of Health researchers** who find cures for diseases.
- **Social Security claims processors** who get retirement checks out to retirees.
- **EPA scientists** who keep your air and water clean.
- **TSA screeners** who keep bombs off airplanes.
- **Park rangers** who protect park lands for all of us to enjoy for generations to come.
- **DoD teachers** who provide education to the children of service members in uniform.



Managers and Union Reps Agree: Official Time Works

Official time is a win for employees, for agencies, and for the American public. Through official time, employee representatives and managers have a forum for resolving problems as early as possible and for negotiating changes at the job site that improve service delivery.

Examples of where official time has worked:

- Union representatives used official time to work with management on a new program to improve the adjudication of compensation claims filed by veterans seeking benefits at the **Veterans Benefits Administration's Regional Office** in Houston, Texas; as a result the accuracy rate for claims improved from 74% to 90%, and veterans got their correct benefits more quickly.
- Union representatives at the **U.S. Army's Fort McCoy** in Wisconsin used official time to meet with management on how

to mitigate the impact of agency downsizing and as a result, 80 employees were successfully placed in other positions on the installation, saving the Army relocation costs.

- The **Federal Bureau of Prisons** launched a pilot program to equip some correctional officers with pepper spray following negotiations with AFGE representatives that occurred using official time; these officers now are better able to protect themselves and other employees from dangerous inmates.
- Union representatives at the **U.S. Army** used official time to settle workplace disputes that would otherwise have resulted in costly litigation, resulting in a 60% decrease in employee grievances **filed over a five-year period**.
- AFGE representatives at **Robins Air Force Base** in Georgia used official time to negotiate an agreement with management and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to improve safety at the job site, avoiding exposure to hazardous conditions that could result in costly workers' compensation claims.



Know the Facts About Official Time

Official time is often misrepresented to discredit unions. It is a fact that both management and labor authorize the amount of hours used for official time representational

activities. Management and labor ensure that the use of official time is reasonable, necessary and in the interest of the public.

In fact, official time has been vital to improving government operations and exposing mismanagement, most recently at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Official Time Protects Veterans' Care

AFGE Local 2028 President **Kathleen Dahl** used her official time to get the VA to come clean about the Legionnaires' outbreak that killed six veterans and sickened 16 others at the Pittsburgh VA hospital since 2011. Dahl's action has saved countless lives. The death of the six veterans was preventable; VA simply failed to maintain its water system. She also risked her own career when

she defied VA's threat of retaliation to come to Washington and testify on the issue in 2013.





Dr. **Michelle Washington**, a member of AFGE at the Wilmington VA hospital, testified before Congress to sound an alarm on a shortage of doctors to treat troops returning from war with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Because of her action, VA hired more than 1,600 new specialists

to provide much-needed help to our country's veterans. Instead of being promoted, hospital managers retaliated against her.

After she testified, Dr. Washington received the first and only unsatisfactory performance rating of her five-year career at VA. She was also stripped of her core duties screening new patients for PTSD and brain injury.

AFGE union representatives used their official time to help represent Dr. Washington and roll back the retaliatory actions taken against her by the VA, allowing her to continue to serve veterans without fear of reprisal.



The Veterans Benefits Administration Regional Office in Houston, TX, was having significant accuracy problems in adjudicating compensation claims, so they created a joint labor-management training committee to create new programs to help improve quality. After implementation, the accuracy rate improved from

74% to 90%. This helped reduce the number of appealed claims, which could take 10 times longer to process than first-time claims.

The official time that union representatives used to collaborate with management helped veterans get their compensation faster.

At the Carl Hayden VA Medical Center in Phoenix, AZ, the turnover rate among Licensed Practical Nurses was 28.8% before the union got involved through the Partnership Council. Union representatives used official time to work with management to improve working conditions for LPNs.

As a result, the hospital cut the turnover ratio by

more than half to 13.4%. This helped save the agency money it had already invested in employee hiring and training by lowering turnover.



VA health care employees who have attempted to expose pervasive problems in the agency have faced retaliation and intimidation by agency managers.

Many of these employees are union officials who have used their official time to testify before Congress about inadequate staffing, patient access to specialized care, and prolonged wait times for appointments.

AFGE also uses official time to represent rank and file workers who speak out. When whistleblowers are protected, veterans get better care.





Many VA employees are veterans, and union representatives use official time to protect their jobs.

We help employees with veterans' preference status who are illegally passed over for jobs. Veterans' preference helps eligible veterans move ahead of other job applicants when they apply for federal jobs.

We also help veterans whose jobs are taken away because they are called on to fulfill their reserve or active duties.

In addition, we help service-connected disabled veterans who have been unfairly downgraded or denied federal jobs because of illegal contracting out.

VA's Veterans Workforce



9 in 10 VA police officers are veterans



7 in 10 employees at the National Cemetery Administration are veterans



5 in 10 employees at the Veterans Benefits Administration are veterans



3 in 10 employees at the Veterans Health Administration are veterans

Federal Employees are also Veterans



But equally important, half a million federal employees are veterans. AFGE is proud to represent federal employees who served our country on active duty and now continue their proud service to our nation as civilians.

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