

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

**AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO
PROVIDED TO THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
CONCERNING
VA'S TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY: EXAMINING THE PLAN TO MODERNIZE VA
JANUARY 21, 2016**

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO and its National Veterans Affairs Council (AFGE) regarding VA Transformation. AFGE represents over 670,000 non-management federal employees. Over forty percent of AFGE members are veterans working in the VA, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security and other agencies. AFGE represents more than 220,000 VA employees working in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery Administration (NCA).

AFGE and its National VA Council (AFGE) believe that the MyVA Transformation initiative has a great deal of potential to make needed improvements to the VA. AFGE was a true partner with VA leadership during the highly successful transformation carried out by Undersecretaries Kizer, Garthwaite and Murphy. In contrast, our role in the current transformation process is more superficial and uneven for a number of reasons. As a result of less meaningful employee engagement, the current Transformation effort's likelihood of success is more limited.

For example, AFGE represents more than 220,000 VA employees working in every VA occupation but has only assigned one seat on MyVA. The other unions participating in MyVA each have one seat even though they represent only a small percentage of the workforce in far fewer occupations. At the same time, twenty or more management representatives typically participate in these work groups. The number of consultants who are completely outside the VA workforce also far exceeds the

number of employee representatives. AFGE has requested that the VA allot employee representative slots on MyVA that are proportionate to the number of employees represented by each union; that request is still outstanding.

AFGE is also frustrated by the VA's recent decision to eliminate the Robert W. Carey Performance Excellence Awards Program that recognized high performing organizations within the department. In the past, AFGE served as a full partner in this valuable program that based its awards on Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence. AFGE helped evaluate nominees, made site visits and trained examiners through the National Quality Council.

To ensure more meaningful labor-management collaboration on VA quality improvement initiatives, we urge the Department to build in more incentives and recognition for labor participants in its current performance improvement projects associated with leadership development programs.

One would think that of all the VA transformation activities, the unions would have the most active roles in initiatives around employee engagement and improving the employee experience. Unfortunately, that is often not the case. For example, we recently learned inadvertently about a management-only workgroup on physician engagement and its focus on two issues that AFGE has raised with the Administration and Congress on numerous occasions: excessive computer view alerts and an inflexible leave policy. It appears that this workgroup never contacted AFGE to get the input of non-management front-line physicians even though our union represents physicians at most medical centers around the country.

A recent survey of local union presidents by the National Partnership Council confirms that true employee engagement is still lacking. The vast majority of respondents indicated that they are not involved in MyVA, iCare or other purported employee engagement initiatives at any level. As one AFGE local president noted, even when management at the facility level does hold town hall meetings or

other efforts to solicit employee input, they often do so in a “robotic” manner as if they are merely going through the motions. For example, employees can rarely attend town hall meetings because facilities are so short staffed. Management should work with the unions to identify ways to make these town hall meetings more accessible to employees who want to attend.

Our members also feel that their suggestions for reducing bureaucracy are not adequately considered. For example, a local AFGE president was recently told by her director that the new “consult clinics” that seemed to add an unnecessary administrative layer to the appointment process were going to be dissolved. Once that director left, the AFGE local president received no other updates.

Our local leaders expressed similar concerns about unnecessary management layers created by the “New Matrix Redesign” and Primary Care Clinical Practice Management Groups. At the same time, the primary care “PACT” teams continue to be chronically understaffed with long term vacancies for front-line, non-management provider and nurse slots. There is also widespread frustration with VHA’s longstanding practice of mandating new positions without additional funding.

On the VBA appeals front, AFGE recently conducted a membership survey and received responses from Decision Review Officers (DRO) on the progress of the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) and the need for additional improvements. We ask that Congress and VBA in its MyVA plan create an effective feedback protocol for employees and the union to provide regular recommendations on improving VBMS. Several DROs claimed that VBMS has helped productivity with initial disability claims but the system still presents glaring issues for more complex appeals cases. AFGE members’ suggestions for VBMS included:

- Alerts: Many members requested meaningful alerts in VBMS to notify the user of pending appeals or that another user working the claims.

- System Delays and Capability: Members requested additional emphasis and assistance in VBMS for appeals which are often far more complex. System delay and equipment issues particular hurt DROs.
- Document Viewing: Increase the ability to view multiple documents at once for appeals.

Thank you for the opportunity to share AFGE's views on VA Transformation Strategies.