



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ON

“PROTECTING THOSE WHO SERVED: A REVIEW OF VA POLICE OPERATIONS”

MAY 13, 2026

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) to participate in today's hearing on "Protecting Those Who Served: A Review of VA Police Operations." My name is Matthew Leffler, and I serve as the Vice President of AFGE Local 1699 at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I am a proud Marine Corps Veteran, where I served as a Military Police Officer for four years. Following my military service, I have continued to serve in federal law enforcement by serving 10 years as a Marine Corps Civilian Police Officer. For the past six years, I have served my fellow veterans as a Senior Police Officer at the Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania VA Medical Center, marking 20 years in federal law enforcement.

It is a privilege to testify today on behalf of AFGE and its National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC), representing over 800,000 federal and District of Columbia government employees, 325,000 of whom are proud, dedicated Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees. How fitting it is to be able to focus my testimony today on the approximately 2,500 VA Police Officers that AFGE represents during Law Enforcement Appreciation Week. Of those approximately 2,500 Police Officers, 90 percent are veterans themselves, serving in facilities throughout the nation. As the Committee continues to evaluate the best ways to support the VA Police Force, AFGE has several recommendations that can help the VA with law enforcement recruitment and retention and help it better serve veterans and their families.

Staffing

The VA Police Force faces significant issues with the staffing levels of VA Police. In August 2023, the VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) released a report entitled "OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration's Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages

Fiscal Year 2023.”¹ The report noted 73 facilities had a severe shortage of VA Police in the 0083 series, with more common shortages found for only seven other positions.² An updated 2024 version of the report noted that VA police shortages “were reported by at least 20 percent of facilities since FY 2018.”³ This has further worsened in the current FY 2025 report, as the VA OIG states:

“In FY 2025, the OIG found that 58 percent of facilities (80 of 139) designated Police as a severe occupational staffing shortage, making it the most frequently reported nonclinical shortage occupation and most frequently reported of all occupations. The Police occupation was among the top five most frequently reported nonclinical shortages in each year since 2019, when VHA first made official designations for clinical and nonclinical occupations, and the seventh most frequently reported shortage among all occupations in 2018.”⁴

On the ground in VA facilities, the shortages referenced by OIG hinder the ability of officers to perform their duties. In some facilities, expensive new security screening equipment sits unused because there are not enough officers to operate this equipment. There are other facilities where only one or two officers are available to respond to emergencies. In some cases, short staffing in 1A facilities limits response to one emergency at a time. The staffing problem is also acute for Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) where the nearest officer is often miles away, or Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Regional Offices (RO) which are often protected by other police forces.

Short staffing and inadequate pay harm officer morale. One officer recently stated on an AFGE VA Police call, “[m]orale across VA is low. [D]owngrading people only pushes more people to leave.” Additionally, with the staff shortage at the level it is, VA facilities must further

¹ “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2023,” August 22, 2023. VA OIG 23-00659-186.

² *Id* at 8.

³ “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2024,” August 7, 2024. VA OIG 24-00803-22 at 10.

⁴ “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2025,” August 12, 2025. VA OIG 25-01135-196 at 9.

rely on extensive use of overtime, which often leads to the denial of annual leave for officers, leading to further burnout of the officers that remain.

To address this, AFGE urges the VA to fully staff the VA Police force and recommends several legislative changes that will help with recruitment and retention of VA Police Officers and help better serve veterans and their families.

Stopping Proposed Downgrades

AFGE and the NVAC strongly support H.R. 8010, the “VA Police Recruitment and Retention Act” introduced by Rep. Kennedy (D-NY). If enacted, this legislation would prohibit the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the VA from downgrading the positions of VA Police Officers, retroactive to October 1, 2025. AFGE is also actively working to amend this legislation so it can advance in a bi-partisan manner.

OPM’s actions to downgrade the positions of Police Officers, which is the bureaucratic way of saying pay cuts, runs counter the VA’s mission “[t]o fulfill President Lincoln’s promise to care for those who have served in our nation’s military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors.”

VA Police Officers have a critical and unique role in protecting the safety of veterans, their families, and VA employees every day. As AFGE has previously highlighted Congress, VA Police Officers receive training at the Law Enforcement Training Center and additional specialized training in crisis intervention to help prevent veterans from harming themselves or others. Moreover, as 90 percent of officers are veterans themselves, these officers can tap into their own experience when both communicating with and policing veterans, building relationships with the veterans they serve, and understanding the nuances of the physical

facilities where they police. As a fellow VA officer from the Great Lakes Region recently articulated:

“VA medical centers are complex environments that present unique law enforcement challenges. Officers respond to violent incidents, mental health crises, domestic disputes, narcotics activity, and threats against staff and patients.”

This unfortunately happens across the country. Officers frequently interact with veterans armed with guns and knives or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

This was tragically put in stark relief in March, after VA social worker Nicholas Crews was murdered at a VA clinic in Jasper, Georgia, demonstrating the bravery and dedication required of VA Police Officers as well as the broad scope of their responsibilities.

This is particularly problematic when VA Police Officers have other opportunities to serve in other federal agencies or in state, county, or local police forces that pay starting salaries significantly higher compared to the planned downgraded GS-5 salary. For example, in Topeka, Kansas, a GS-5 Step One makes \$41,400 annually,⁵ while the starting pay for a Police Officer in the City of Topeka, KS is \$65,374.⁶ Similarly, a GS-5 Step One in West Haven, Connecticut makes \$48,005 annually, while an “Entry Level Police Officer” in the West Haven Police Department makes between \$74,810 and \$88,484.87 annually.⁷ Severe staffing shortages, low retention, and poor morale require attention and solutions, not downgrades in positions and pay.

The VA should do everything in its power to recruit and retain its police force. While AFGE is pleased that the planned downgrades have been “paused,” AFGE still fully supports

⁵ See GS Salary Table 2026-KC. <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/salary-tables/pdf/2026/KC.pdf>

⁶ See City of Topeka webpage on “Police Careers” and “Reasons to work for the City of Topeka – New Applicants.” https://www.topeka.gov/government/police_careers/#collapse1830b0

⁷ See West Haven Connecticut’s Police Department website on “Recruitment” <https://www.whpd.com/administrative-division#RECRUITMENT> and link to Policeapp.com link for the West Haven Police Department <https://www.policeapp.com/West-Haven-CT-Police-Department/317/>

H.R. 8010, the “VA Police Recruitment and Retention Act,” as it is a necessary first step to stem the tide of departures from the VA Police Department. AFGE strongly encourages the swift passage of H.R. 8010 to prevent any future downgrades from OPM and looks forward to working with the committee to pass this bill.

VA Law Enforcement Pensions

Another crucial step that Congress can take to help with the recruitment and retention to the VA Police Force is to extend Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) status and what are commonly known as “6(c) benefits,” to VA Police Officers. Under 5 U.S.C 8336(c), any LEO who either serves 25 years or is age 50 or older and serves 20 years may retire without penalty for early retirement. Currently, the definition of LEO relied upon in the code (5 U.S.C. 8401(17)) does not include VA Police Officers, and consequently they do not receive retirement benefits on par with federal law enforcement officers at other federal agencies. AFGE strongly supports H.R. 3226, the “Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) Equity Act,” introduced by Representative Andrew Garbarino (R-NY), which would grant “6(c)” benefits to VA Police Officers. The bill also covers police at other agencies that do not have LEO status, including those at the Department of Defense (DoD), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the Federal Protective Service (FPS). This widely bi-partisan bill currently has 64 co-sponsors, including many members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. The Senate version of the bill has not yet been reintroduced in the 119th Congress, but was S. 1658 in the 118th Congress, introduced by Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ) and J.D. Vance (R-OH), and co-sponsored by Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Susan Collins (R-ME).

Providing full LEO status to VA Police Officers would significantly help the VA Police Force with recruitment and retention. Currently, the VA hires many new recruits, sends them to

the Law Enforcement Training Center (LETC) for training similar to other federal LEOs, and then sees these officers depart the force for other opportunities within the federal government that do have 6(c) benefits, or to other state and local police departments with already higher salaries. Granting full LEO status to VA Police Officers will diminish this turnover and help the VA maintain a stronger and better trained police department with higher morale. Additionally, it is important to note that at a joint hearing before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee Subcommittees on Oversight and Health on May 17, 2023, Tracey Therit, the VA's Chief Human Capital Officer, stated: "The last thing that I'll mention is we very much support the 'Law Enforcement Officer Equity Act.' We look forward to being able to provide our Police Officers with those enhanced benefits as well to make us more attractive and to fill those positions."

While the "Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) Equity Act," is not in the jurisdiction of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, AFGE urges that members of this Committee to support legislation to grant "6(c)" benefits or VA Police Officers.

VA Police Reorganization

AFGE understands the VA's intent to streamline the VA Police Command structure and have it run through the VA Office of Operations, Security and Protection (OSP).

However, despite this realignment, AFGE wants to highlight that Police Officers are still funded from the same budgets as other medical center personnel. This practice forces each medical center director to choose between hiring between hiring a medical professional or a Police Officer, with priority often going to the healthcare provider. AFGE believes Congress and VA should consider a dedicated funding source or specific line item for VA Police to ensure that these officers are not competing for funds with medical providers.

Training

One of the key strengths of the VA Police force is the level of training officers must undergo to serve the veteran population. A key example of this is the crisis intervention training that passed in the 116th Congress as part of then Chairman Takano's VA COMPACT Act which became a part of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020. Because of this law, VA Police Officers who serve at VA Medical Centers, Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), or VBA ROs now undergo crisis intervention training to prevent veterans from themselves or others.

This training is a critical, specialized investment that helps protect veterans, their families, VA providers, and VA staff. Unfortunately, high attrition among VA Police Officers reduces the number of officers who receive this training. Improving retention would increase the share of active officers who complete this statutorily required training and would enhance safety at VA facilities.

Physical Security

The VA Police's first obligation is to fulfill its Mission Statement "To Protect Those Who Served." To achieve this goal, AFGE recommends that security needs to be tailored to each facility to best protect its veterans.

In relation to staffing and coverage, AFGE urges the VA to increase staffing so VA Police can cover all VA facilities, including but not limited to medical centers, CBOCs, and VBA ROs with employees who have undergone crisis intervention training and are best equipped to police veterans at VA facilities.

AFGE also urges that the VA provides its police with training on any new security technologies installed at VA facilities and that only VA Police Officers, who have undergone

crisis intervention training required by statute and are best equipped to respond to an emergency at a VA facility, are allowed to operate such technology, and not third-party contractors. AFGE also recommends that VA ensure that facilities using or piloting screening technology account for the extra demand on staff and hire more officers accordingly. Some facility police forces do not have the capacity to operate screening technology and perform their other duties. There have been reports of VA facilities that have new equipment sitting unused because of short staffing.

AFGE also asks the committee and VA to consider more standardization in allowing VA police to protect VA employees and veterans on VA property that is unconnected to the VA facility where they are based, as well as the spaces between those facilities and next to VA facilities. This would allow, for example, VA police to protect veterans and staffers while they travel between a VA facility and a unconnected parking lot late at night.

AFGE and the NVAC look forward to working with the Committee and the VA to improve the recruitment and retention of the VA Police Force and ensure that it is fully staffed.

Thank you.