

**PROTECTING THOSE WHO SERVED:
A REVIEW OF VA POLICE OPERATIONS**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS
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MAY 13, 2026

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PROTECTING THOSE WHO SERVED: A REVIEW OF VA POLICE OPERATIONS

WEDNESDAY, MAY 13, 2026

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 4:12 p.m., in Room SH-216, Hart Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry Moran, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Moran, Tuberville, Sheehy, Blumenthal, Hirono, Hassan, and King.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS

Chairman MORAN. Good afternoon. Welcome to all, and welcome, especially to our witnesses. I want to recognize this day of the week, this week of National Police Week. We convened today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs Police Force and how we can best support those who protect our Nation's veterans.

And I take a moment to thank the VA police officers for the work that they do every day to keep our veterans, to keep our staff, and to keep our visitors to VA facilities across the country safe. As a Kansan, I particularly want to thank Wichita Kansas, VA Police Chief Chad Allan, who joins us today. Thank you, for his hard work and his dedication to protecting his fellow Kansas veterans.

Close to 90 percent of the VA's police workforce is made up of veterans themselves. By combining their personal experience with advanced crisis intervention training, VA police are uniquely equipped to manage the difficult situations with veterans in crisis.

In May 2024, I raised my concerns with then Secretary McDonough after discovering that VA police were not in compliance with statutory crisis intervention training requirements. In response to Committee inquiries, VA self-reported a mere 28 percent compliance with the law from January 23 to March 24.

Today, VA police compliance with this important training requirement is at 96.8 percent. I'm encouraged by Secretary Collins April 2025 directive; to centralize the VA police chain of command and I look forward to full realignment that's expected in November. This command structure should allow for more oversight, career progression, and standardization among VA police units, and I look forward to the VA's update along the way.

The number one concern I hear from VA police officers in Kansas and around the country, is the potential pay downgrades. While

classification changes are currently paused, VA police officers are facing a pay downgrade to levels as low as GS-5.

In addition, in August 2025, VA Inspector General report found VA police staffing shortages at 58 percent of facilities. If these downgrades go through without a new compensation package, staffing issues undoubtedly will get worse. It's my understanding that the VA leadership is currently working to update position descriptions that will bring VA police to a competitive pay rate with other Federal law enforcement agencies. I look forward to learning more about that effort today and in the weeks ahead.

Finally, in September 2023, I requested the Government Accountability Office to conduct a review of campus security at VA facilities around the country. GAO will be releasing this report today in conjunction with our hearings. The findings warrant attention by VA leadership. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses this afternoon about how this Committee can best support VA police in securing VA facilities, while providing care to those that served.

With that, I yield to the Ranking Member. We have three votes that start at 3:45 p.m., so the first one is now underway. You'll see some of us come and go during the hearing, but my plan is to have the hearing continue in our absence. With that, I yield to the Ranking Member, Senator Blumenthal.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks very much, Chairman Moran. We come here today on a really important issue to so many veterans who depend on proper safety and policing at VA facilities. VA police departments are charged with the responsibility of that safety and ensuring the security of all VA facilities, including veterans, families, VA staff and visitors.

Since 2019, VA police officers have been among the top non-clinical staffing shortages based on facility reports to the VA Inspector General. That's since 2019. But nothing has been more damaging to the recruitment, retention and morale of VA police than this Administration's policies of changing the staffing of VA facilities, the threat of position downgrades by the Office of Personnel Management.

And based on VA's monthly workforce dashboard, VA's police officer experienced a net loss of nearly 300 officers in fiscal year 2025, the first net loss on record since the VA began publishing this data. During this time, VA facilities struggled to recruit police officers, often failing to solicit quality applicants due to the fear of salary cuts or they stopped recruitment altogether.

At the same time, a significant restructuring of the Office of Security and Preparedness, OSP, was underway. This restructuring was intended to give more authority over staffing resource allocations decisions to OSP, thereby helping the medical center directors avoid the difficult decision of choosing between clinical staff and police. Unfortunately, when facility leadership was tasked with cutting vacancies, they were told to target those vacancies that had been unfilled the longest, resulting in removal of 461 vacant police officer positions.

Moving forward, even though the Department paused the proposed downgrades, the significant damage has been done. Amidst ongoing consultation with OPM, many police officers continue to fear unsustainable salary cuts are on the horizon. Many are leaving the department; many have already left.

To provide peace of mind to these officers and to prevent future downgrades and pay cuts, I will be introducing the VA Police Recruitment and Retention Act of 2026. This legislation has been already introduced in the House by Representative Tim Kennedy. It would prohibit any position downgrades of VA police officers. I would like to make this bill bipartisan, and I look forward to discussing the bill with our witnesses today.

I will close with a couple of quotes from VA police officers who reached out to my office. They expressed concern over the current status of the VA police work. “We have more than 15 floors to cover, and several times, we only have two VA cops to respond to emergencies. Midnight tour only have one VA cop. This facility is definitely not safe for staff, veterans, and guests. It’s not safe for one cop to respond to our mental health ward alone. It’s unacceptable.” Second quote, “I often work alone. My backup is the local city police and county sheriffs. We run bare bones staffing with two officers only.”

I hope our witnesses will provide assurances today to Congress, but more importantly, the VA, police officers, and staff there, that VA leadership in this Administration support the role of VA police departments without reservation. I hope you will support the bill that I am introducing. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Blumenthal, thank you very much. I now want to recognize our witnesses. We are joined today by Reginald Neal, the VA’s Assistant Secretary of Operations, Security and Preparedness. And accompanying him is Mr. Mark Engelbaum, Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration; Mr. Patrick Hernandez, Director of Security and Law Enforcement, Office of Operations, Security and Preparedness; and Mr. Chad Allan, Chief of Police for the Wichita, Kansas, the Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center.

We are also joined by Triana McNeil, the Director of the U.S. Government Accountability Offices, Homeland Security and Justice Teams. Finally, we’re joined by Matthew Leffler, a Senior Police Officer at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center and Vice President of AFGE Local 1699.

Thank you all for your presence today. Mr. Neal, you are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF REGINALD G. A. NEAL, ED.D, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR OPERATIONS, SECURITY, AND PREPAREDNESS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS ACCOMPANIED BY MARK ENGELBAUM, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR HUMAN RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; PATRICK L. HERNANDEZ, DIRECTOR OF SECURITY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT, OFFICE OF OPERATIONS, SECURITY, AND PREPAREDNESS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; AND CHAD ALLAN, CHIEF OF POLICE, ROBERT J. DOLE VA MEDICAL CENTER, WICHITA, KANSAS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Dr. NEAL. Thank you, Chairman, the Ranking Member Blumenthal and to the Members of the Committee on Veterans Affairs. I appreciate this opportunity to provide an update on the state of our VA police. As previously mentioned, I'm accompanied by Mr. Engelbaum, Mr. Patrick Hernandez and Chief Allan from Wichita, Kansas.

When people ask me about the mission of the VA police, I'm proud to tell them that our police provide security and law enforcement services to the largest integrated health care system in this country. When this Administration returned to office in 2025, we inherited a fractured and dysfunctional force. One that was plagued with many of the very problems that have been highlighted for years, not only by the GAO reports, but by the VA's own accounting and our IG office. Here are some of the most serious issues that we have had to address.

For years the VA police were managed by individual VA medical centers. For many of our officers reported to medical center personnel instead of law enforcement professionals. Our VA police endured inconsistent policing standards, which led to a lack of both accountability and discipline.

Often, our professional officers were used to perform non-police functions, including in some cases, serving as valets to parked cars. This basic organizational problem also made it difficult to recruit, retain, and promote seasoned officers. Our officers were not a part of a larger law enforcement structure, a structure that understood policing and one that allowed for career advancement, from journeyman police officer to senior law enforcement leadership positions.

Since we began our police consolidation effort, we immediately began working to properly classify VA police position descriptions. This is a complex issue, and it has been my top priority since I was appointed by the President in December of last year. The bottom line is that police officers were not properly classified in accordance with Federal standards. This led to OPM directing that these inconsistencies be identified and be corrected. The result of correcting these improper classifications would have indeed lowered grades and pay of over 95 percent of our VA police officers. This was not acceptable.

Although these downgrades were not implemented, the very threat of lower grades and less pay created deep professional and personal concern amongst the VA police. President Trump charged VA Secretary Doug Collins with putting veterans first, and Secretary Collins is doing just that.

So, what have we done? First, we recognize that VA police needed a unified chain of command, and this started at the top. This started with the re-establishment of the Office of Operations, Security and Preparedness with its own Assistant Secretary. And I am that person.

In addition, with the realignment of the police under OSP and the Office of Security and Law Enforcement, we finally have actual law enforcement leaders in charge of our VA police—officers leading officers. So, what does all this mean? It means now we can enforce standards and discipline across all facilities with departmental oversight of training and professional development.

It means that VA police now have a direct line to an Assistant Secretary who represents them to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. And we've created more stability and opportunities for officers to have a long-term career within the VA. And most importantly, we are fixing the core issues with the VA police duty classifications. This is a huge undertaking.

I've been personally involved with our HRA office and conducting detailed reviews of current police position qualification standards. Together, we are working with OPM to permanently classify our VA police based on the complex duties that they now perform, not on antiquated job descriptions that haven't been reviewed or updated in almost 40 years. I'm proud to say that we are on track to provide the pay and compensation that our police officers have earned.

These critical changes have put the VA police on better footing to address the emerging challenges, including those highlighted in this latest GAO report. I recently became aware of this report and its findings, and I was briefed on it yesterday. I've read it and I take the findings and the recommendations very seriously. However, I believe that our actions since initiating VA police consolidation in September have already begun to address some of the challenges identified therein.

Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Blumenthal and the Senators on this Committee, thank you for your support. You and I understand that the VA's commitment to help veterans, their families and our providers does not mean very much if our facilities are not safe. I carry this weight-like command very seriously.

Since coming to the VA, I have personally visited 13 facilities and met with 13 police units in the short time that I've been here. I've seen firsthand the challenges that our VA police face and the improvements needed to keep our facilities safe. I'm here to testify today that, prior to the findings and release of this report, that we have already made tremendous strides that have put us on the right path.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss the importance of our VA police force and their integral role in the Department that provides care and benefits for millions of veterans. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Neal appears on pages 27–29 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Dr. Neal, thank you for your testimony. Let me turn now to Mr. Leffler.

**STATEMENT OF MATTHEW LEFFLER, VICE PRESIDENT OF
AFGE LOCAL 1699, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERN-
MENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO**

Mr. LEFFLER. Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, my name is Matthew Leffler, and I currently serve as Vice President of AFGE Local 1699 at the Wilkes-Barre VAMC. I am a proud Marine Corps Veteran and I served 20 years in Federal law enforcement, including four as an MP, ten as a Marine Corps Civilian Officer, and the last six years as a senior VA police officer.

On behalf of AFGE and its National VA Council, representing 325,000 dedicated VA employees, including 2,500 VA police officers, 90 percent of whom are veterans themselves, it is a privilege to testify today, especially during Law Enforcement Appreciation Week. AFGE has several recommendations raised by our law enforcement members that can help the VA with recruitment and retention.

First and foremost, the VA must fully staff the VA police force. In fiscal year 2025, OIG reported 58 percent of facilities designated police as having a severe occupational staffing shortage, making it the most frequently reported non-clinical shortage. Because of this, expensive new security equipment in some facilities sits unused due to short staffing.

In other locations, nurses are being forced to operate metal detectors. In some facilities, a lack of officers limits response to one emergency at a time. The staffing problem is also dire for CBOCs, where the nearest officer is often miles away, or VBA regional offices, which are often protected by other police. To address this, AFGE urges the VA to fully staff the VA police force, and allow us to keep everyone safe.

Second, AFGE strongly opposes the proposed downgrades of VA police officers. To address this, AFGE supports H.R. 8010, the VA Police Recruitment and Retention Act, introduced by Representative Kennedy. If enacted, this legislation would prohibit OPM and the VA from downgrading the positions of VA police.

AFGE also supports the amended version of the bill being considered tomorrow by the House VA Committee. OPM actions to downgrade VA police are pay cuts and put veterans at risk. VA police have specialized training in crisis intervention to help prevent veterans from harming themselves and others.

Additionally, as 90 percent of the officers are veterans themselves, they have shared experiences which uniquely qualify them to interact with fellow veterans. This is critical when veterans are in crisis and need help, not harm. 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 our VA officers.

The planned downgrades are even worse when considering VA police have other lucrative law enforcement opportunities outside of the VA. For example, in Topeka, Kansas, a GS-5, Step 1, makes over \$41,000 annually, while the starting pay for a police officer in the city of Topeka is over \$65,000.

Similarly, a GS-5, Step 1 in West Haven, Connecticut, makes \$48,000 annually, while an entry level police officer in the West Haven Police Department makes a minimum of \$74,000 a year.

The VA should do everything in its power to recruit and retain its police force.

While AFGE is pleased that some of the planned downgrades have been paused, AFGE still calls for the passage of H.R. 8010. Furthermore, Congress should extend LEO's status and what are commonly known as 6(c) benefits to VA police. Currently, the definition of LEO in the Federal code does not include VA police officers, and consequently they do not receive retirement benefits on par with other Federal law enforcement officers.

AFGE strongly supports H.R. 3226, the LEO Equity Act, which would grant 6(c) benefits. This widely bipartisan bill has 64 cosponsors, including Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano. The Senate version of the bill has not been introduced in this Congress, but was introduced last Congress by Senators Cory Booker and then Senator JD Vance.

Granting full LEO status to VA police will improve recruitment and retention and keep these specialized officers with the veterans they are trained to serve. Additionally, it is important to note that the VA previously endorsed this bill at a 2023 hearing. AFGE urges Members of this Committee to support legislation to grant 6(c) benefits to VA police.

I would also like to briefly touch on VA police realignment. Under OSP, police officers are still funded from the same budgets as medical center personnel. This forces each VA director to choose between hiring a medical professional or VA police officer with priority, often going to the health care provider.

AFGE recommends that Congress provide a dedicated funding source for VA police to ensure that officers are not disadvantaged. AFGE and the NVAC look forward to working with the Committee to improve the recruitment and retention of VA police.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Leffler appears on pages 30–39 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Leffler, thank you. Now, we would like to hear from Miss McNeil from the Government Accountability Office.

STATEMENT OF TRIANA MCNEIL, DIRECTOR, HOMELAND SECURITY AND JUSTICE TEAM, U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Ms. MCNEIL. Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Blumenthal and Members of the Committee; I am pleased to be here today to discuss GAO's examination of the physical security of VA's medical facilities.

The VA employs 188,000 health care workers and serves 9 million enrolled veterans. Who keeps them safe? Over 4300 officers, physical security specialists, and investigators, and 800 contract security guards.

VA police officers play a unique and important role. They are often the first and last person that a veteran, who may be in crisis, sees when they seek care at a VA medical facility. They have to balance their safety and security role with ensuring that there is a welcoming and open environment for our veterans.

I hope the work that we did that was released today will help move the needle and get things moving in a direction that benefits veterans, the health care workers that serve them, and the police officers that protect them.

We examined three issues in our review. First, we looked at criminal activity at VA medical facilities. VA police reported over 74,000 crimes at VA medical facilities in fiscal year 2024 and 2025. Most were nonviolent, and crimes at facilities in urban areas were two times higher than in rural areas.

Second, we examine the status of VA implementation of Federal security requirements. It's a mixed story. VA implemented our recommendations from 2013 and 2014, calling on them to make its risk assessment methodology aligned with Federal security standards. But, for example, they still need to address our 2018 recommendations to revise their risk management policies, to better reflect Federal standards and develop an oversight strategy to assess its risk management programs.

And finally, we examine VA's processes for obtaining and incorporating security and threat information into its capital planning. We determined that VA's capital investment planning process is consistent with best practices and Federal standards.

The one issue we found was that two VISNs failed to meet the VA goal to close 95 percent of security gaps identified through the capital planning process. The reason given was that they were never told they were lagging behind. So, we have a recommendation to address this in our released report.

Now, central to our work was covert testing. We needed to test the current physical security situation at VA medical facilities so we could shed light on the impact of their efforts to date. We chose 30 sites across the country in urban and rural areas, large medical centers, and smaller clinics with a range of security levels.

Unfortunately, we identified serious issues. While our testing was not generalizable, the results indicate a higher potential for system-wide failures. During these covert tests, we were able to carry prohibited weapons into 30 of 30 VA medical facilities. We were able to drink from large, clearly labeled alcohol bottles while inside the waiting rooms of 25 of 26 facilities, and in other facilities, we were able to sometimes walk into prohibited areas.

While we didn't identify any criminal activity on the part of any VA staff, we were shocked that we could freely walk into these facilities with all kinds of things without being checked. That we could openly drink water out of a vodka bottle.

This is especially concerning given that in 2024 and 2025, over 74,000 crimes were committed at VA medical facilities. While the majority were non-violent, over 5,000 were weapons-related crimes and over 6,000 were drug-related crimes. This is a serious issue and needs to be addressed immediately in a strategic way with leadership support from the top.

We have a lot of questions for VA. What's the progress to fill the vacancies for VA police officers? What more is VA going to do to support its police officers? What is the plan to address the over 3,000 recommendations in the risk assessments that VA never responded to? If VA does all of these things, is it going to be enough to address the enterprise-wide failures that we identified? Is there

a culture issue? Is it a training issue? Is it a resources issue? Is there a need for more controls to ensure proper oversight? These are the type of questions that we will be asking VA moving forward.

Thank you again for inviting GAO to this important hearing. I look forward to answering any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. McNeil appears on pages 40–57 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you for your report and for your testimony. Let me start with Mr. Hernandez and reference a VA social worker, Nicholas Crews, who was killed at a shooting at a VA clinic in Jasper, Georgia. Tell me what oversight your office, the VA, does in conducting security for community-based outpatient clinics, or CBOCs, and to make certain that those facilities and the veterans that they serve and staff are afforded the same level of security at a larger VA facility?

Mr. HERNANDEZ. Yes, sir. Senator, thank you for that question. The CBOC in Jasper was a Federal Security Level (FSL) 2 facility, which means it was low to moderate. This was ascertained through what we call a Modified Infrastructure Survey Tool (MIST), which is a DHS developed tool that we use. It's a Federal standard.

We had employed countermeasures there. We had a uniformed security guard; we had a key entry to any of the clinical areas that only staff had access to. And we had practices that were practiced well. We had panic buttons that not only informed the VA police, it informed local police as well as the staff inside the building.

So, from a physical security standpoint, the countermeasures in place were on par with an FSL 2 facility and the practices that they practiced were sound. The individual came in; he was under duress. He was obviously having an episode, he was brought in by a person, a veteran friend of his. It was unannounced visit, the clinician agreed to see him. The clinician keyed in to the building, walked him back to his office and that's where the shooting occurred, sir.

Chairman MORAN. Chief Allan, let me ask you, are you aware of the number of CBOCs, there are none in Wichita itself, but the Dole VA center manages, supervises CBOCs across Kansas. Are you aware of the security and police protection that occurs at a CBOC at our home state?

Mr. ALLAN. Senator, thank you for the question. Yes, sir. At our CBOCs that Robert J. Dole is responsible for, we do not currently staff them with VA police. We do have memorandums of understanding with the local police who we have very good relationship with, and their response times when they have responded, have been almost identical to our response times at our facility with VA police, within approximately 2 to 4 minutes on their response.

Chairman MORAN. I would guess in most instances, the CBOC is 2 or 3, 4 hours or more away from the Dole VA center?

Mr. ALLAN. That is correct, sir. We do have some that as far as approximately 4 hours away.

Chairman MORAN. And, Mr. Leffler, you mentioned this in your testimony about making certain that it's safe at a CBOC. Tell me what I should know about this topic, please?

Mr. LEFFLER. Thank you for the question, Senator. As was mentioned, there is a lot of CBOCs that are not manned by VA police officers. With their specialized training, there is a lot of memorandums of understanding with local law enforcement, but having a VA police officer and enough staff to have a VA police officer there, I think would pay dividends and assist the veterans far and above.

Chairman MORAN. So, your point is, it's practical for the VA to have an officer. I wonder how—I mean, just having a conversation with you, I wonder how this works in a remote location and how the staffing occurs. I guess we would start with—we need full staffing as the beginning premise, but I'd be glad to hear what else you'd tell me.

Mr. LEFFLER. Yes, sir. Thank you for the question again. There are other states I know that have CBOCs that are manned by officers. Some of them are probably the same distance, but they have officers. I am not completely aware of their setup and how they have it. I know there's some issues with being able to manage firearms and where they are within the facility and stuff, and transporting them in that nature, but I know having them there would help a veteran in crisis.

Chairman MORAN. Senator King.

**HON. ANGUS S. KING, JR.,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MAINE**

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First, I just want to be parochial for a minute. At Togus, our veterans' hospital in Maine, by the way, the first veterans' hospital in the country, we were forced to cut seven police vacancies because they were vacant as of this April vacancy cut. But they were vacant because the VA was reviewing the policies with regard to consistency standards of VA job descriptions. So, it was kind of a "Catch-22."

Mr. Engelbaum, can you give me some help on this one? It seems to me this deserves a little review. These positions were not vacant because nobody was paying attention if they weren't important. They were vacant because you all had told them to hold them vacant while you did this review.

Mr. ENGELBAUM. Yes. Absolutely. Senator, thank you so much. So, as part of the review, specific installations or for example, in this case, medical centers were not directed to cut any specific positions. As was pointed out previously, a lot of times police previously had to compete within the medical center for, you know, authorizations and depending on how every individual medical center looked at it, those authorizations varied.

So, and Chairman back to your point about a standard, and that's really the point, we really didn't have a standard, and we still don't, we're in the middle of that. And I'll talk to that very quickly if you wouldn't mind. But we are addressing that right now.

So, we had to go to a baseline to establish where we were based upon authorized funding and what people had. We are right now in the middle. We are conducting a facility by facility review specifically for the police force. It's going to be done later on this fall where we will have defined requirements, manpower standards for

every single installation within the VA. Up front, I'll be happy to provide that once we get that complete.

Senator KING. We haven't necessarily lost those seven positions?

Mr. ENGELBAUM. We have not. In fact, Senator, to this date, even though based upon request, we've already "plussed up," as mentioned in this morning hearing. We "plussed up" West LA by about 80 police officers. We "plussed up" OSP, asked for an additional 107 officers, we already plussed them up by an additional 107. So, we're reacting where we identify requirements. But we are going to have a holistic manpower standard done for the entire VA later on this fall.

Senator KING. I appreciate that, Mr. Chairman. The other issue, of course, is pay, which has already been discussed. We did a little survey in sort of community rates. The GS-6 starting salary, \$45,409 comes to \$21.83 an hour. So that's a benchmark. Brunswick Police Department, where I live, starting pay is \$30.69 an hour, almost \$9 more. Patrol officer, Waterville Police Department, \$28; Patrol Sergeant, \$28.31; Bucksport, \$35; a school crossing guard in Bath is \$16.78, not far from the VA rate. So, I think that really makes the case.

And we have to compete. I mean, when we go to hire people, we've got to compete with—and the numbers I just gave you are all small towns in the vicinity of our—sort of halfway between Togus and the major CBOC that we have in Portland. So, I think the case is pretty clear, that if we're going to have qualified and able people, we've got to pay them a competitive rate. So, I hope that we can make that part of this discussion.

Thank you, Mr. Engelbaum. I look forward to that review. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

VA Response: VA expects to complete the VA Police Manpower Model by the end of 2026 and will provide the Committee with an updated status in the Fall.

Chairman MORAN. You're welcome. Thank you, Senator King, Senator Sheehy.

**HON. TIM SHEEHY
U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA**

Senator SHEEHY. Thanks everyone for being here. I think first off, it's always important to remember that, you know, we're veterans, not victims. And I think, you know, whether it's our VA security, whether it's our health care providers that are VA facilities, we need to not encourage the victim ideology that unfortunately, I think has been encouraged by many well-meaning Americans who want to welcome our veterans home.

And maybe they didn't serve and we victimize our veterans instead of treating them like the heroes they are and the volunteer warriors that they are and were. And I think that's a really important aspect that we have to have in our care, that we're proud of our service. We have earned benefits that we deserve to receive, but at the same time, we're not victims, we're veterans.

So, regarding security of our facilities, community care has been the law for the VA for some time. And we are obligated to provide

choice to our veterans and their ability to benefit from community care, when available.

And of course, our security aspects, when we're talking about a VA facility that could become the focus of a veteran's ire at the VA, even if that wasn't their clinic, if they're mad about something, if they're experiencing a crisis, they will oftentimes take out their anger at the nearest target they have. And unfortunately, that could be their VA facility.

But, as you evaluate our security posture, it sounds like, Ms. McNeil, you made some very concerning discoveries in your assessments of the security posture. How does that extend to our community care network, and how do you think about the community care network, since that is an integral part of the VA ecosystem?

And how does that fold into your, although it's not protected by VA police, if those providers are part of this veteran ecosystem, where does the community care model fall into this? And that's for anybody to address.

Dr. NEAL. Senator, one of the things that I learned when I first came into this position is the unique nature of VA policing. VA policing involves so much more than law enforcement. As you mentioned, many veterans, and I'm a veteran as well, a lot of challenges. But when they come and they seek care, it's more than just going to see the doctor, the issues, the emotions, all the frustrations that we carry with us when we go to a facility. Our VA police is, as was previously mentioned, they're the first ones that you see when you come to a facility. They're the last ones you see when you leave. And those VA police officers set the tone for that visit.

And in the meantime, all the disruptions and all the things that they have to encounter in addition to policing, is which adds to the uniqueness of our VA police. So, I would offer that, that sets the tone for care.

Senator SHEEHY. I'd agree completely. And I think the VA police, unfortunately, we have a lot of work to do as we've heard there. But I think also to your point, arguably, the VA police will probably spend more time in the presence of that veteran than anybody else. I mean, the waiting area, unfortunately, is where our vets spend most of our time at the VA clinic.

And arguably, if they're regularly dealing with the same veteran who's having the same issues, there may be an occasion where, if we know that veterans being referred to community care, is there also a referral system to let that clinic know, hey, you're going to be receiving a veteran that is regularly having violent outbursts or is regularly having issues in the lobby.

We've had multiple assaults with this, so that when that veteran shows up to a local clinic, they know that they're not going to deny care, but they're aware that they may be dealing with a situation that they're not used to dealing with. They may be dealing with someone who's been trained in physical violence, who's experiencing a crisis, and they need to be ready to deal with that. So, I'd be curious if that's anywhere in our procedures. If it's not, it's probably something we should think about because as we try to leverage community care more, we don't want to have a red flag system where that follows these people around. But at the same time, we

want to make sure they're safe and there are other providers are aware of the status.

Mr. ALLAN. Yes, sir, I'm Chief Allan. Senator, one of the things that we have is called a disruptive behavior committee. And what that committee does is, there's a system that when the staff experiences any kind of disruptive behavior and no matter how minor it is, they can enter the information and their experiences into the system. And there is a committee that's very diverse and includes VA police that reviews that information.

And whether it's a flag, that maybe requires more than one doctor or person to be in the room with that individual, or in some situations can require that individual to come to the main facility where we do have VA police to receive their care. If the concern is significant enough of physical violence or any kind of harm. And that's another way of ensuring that that individual is not receiving their care where there are no VA police. And we do see that happen on a fairly consistent basis where that system is used.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Hirono.

**HON. MAZIE K. HIRONO,
U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII**

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This is for Mr. Neal. Like other facilities across the country, the VAPIHCS in Hawaii, and I understand that you visited the Hawaii facility last year?

Dr. NEAL. Yes, Senator.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you for that. But they have had very high vacancy rates for police officers and security assistance since the positions were allocated. And when facilities were given FTE caps at the end of last year, the then medical director opted to cut vacant police positions, of which there were quite a few, in favor of preserving clinical positions. And I think that was also an appropriate decision. So, my question to you, two of them, has the Department reassessed impacts to patients and staff safety post-FTE caps?

Dr. NEAL. Senator, thank you for that. And I'm going to ask Mark Engelbaum to follow up. But I will say that because of those challenges, I think the Hawaii facility was my third facility. And my message, as I met with the hospital staff, was to find a balance, at least have a conversation with our VA police, and let it be a two-way conversation instead of unilateral.

Mr. ENGELBAUM. Senator, yes, on the police side, speaking for Mr. Neal, but he can add more color to it. VA constantly and VHA constantly reviews its security postures with respect to its facilities across the board.

With respect to the positions that you're referring to, I think you highlight some of the issues that we face, as I previously mentioned in my testimony. We first had to understand and establish a baseline. The way that was brought about and as was previously mentioned, doing that at a very fractured and institutional or level based, every single separate medical center is really not a way that's sustainable. That's one of the reasons that we did our consolidation and we're looking at this.

So, we're looking at this as an entire entity from right now. I mentioned previously today, earlier, we are in the middle of a fun-

damental review where we are establishing firm manpower standards for every single facility in the VA system. That will be done later on this fall. And I have committed to provide that to this Committee once that is complete. We are going to man to the standard, whatever that may be.

In the interim, we've already addressed and have tackled individual request, plussing-up the police in certain locations such as West LA as mentioned this morning, another 107 authorizations elsewhere. So, we have a focused effort on this, and not only from the reclassification, but specifically on the manpower standards, ma'am.

Senator HIRONO. So, the VA writ large is already facing all kinds of staffing issues, shortages, recruiting, retention issues with the medical personnel, etc. And of course, we've had hearings in this Committee where there have been massive cuts to the VA workforce and possibility of thousands more in cuts. So, there's an instability from what I can see regarding the VA. And we're not doing the best for our veterans because of that.

Now, while the VAPIHCS in Hawaii could reassess its cutting decisions, so how about the Department exempting police from FDA caps to ensure that the originally identified needs of each facility are met?

Mr. ENGELBAUM. Yes, Senator. As the FTE caps, as mentioned before, actually was the UMD authorizations. You have to do something about what you actually have available funding to do. Since we didn't have a structure or a manpower document, so we had to create that. But what we have done, they're not exempt, but what we care about is, what are the requirements? Outside that foundation which we have now established, you just can't say this is a requirement of valid or not.

So, we've established that, we've got our baseline. We know how much money we have budgeted for. We have a system set up that we can validate what the actual requirement is, and we are now going through and developing the manpower standards. So, there's no question whatsoever what the actual requirement is. So, to answer your question, ma'am, yes, we are developing that standard. We're going to clearly know what the requirement is that is independent of any specific medical center staff. It is specific to the police and we are going to man to that level.

Senator HIRONO. Although one would think that, you know, each specific place I mean, we're talking about millions of veterans being cared for, and there should be input from the people who are actually on the ground at the facility as to what their security needs are. So, would there be an opportunity for that kind of input?

Mr. HERNANDEZ. Yes, ma'am. Thank you very much for that question, Senator. Their input is being taken. Right now, I have a team of investigators and inspectors that are criminal investigators, but they're being dual purposed, to go down to all 139 police service units to do deep dive assessments.

In that, we do surveys, we do interviews. So, the input from the ground is being ascertained to determine what the requirement is for staffing, contracting, support services, the full wraparound service for the police service unit.

Senator HIRONO. And when would the determinations be made as to each facility?

Mr. HERNANDEZ. I expect the report in first quarter fiscal year 2027, ma'am.

Senator HIRONO. 2027?

Mr. HERNANDEZ. This fall.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator. Let me go back to maybe a basic question. What are the requirements, and are they standardized for employment within the VA as a law enforcement officer?

Mr. HERNANDEZ. The requirements for law enforcement officer, we're working those standards right now, sir. We've just classified, I think it was 16 position descriptions, working with our human capital partners. And those standards have been encapsulated in those position descriptions. The basic entry police officer, those are outlined in the position description as well, sir.

Chairman MORAN. And, so you're saying they're being determined now, but that doesn't tell me whether they existed before the determination started.

Mr. HERNANDEZ. They have been determined. The position descriptions, we have them. They're complete, they're signed, they're approved. Prior to that, we had 139 different ways of doing position descriptions throughout the VA because they were being classified at the facility and the VISN level.

Chairman MORAN. Got it. And what are those qualifications now? How do they compare to—we heard, Senator King talk about comparisons of salary and compensation. How do they compare to someone who's applying to be a police officer at Topeka and Connecticut as his examples? How do they compare in qualifications and training and certification as a law enforcement officer at the police department in the same town?

Mr. HERNANDEZ. So, we work together with our human capital partners. I had my subject matter experts there. We feel that the position descriptions that were developed are very competitive. They start out at a baseline of a GS-6 police officer, go up to a GS-7. The first line supervisor will be a 9, and the second line supervisor will be an 11.

So, we think we feel they're very competitive. In addition, there are incentives that we can provide along the way to ensure that their competition with the local community can be commensurate.

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Leffler, do you know about what Mr. Hernandez is talking about? Have you seen these classifications, the qualifications?

Mr. LEFFLER. I have not seen it yet on my level, sir.

Chairman MORAN. I would welcome you the opportunity to see those and comment to us in writing about how you see that work product.

Mr. LEFFLER. Thank you, sir.

Chairman MORAN. That makes sense?

Mr. LEFFLER. I would absolutely love to do so.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Let me make sure that we hear from Miss McNeil. Dr. Neal said that because of what's taking place at the VA in recent times in this Administration, that many

of the—and I think I'm saying reasonably what Dr. Neal said—many of the things that are included as your recommendations have been met. Can you respond to that?

Ms. MCNEIL. We have seen no evidence that our recommendations have been addressed by the VA. Just going back to 2018, the update that we received from the VA in April was that they are drafting policies and that they're in the review stage, because our 2018 recs are quite dated, as you can see. And all we're simply asking is for their risk management to be consistent with the ISC, the Federal standards. We are still waiting to see those draft policies.

Chairman MORAN. Dr. Neal.

Dr. NEAL. Yes, I want to clarify that. I said that we are in the process of meeting those requirements. Even before I read the GAO report, the things that were outlined and the concerns were on my list. As the new Assistant Secretary, as I did my assessments and I visited the field. So, we are getting after many of those things. But again, I was not aware of what the report said until a couple of days ago.

Chairman MORAN. So, if I misquoted you, I'm sorry, but I want to make certain that we don't have the circumstance in which the VA says we are complying or we are going to comply without actual compliance.

Dr. NEAL. I agree, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. And so let me ask you to say that in a way that is important for me to hear. So how will you treat the GAO recommendations?

Dr. NEAL. Well, I'd say I read them and in fact, the VA concurs with the GAO recommendations. And part of that having this consolidation is the Secretary has, given me the authority to have oversight over this. Whereas before we didn't have oversight. And, as I said earlier, this Administration came in and I didn't know where we were. I had to figure out how we see ourselves. So, I have clear guidance from the Secretary. I do want to highlight we've done a lot, but now I have to frame what we've done in the context of this report, the ISC standards.

Chairman MORAN. So, you'll take the GAO report seriously and make every attempt to comply, or at least explain to the GAO, have a conversation about why what they are requiring doesn't make sense to you. Is that true?

Dr. NEAL. That's true.

Chairman MORAN. And I don't know what kind of timeframe you will be on this, but I would ask my staff to follow up in a few months and maybe a few more months to see that what you just described is occurring. That makes sense to you?

Dr. NEAL. Absolutely.

Chairman MORAN. Miss McNeil, something that you would like for me to ask the Department of Veterans Affairs that would be helpful to assure the GAO of their seriousness and the efforts to comply?

Ms. MCNEIL. Dr. Neal and I and some of the other folks on the panel, we had a very productive meeting yesterday, and he committed to, very open, constant communication with us on these issues. And I'm taking him at his word. And I'm very encouraged

that we will have, hopefully within the next month or two, a substantive discussion about the actions that they plan to take.

We weren't able to incorporate any of the specific details about how they were going to address our recommendations and the report that was published today, and I think that's the next step. We would like to hear some substantive details about the actions that they're going to take to implement our recommendations, and within the next month or two. I think that would be very helpful.

Chairman MORAN. And those conversations you expect to continue between the two of you or your teams?

Ms. MCNEIL. Definitely.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you.

Ms. MCNEIL. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. You're welcome. And Mr. McNeil or Mr. Neal, I point out that there's no expectation that you have complied with the recommendations because we're just seeing them now this week. So, I understand that and I appreciate the evident seriousness by which you take those recommendations.

It was also commented on, that this issue of staffing, this seems to me to be a problem that sounds like you're correcting, but the idea that a hospital director would have the capability of choosing whether to hire a police officer or a law enforcement officer, or a nurse out of the same pot of money is a terrible conflict in trying to make the right choice for the care and well-being of veterans and their families, and that's being corrected or has been corrected?

Mr. ENGELBAUM. Yes, sir. It has been corrected. It is actually a little bit of both. And I would be remiss, if you would indulge me, Chairman, because I think we've done a lot of great work on this. And to highlight some of the things that were brought up earlier, if I may.

One of the first things, as I mentioned, was we talked about the pay, but there's a lot more than the pay. So, when we first came on, we inherited this pay situation. But I have to be frank, when we talk about standards, those are Federal standards. So, what happened was, is just this general background, there are Federal standards that defined they're 40-plus years old, right. But they define what a police officer does. Based upon that—

Chairman MORAN. Federal standards that are government-wide?

Mr. ENGELBAUM. Government-wide, yes, sir. So, what happened was agencies are authorized to classify, and what happened because these standards and the way that the VA classified these positions weren't in accordance with that Federal standard. We were not abiding by Federal guidelines. So, they were overclassified in many areas to try to compensate for a problem.

When OPM came in and did a consistency review to make sure that we were in accordance with Federal standards, they found out that we weren't and therefore ordered the downgrade. So, there's a little bit of onus on both sides. This is what we walked into. And what we walked into is a situation where people did not take action to address the problem. What have we done about it?

Well, one of the first things we did is we got with OPM to ask them to put a hold on this, to allow us time to work this. You know, Secretary Neal really addressed some of the detrimental effect by this. But in the interim, we just didn't put a hold on this.

We worked very closely with OSP. We went over, and as part of this whole reorganization. First of all, we've created a pipeline, before in the past, there was not a clear path for an officer, so it wasn't just coming in.

When you look at the details of why people left, there was no career progression. It wasn't all just about pay, no career progression, development, trust in leadership was a big one, that we provided.

So, what we have done is we've created a professional chain of command, single unified chain of command and for those in the military, I know that means something that provides that guidance, leadership, and development for our entire force.

We've also given now a career path for folks to move forward. We took all of our position descriptions as being referenced before. We've reclassified 16 of 17 of them. The way we did that is not just accept what was there, but underneath the current Federal guidelines, we went in and looked at what officers actually were doing. We reinvented, we went back to square one and we did that.

So, I'm happy to report what we did resulted in an entry level police officer being recategorized as a GS-6 entry level from a GS-5. I would like to say we put the first U.S.-wide announcement out on the streets that has been out there, it is closed. We got over 2100 applicants for positions, 1900 of them are still under consideration, 1700 or so are under active consideration. So that we've got this pool now of folks that we can do.

We also now have this career progression going from GS-6, 7. We have a path forward that an entry level officer with a training and development can come in as a GS-6 and go out and all the way up to the highest echelons, SES, if he or she has those qualities, and to be able to do that. So, we provided that. So, it's not just a matter of pay. It's a matter of discipline, training, leadership, development, and that ability to progress. We found that officers were leaving us because they had nowhere to go.

In addition to that, as previously mentioned, we have instituted special salary rates. So just the basic entry level pay is not what they get. We have SSR or Special Salary Rates for over 90 percent of our police force. So, for example, mid-grade, our average GS-6 pay for police officers is \$67,000 a year. Of course, that varies by location depending on where you're at with the SSRs. Anyway, very happy to really highlight that. We just didn't sit, we took action, we've worked it. I believe we have a viable solution.

The last thing, sir, is that we are working with OPM. We've taken the lead of working with them. We've pushed the reviewing the officer classification standards, that 40-year-old standards that I mentioned to you, to the top of the list.

We're doing a review with OPM that will affect the entire Federal Government that will be done by July. And the hope that will be the last piece of the puzzle that will allow us actually, it really focuses more on qualifications. That's going to be the big benefit rather than just education and how much time have you served here.

So as officers gather experience, go to courses, get training, get development, and qualify, they'll be able to move up or take other positions rather than just saying, were you a GS-6 for a year?

Were you a GS-7 for a year? We've got that. So, pending your questions, sir.

Chairman MORAN. That's helpful. Let me ask a question before I turn to Mr. Neal. Is there a training program within the VA, for VA system-wide for training law enforcement officers?

Mr. ENGELBAUM. Yes, sir. And I'll let Mr. Hernandez speak to that. But just to highlight, that's another area, I'm glad you brought that up. We've revitalized that entire training program, extended it from 7 to 11 weeks to better professionalize our force. It's a key component of what we're doing.

Chairman MORAN. So, the police officer at the VA in Kansas and the police officer at the VA in Connecticut will have received the same training?

Mr. HERNANDEZ. That's exactly right. Senator, it's exactly right. The Law Enforcement Training Center down in Little Rock, Arkansas is fully accredited by the Federal Law Enforcement Training Accreditation Board. And our police officer training, as Mr. Engelbaum said, went from 7 weeks to 11 weeks.

And that has been done in partnership with the fleet aboard to make sure that we meet all the standards. That the enhancements that we made in the curriculum included enhanced crisis intervention training.

And I'm happy to highlight that the VA police in Columbus, Ohio, actually, were the 2026 awardees of the CIT International Mobile Crisis Response Team of the year award. So, it was kudos to our officers in Columbus, Ohio.

But enhanced crisis intervention training with more vignettes and more in-person type of role playing. We have also had enhanced de-escalation tactics, techniques, and procedures, which makes everything safer for everybody across the board when they employ those. And then we added, additions like civil disturbance and disorder training, so that we can set our officers up for success when we conduct our fourth mission.

Chairman MORAN. Did you have something you wanted to say, Mr. Neal?

Dr. NEAL. Yes. I was just going to amplify, Senator, a lot of the concerns raised by this panel and your own concerns. I'll tell you that this Administration we're getting after them. As I've gone out and visited with our police, I hear them loud and clear. And in all of the things that we have described are where we were or where we are leaving.

I'd like to offer Chief Allan an opportunity to give a perspective on if he actually sees changes or if he actually sees, I can say a lot of things, but if nothing changes when Secretary Neal leaves and goes back to D.C., then it's all for naught. So, I'd like to ask the chief if he would offer his perspective on if he's actually seeing some movement, some changes.

Chairman MORAN. Chief Allan?

Mr. ALLAN. Yes, sir, I appreciate the question. And the answer to that is absolutely yes. Especially over the last five or six months, the changes that I've noticed most drastically is the level of communication that's coming from top to bottom. We're getting information flow that we haven't seen. I've been with the VA police for

22 years. This is my second facility and this is the most communication flow that I've seen.

And while there may be struggles with staffing, there may be other struggles and things that are going on around my officers, as short-handed as we may be at times, the morale of the officers that I have right now is extremely high, and they're motivated, and they're actually getting as much or more accomplished with what we have.

Because they're motivated seeing what this team is doing, they're motivated, they feel that they have someone that's finally in their corner, someone that's fighting for them, and they're doing great things. And what I would ask this Committee to do is to get behind that, continue to support them and support the officers and not let that down.

Chairman MORAN. When you use the words, "what we have," was that referring to the number of officers?

Mr. ALLAN. That's correct.

Chairman MORAN. Is that number yet sufficient?

Mr. ALLAN. That number is not as many as I would like to have.

Chairman MORAN. But I knew I chose the wrong word when I said sufficient. But is it more than acceptable for where you are, or do you have an assurance that there's more officers that will be hired?

Mr. ALLAN. I have assurance that with what they have in place, with the manpower pool, that that backup and that that pool will be opened up to us in the very near future.

Chairman MORAN. I'm going to wrap this up in just a minute, because I have no one to turn this hearing over to, and I have to go vote. But let me ask a broad question. I was thinking, as I thought about this hearing, I was thinking of the number of times I've walked into the, sometimes announced, sometimes unannounced, at the Dole VA or the Eastern VISN division in the Eastern Hospital in Leavenworth or Topeka.

And I was trying to think of what, particularly when I was unannounced, what the security was just in getting in the facility. So, what does a visitor encounter upon an arrival at Dole VA in Wichita, or in Topeka, Colmery-O'Neil?

Mr. ALLAN. Yes, sir. I appreciate the question. I can't answer for Topeka, but what I can say for Wichita. First thing that hopefully you'll see is an exterior police patrol in a vehicle. Our greatest resource is our officers, and our physical presence and crime deterrence. Our officers are very, very much into community policing and being seen and being public.

At one point, we did try some of the artificial intelligence, weapon detection systems. Unfortunately, they were locking down the building for laptops and all kinds of other things.

Chairman MORAN. But as a visitor, go through a screener?

Mr. ALLAN. Just to come into the building. There were two sets of doors. You come in the first door and you walk through it and if it detected anything that was supposed to be a weapon.

Chairman MORAN. Do I know I'm going through it? Is it's noticeable by me?

Mr. ALLAN. It's not very noticeable. It's very discreet. And then it would lock down the second set of doors and it would notify the

police and we would have to respond to that location. Unfortunately, sometimes 20, 30 times a day we're responding and it's a laptop or something to that effect, to the point where it's impacting patient access, which is another issue. So, we're trying to differentiate that it became completely ineffective.

So, our patrols and proactive patrols, we use predictive crime analysis tools to determine where the highest rate of crimes are, at what times, locations, and what type of incidents so that we know how to direct our patrols and several other programs as well.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you.

Mr. ALLAN. Yes, sir.

Chairman MORAN. I ask the witnesses at a hearing that I conduct if they have something they wish they hadn't have said, or they have something they wish they could say. And I'd give you that opportunity, although it needs to be brief. If you don't mind.

Dr. NEAL. Mr. Chairman, I appreciate it. Again, you know, we take those findings very seriously, and it's part of my responsibility to make sure the VA meets those performance requirements. But I will say that over large, out of 131,000 police reports, we've had very good success with weapons and other things that are highlighted.

So, if you look at the GAO report, 97–98 percent of health care workers, 98 percent of veterans do feel safe at our facilities. We've got some gaps, we're going to address them, but our VA police officers are working hard every day and in meeting safety requirements and keeping our facilities safe.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you very much, and I would use this moment to express gratitude to certainly the witnesses, but to the folks in the Department of Veterans Affairs, who are law enforcement officers who protect and defend other veterans and patients, other visitors, and family members.

It's a difficult challenge, It's true outside the VA. Emergency rooms in today's hospitals today can be pretty dangerous places. And I hope that you'll pay particular attention to emergency departments with issues related to mental health and drug abuse and the factors that affect human behavior. And I would ask that you express gratitude from this Committee from the United States Senate for the service of your law enforcement officers, and we looked forward to following up.

This seems to me to be a circumstance that the VA has been in, a circumstance they should never have been in, in regard to law enforcement and the well-being of those officers and the people they serve. And it also seems to me that this Department of Veterans Affairs is working to correct what I see as a poor history in regard to law enforcement support at the Department.

I also want to add to the hearing record and ask unanimous consent to do so. A list that honors the 12 VA police officers who made the ultimate sacrifice. Officers who went to work every day to protect and serve our veterans. They deserve and have our respect, admiration, and remembrance. And without objection, so ordered.

[The information referred to appears on pages 61–62 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you for your participation in today's hearing.

[Whereupon, at 5:18 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statements

**STATEMENT OF
REGINALD G. A. NEAL, Ed.D.
ASSISTANT SECRETARY
OFFICE OF OPERATIONS, SECURITY, AND PREPAREDNESS (OSP)
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
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 this opportunity to provide an overview of the VA Police force and our plan to improve how it serves and protects Veterans, families, caregivers, survivors, visitors, and VA employees. I am accompanied by Mark Engelbaum, Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration; Patrick Hernandez, Director of Security and Law Enforcement; and Chad Allan, Chief of Police, Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center.

VA Police officers proudly provide security and Federal law enforcement services for the largest integrated health care system in the country. However, when the second Donald J. Trump Administration took office in 2025, we found a fractured force that was plagued with problems that had been highlighted for years by VA's Office of Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

Here are some of the most serious problems we faced:

For years, the VA Police were managed by individual VA medical facilities and reported to medical center personnel instead of senior law enforcement professionals. Without a unified chain of command, VA Police suffered from inconsistent policing standards and a lack of discipline and accountability. In some VA facilities, police were

being used for non-police missions, including serving as valets to park cars. This system increased safety risks for everyone at VA.

This basic structural problem also made it very difficult to retain and promote seasoned officers, because VA Police officers only reported to the facility and were not part of a larger law enforcement structure that could support their advancement. As a result, VA lost many senior officers to other law enforcement agencies.

This is a complex issue, but here is what happened:

- VA Police positions were not properly classified in accordance with Federal standards.
- The threat of lower grades and less pay created an even deeper crisis for the VA Police force, as it became far less competitive compared to what other law enforcement agencies could offer.

President Trump charged Secretary of Veterans Affairs Douglas Collins with putting Veterans first, and Secretary Collins is moving out aggressively to do so. Here is what we have done:

We recognized in 2025 that VA Police need a unified chain of command. We are completing a reorganization that includes actions such as the establishment of an Assistant Secretary position over OSP. This means at VA, we finally have law enforcement leaders in charge of VA Police. As a result:

- We can enforce standards and discipline across all facilities.
- We can improve training and professional development across the Department.
- VA Police have a direct line to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to discuss emerging issues.
- We can create stability and opportunities for a long-term career at VA for our police officers.

We are also fixing the issues with VA Police position classifications. Here is what we've done:

- We conducted a detailed review of duties and responsibilities in accordance with current classification standards. This has provided increased competitiveness for the force, such as in entry-level positions.
- With the restructure, we have been able to develop a model that allows for greater career progression within VA.
- We are participating in the Office of Personnel Management's initiative to revise the 40+ year-old classification standard.
- These steps will make it easier to recruit and retain quality officers because VA will be more competitive.

These critical changes put the VA Police on a better footing to address emerging challenges, including those highlighted in a March 2026 GAO report that outlined a range of security challenges at VA facilities. We believe our efforts to stop the downward spiral of staff reductions and ineffectiveness will allow us to meet those challenges.

I have personally visited 13 VA facilities and police units in the short time I have been in this position. I have seen firsthand the improvements we need to make, but I can also tell you we are making tremendous strides that are putting us on the right path. Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss the importance of security to the VA system that millions of Veterans rely on for care and benefits. We look forward to your questions.



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BY

MR. MATTHEW LEFFLER
VICE PRESIDENT OF AFGE LOCAL 1699
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

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 to 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.

Matthew Leffler

Vice President of AFGE Local 1699 Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania VAMC

Matthew Leffler has proudly served as a Federal Law Enforcement Officer for 20 years in various positions. He joined the United States Marine Corps in 1999 and served honorably as a Military Police Officer for four years. After his military service, he continued his law enforcement career working as a corrections officer.

Upon graduating from the Pennsylvania Police Academy, Matthew served for 10 years as a Marine Corp Civilian Police Officer in North Carolina. After this service, he continued serving his fellow veterans by moving back to Pennsylvania and working at the Wilkes-Barre Veteran Affairs Police Department, where he is currently serves as a Senior Police Officer. In addition to his role as VA Police Officer, he proudly serves as the Vice President of AFGE Local 1699 at the Wilkes-Barre VAMC.

Matthew and his wife, Abigail, live in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania with their two children.



United States Government Accountability Office

Testimony
Before the Committee on Veterans'
Affairs, U.S. Senate

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VA MEDICAL FACILITY SECURITY

Actions Needed to Address Longstanding Risks

Statement of Triana McNeil, Director,
Homeland Security and Justice





VA MEDICAL FACILITY SECURITY

Actions Needed to Address Longstanding Risks

GAO-26-109020

May 13, 2026

A testimony before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, U.S. Senate

For more information, contact: Triana McNeil at McNeilT@gao.gov

What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is responsible for securing its facilities. GAO has identified security challenges at VA medical facilities and made recommendations to help manage related risks.

In January 2018, for example, GAO found limitations with VA's risk assessment methodology and recommended VA review and revise its risk management policies to reflect interagency standards, and develop an oversight strategy to assess its facilities' risk management programs. VA has not yet fully implemented these recommendations as of April 2026.

In April 2026, GAO reported that its 2025 covert testing found security vulnerabilities at selected VA facilities. In some cases, VA security measures were not effective. Specifically, VA failed to detect most of GAO's covert tests related to security vulnerabilities it had previously identified in its risk assessments of its medical facilities. For example:

- In all 30 tests, VA staff did not detect a prohibited weapon that GAO investigators carried into the VA facilities, including two that had metal detectors.
- In 25 of 26 tests, VA staff did not confront an investigator drinking in plain view from a bottle labeled vodka—which is generally prohibited at VA facilities.

Undercover GAO Investigator Appearing to Drink Alcohol in a VA Medical Facility



Source: GAO | GAO-26-109020

Taking actions to address GAO recommendations would better provide VA with information it needs to make informed decisions, allocate resources effectively, and prioritize security efforts to create a safe environment for veterans and VA staff.

Why GAO Did This Study

VA oversees the largest integrated health care system in the U.S., serving 9 million enrolled veterans at over 1,300 facilities. VA employees, veteran patients, and medical facilities have been the targets of violence, threats, and other security-related incidents in recent years, including nonviolent crimes such as disorderly conduct and theft.

The Interagency Security Committee (ISC)—which VA is a member of—developed a risk management standard that federal agencies must follow to identify and address the types of security vulnerabilities impacting their facilities.

GAO has conducted work related to the ISC's risk management standard and security at VA medical facilities. This statement, based primarily on three reports published from January 2013 to April 2026, discusses challenges VA faces related to the security of its facilities and actions that could help address those challenges, among other issues.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made five recommendations to VA in two reports to help address challenges related to securing its facilities. In April 2026 for example, GAO made three recommendations, including that VA develop a plan with milestones and assess resources needed to fully implement the ISC's risk management standard.

GAO will continue to monitor the agency's progress in implementing the recommendations.

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

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our work examining Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) challenges with securing medical facilities. VA oversees the largest integrated health care system in the U.S., serving 9 million enrolled veterans at over 1,300 medical facilities. VA employees, veteran patients, and medical facilities have been the targets of violence, threats, and other security-related incidents in recent years, including nonviolent crimes such as disorderly conduct and theft. In 2025, for example, a VA employee was assaulted and injured by a man with a knife outside of a VA Hospital in Fresno, California. In another incident in 2025, a man brandishing a weapon entered the emergency room of a VA hospital in Reno, Nevada. The man was shot and killed by law enforcement after charging at the officers, according to news reports. We placed managing federal real property on our High-Risk List, in part, due to threats to federal facilities.¹

VA is responsible for physical security at its medical facilities. Its armed and uniformed police force—VA police—provides law enforcement services at these facilities nationwide. The agency employs more than 4,300 officers, physical security specialists, and investigators along with about 800 contract security guards.² The design of the facilities is another important component of physical security. For example, facilities may employ measures such as card readers, bollards, and surveillance cameras to enhance security.

My statement today discusses (1) the nature of crime at VA medical facilities and (2) challenges VA faces securing its facilities and actions

¹GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, GAO-25-107743 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 2025).

²VA staffing data are as of May 31, 2025. VA estimates the data has a 5 percent error rate on newly hired positions at a given point in time, as VA manually enters and continuously reviews and corrects it.

that could help address those challenges. It is based primarily on three reports we published from January 2013 to April 2026.³

For the three reports we cite in this statement, we reviewed VA policies and documentation, analyzed data, conducted covert tests, interviewed officials from agency headquarters and conducted site visits to selected field units (among other methodologies). More detailed information on our scope and methodology, including how we analyzed data and assessed their reliability, is in the reports. For this statement, we also reviewed the status of VA implementation of selected recommendations we made through April 2026.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We conducted our related investigative work in accordance with standards prescribed by the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

The Majority of Reported Criminal Activity at VA Medical Facilities Was Nonviolent and Occurred in Areas with More Urban VA Facilities

Our prior work has shown that the majority of reported criminal activity at VA medical facilities was nonviolent and occurred in areas with more urban VA facilities. In April 2026, we reported that around 98 percent of the 74,706 crimes reported by VA police in fiscal years 2024 and 2025 were nonviolent, according to our analysis of VA police records.⁴

The most frequently reported nonviolent crimes were disorderly conduct, larceny or theft, and drug or narcotics offenses, which accounted for about 48 percent of all crimes in fiscal years 2024 and 2025, as shown in

³See GAO, *Facility Security: VA Should Fully Implement Federal Security Requirements and Improve Performance Reporting*, [GAO-26-107952](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 29, 2026); *VA Facility Security: Policy Review and Improved Oversight Strategy Needed*, [GAO-18-201](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 11, 2018); and *Facility Security: Greater Outreach by DHS on Standards and Management Practices Could Benefit Federal Agencies*, [GAO-13-222](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 24, 2013).

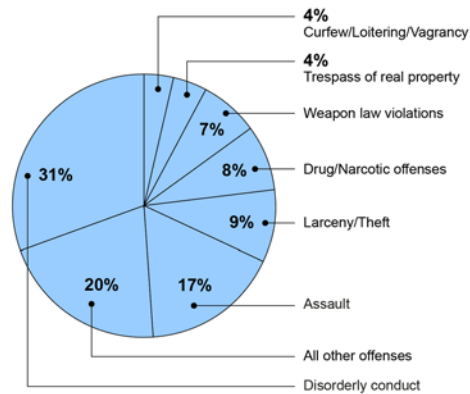
⁴[GAO-26-107952](#).

figure 1.⁵ These are crimes that VA police officers reported using the department's record management systems. Accordingly, they may not include all crimes that occur at VA medical facilities. Violent crimes were also reported at VA medical facilities during this period. Violent sex crimes—such as sexual assault and rape—were the most common types of violent crime reported, accounting for 888 of the 74,706 crimes reported by VA police.⁶ VA police also reported 233 aggravated assaults and three murders.

⁵According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, disorderly conduct is any behavior that tends to disturb the public or decorum, scandalize the community, or shock the public sense of morality. VA police reported 12,545 assaults of all types in fiscal years 2024 and 2025. The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines assault as any unlawful attack by one person upon another and collects statistics on three types of assault crimes: (1) simple assaults, which do not involve a weapon or result in severe bodily injury; (2) intimidation, which is the use of threatening words or behaviors that places another person in reasonable fear of harm; and (3) aggravated assaults, which are attacks involving the use of a dangerous weapon or that resulted in serious injuries. The Federal Bureau of Investigation does not classify simple assault or intimidation as violent crimes.

⁶In fiscal year 2025, VA police reported one sex crime—failing to register as a sex offender—that the Federal Bureau of Investigation does not classify as a violent crime.

Figure 1: Crimes at VA Medical Facilities Reported by VA Police, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025



Source: GAO analysis of VA police records. | GAO-26-109020

Note: VA police reported 74,706 crimes in fiscal years 2024 and 2025. The "all other offenses" category is composed of 28 crimes. For a full list, see GAO, Facility Security: VA Should Fully Implement Federal Security Requirements and Improve Performance Reporting, [GAO-26-107952](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 29, 2026). Our report uses the criminal offense categories and definitions used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to collect crime statistics through its National Incident-Based Reporting System.

Our prior work found there may be a variety of factors associated with crime trends at VA facilities. For example, VA officials told us the layout and location of VA facilities affect crime trends. Older VA hospitals typically consist of multiple large buildings spread out on a large campus, making it more difficult for VA to secure them. Newer VA hospitals consist of a central main building, which is easier to secure and upgrade with new security technologies, according to VA officials.⁷

Reported crimes at VA facilities most commonly occurred in emergency departments and inpatient treatment areas, and common areas such as lobbies, hallways, medical facility grounds, and parking lots, according to

⁷GAO-26-107952.

VA police records for fiscal years 2024 and 2025. According to VA officials, patients receiving care in the emergency departments might be experiencing mental or emotional difficulties that cause them to commit crimes. Crime at non-VA hospitals most commonly occurs at emergency departments, according to officials from the American Hospital Association—which represents and provides guidance to private hospitals—and the Joint Commission—which develops leading practices and standards for patient safety in health care. Figure 2 shows examples of areas at a VA medical facility that VA security personnel monitor, including hospital grounds, a lobby, and a parking lot.

Figure 2: Examples of Locations Monitored by VA Security Personnel



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109020

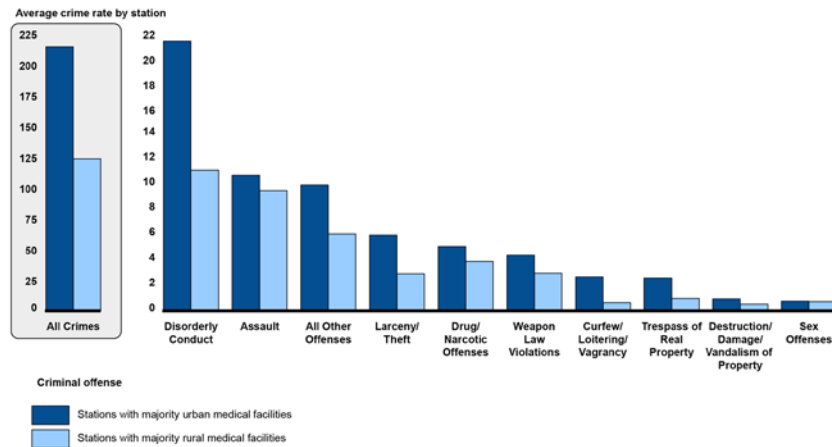
We previously found that the average crime rate for crimes of all types was about twice as high at VA stations we classified as majority urban than at those we classified as majority rural in fiscal years 2024 and 2025,

as shown in figure 3.⁸ The VA police generally reported the same types of crimes at majority urban and majority rural stations. Both violent crimes, such as sexual assault and rape, and nonviolent crimes, such as theft, were more frequently reported at majority urban VA stations on average. VA officials told us that crime rates at VA facilities reflect crime trends in the surrounding area, and higher crime rates in some areas are caused by socioeconomic differences, such as poverty and the concentration of at-risk populations. The prevailing crime rate in the area surrounding VA facilities is a factor in how VA management decides where to station police officers and security guards, according to VA officials.

The results of our analysis reported in April 2026 match what some VA patients and staff told us during our visits to rural VA facilities. VA staff at two rural clinics we visited told us they rarely or never observed criminal activity while at work. Additionally, patients at one rural clinic told us that they had not seen or experienced crime while receiving treatment at the clinic.

⁸GAO-26-107952.

Figure 3: Crime Rates at Majority Rural and Majority Urban Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Stations, Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 Combined



Source: GAO analysis of VA police data. | GAO-26-109020

Note: A station is a geographic grouping that includes multiple medical facilities. We divided stations into two groups. Those with more than half of the facilities in the station in urban areas were defined as stations with majority urban medical facilities, and those with more than half of the facilities in the station in rural areas were defined as stations with majority rural medical facilities. We used the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural-Urban Commuting Area code framework to determine if a facility was in an urban or rural area. We calculated the average crime rate by calculating the average rate of reported crime incidents per facility across stations, grouped by rurality category. For each group, we computed the rate of criminal incidents as the number of reported incidents divided by the number of facilities in each station, then averaged these rates within each rural classification group.

GAO's Covert Testing Found Vulnerabilities at VA Medical Facilities Related to Longstanding Security Challenges

VA Failed to Detect Almost All of GAO's Covert Security Tests

In 2025, we conducted covert testing to assess security at 30 selected VA medical facilities and found security vulnerabilities.⁹ In April 2026, we reported that these security vulnerabilities included those related to reported types of crimes at VA facilities and vulnerabilities that VA identified in its medical facility risk assessments. Specifically, we conducted tests related to weapons, alcohol, and accessing nonpublic spaces.¹⁰

VA staff did not detect the prohibited weapon in any of the 30 selected VA facilities we tested. During our covert tests, our investigators successfully brought in a multi-tool with a knife blade, as shown in figure 4. The blade exceeded 2.5 inches, so it was longer than the maximum length allowed in federal facilities by law,¹¹ and was carried into facilities in a backpack.

⁹We were able to perform the weapon test at all 30 locations and the alcoholic beverage test at 26 of the 30 locations. While these tests are not generalizable to all VA facilities, they provide insights into security vulnerabilities.

¹⁰[GAO-26-107952](#).

¹¹18 U.S.C. § 930(a)-(b), (g)(2); see also Interagency Security Committee, Items Prohibited in Federal Facilities: An Interagency Security Committee Standard 8, 10 (2022). VA has a regulation that prohibits possession of knives on VA property that exceed a blade length of 3 inches. 38 C.F.R. § 1.218(b)(39). We used the more restrictive Interagency Security Committee standard, which applies to federal facilities and is based on federal law.

Figure 4: Multi-tool with a Blade Length Over the Federal Limit



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109020

Metal detectors are not required by VA policy or the federal Interagency Security Committee (ISC) standard, but they both state that they are one of the mitigation methods facilities can adopt to help prevent individuals from bringing weapons into facilities. Twenty-eight of the 30 facilities in our 2025 covert tests did not have metal detectors. Of the two facilities where our investigators saw metal detectors, in one case the metal detector was not in use. In the other case, the weapon test triggered the metal detector to alert, but the investigator was not questioned or searched.

VA management from the three medical centers we met with had differing views on using metal detectors. Management at two centers raised concerns, one regarding metal detectors impeding the flow of foot traffic into the facility and the additional resources needed to monitor the detectors. Management from another center said that detectors could detract from the warm and welcoming environment they are trying to create. In contrast, the third center had recently started using the weapon

detection system in response to staff safety concerns and a suicide involving a gun at the hospital.

VA generally prohibits possessing alcoholic beverages at VA medical facilities.¹² Alcohol use is associated with a higher risk of violence and other harmful health effects, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹³ Officials from VA's Law Enforcement Training Center said that when VA police encounter veterans exhibiting concerning behavior, one goal is to connect the veterans to medical staff for treatment.

However, in 25 of the 26 tests we conducted at selected VA medical facilities in 2025, VA staff did not detect and confront our undercover investigator appearing to drink an alcoholic beverage in plain view.¹⁴ During our covert tests, our investigators drank from a bottle appearing to contain alcohol in a waiting room for a period of 5 minutes, as pictured in figure 5 below.¹⁵ In over one quarter of these tests (eight of 26), security personnel (VA police or security guards) were nearby but failed to notice or act. Similarly, in five of the 26 tests, other nearby VA personnel failed to notice or act. In nine of the 26 tests, our investigators did not observe any security personnel.

¹²38 C.F.R. § 1.218(a)(7).

¹³Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Alcohol Use and Your Health," accessed Nov. 14, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/about-alcohol-use/index.html>.

¹⁴We determined it was not feasible to conduct this test at four selected VA facilities.

¹⁵The bottles were labeled as containing vodka but did not contain alcohol.

Figure 5: GAO Investigator Appearing to Drink Alcohol in a Department of Veterans Affairs Waiting Room in the Vicinity of Security Personnel



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-109020

VA Has Faced Longstanding Challenges Addressing the Federal Facility Risk Management Standard and Law Enforcement Staffing

Since at least 2013, we have reported that agencies face challenges addressing the ISC's standards. The ISC's risk management standard is designed to help agencies identify and address the types of security vulnerabilities impacting their facilities. We have also made recommendations to help agencies ensure compliance with these standards.¹⁶ Prior to our covert testing, we reported in 2018 that VA faces challenges addressing risks at its medical facilities, including fully

¹⁶See [GAO-13-222](#) and *Federal Facility Security: Additional Actions Needed to Help Agencies Comply With Risk Assessment Methodology Standards*, [GAO-14-86](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2014). We recommended that the Department of Homeland Security, as the leader of the ISC, direct the ISC to conduct additional outreach and assess agency compliance with its standards. These recommendations have been implemented.

implementing the ISC's risk management standard.¹⁷ Specifically, in 2018, we found limitations with VA's risk assessment methodology. For example, we found that VA considered only three of the five factors the ISC calls for when calculating a facility's security level. We recommended VA review and revise its risk management policies to reflect ISC standards and develop an oversight strategy to assess the effectiveness of risk management programs at its facilities.¹⁸ VA concurred with these recommendations and stated that it planned to issue a policy that would address both recommendations by January 2027.

Additionally, in April 2026, we reported that VA has taken steps to implement the ISC's risk management standard but had not fully implemented the required ISC steps of implementing the risk management strategies or measuring performance.¹⁹ The ISC's risk management standard recognizes that it is not always possible for agencies to implement all security recommendations because of budget limitations and competing priorities. The standard requires that the responsible agency document its decisions on which aspects of the risk management strategy it plans to implement and which aspects it will not implement, along with the reasons for accepting greater security risks.

We also reported in April 2026 that VA officials said the lack of an agencywide policy instructing officials in the field on how to implement the ISC's risk management process was one factor impeding implementation. As previously discussed, VA set a goal of issuing a policy that incorporates the ISC's standards by January 2027 in response to our 2018 recommendation.²⁰ However, while these efforts have been underway for years, the agency does not have a timeframe for fully implementing its forthcoming policy or the ISC's risk management

¹⁷In response to the 1995 terrorist attack at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, President Clinton issued an executive order creating the ISC. Exec. Order No. 12977, 60 Fed. Reg. 54,411 (Oct. 19, 1995). The ISC was tasked with enhancing the quality and effectiveness of security in facilities in the U.S. occupied by federal employees for nonmilitary activities, and to provide a permanent body to address continuing government-wide security for federal facilities. The committee is chaired by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency within the Department of Homeland Security and consists of 66 departments and agencies, including VA.

¹⁸GAO-18-201.

¹⁹GAO-26-107952.

²⁰GAO-18-201.

standard. VA officials said this was due to resource constraints and competing priorities.

As we reported in April 2026, the ISC's risk management standard is designed to help agencies identify and address the types of security vulnerabilities impacting their facilities. Our covert testing found that there are security vulnerabilities at selected VA facilities and in some cases the security measures in place were not effective. Without information on the status and performance of VA facilities' security risk management strategies—as required by the ISC's risk management standard—VA does not have the information needed to make informed decisions, allocate resources effectively, and prioritize security efforts.

Given the amount of time—approximately 8 years—it has been since our prior recommendation to address ISC standards, in April 2026 we recommended VA establish a plan with milestones and assess the resources required for implementing the ISC's risk management standard to help the agency build momentum and track progress.²¹ We heard from VA after we issued our report that it concurred with the recommendations and we will monitor VA's progress in implementing them. Fully implementing the ISC's risk management standard can help VA ensure its medical facilities have appropriate levels of security to create a safe environment for veterans and staff.

Directly related to maintaining a safe environment, in February 2026, we reported that law enforcement officers comprise one of VA's top nonclinical occupation shortages, according to agency officials.²² Officials said one factor leading to understaffing is budget constraints which required the agency to weigh competing priorities in hiring clinical and nonclinical staff. As a result, they said that officers were not always available to patrol facilities, potentially making them less safe. VA data show that from fiscal year 2020 through fiscal year 2024, the agency's law enforcement officer staffing levels ranged from a low of 4,669 in 2021 to a high of 6,281 in 2024; however, staffing levels were consistently below VA's staffing level targets for these years.

²¹We also recommended that VA develop a mechanism for VA headquarters to communicate with Veterans Integrated Service Network officials on their progress in meeting VA's 95 percent security gap closure planning goal. See [GAO-26-107952](#).

²²See GAO, *Law Enforcement Officers: Observations on Recruitment and Retention at the Federal, Tribal, State, and Local Levels*, [GAO-26-108495](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 3, 2026).

In summary, VA manages the largest integrated health care system in the U.S. and is responsible for the safety of the 9 million veterans it serves and its staff. While VA staff, veteran patients, and medical facilities have been the target of violence, threats, and other security-related incidents in recent years, VA has not fully addressed longstanding and known risks. We have identified challenges with VA's management of its medical facility security and have made recommendations to help address these challenges. The results of our 2025 covert testing at 30 selected VA facilities demonstrate ongoing risks to patients and employees, including medical providers. Implementing our recommendations pertaining to resource needs assessments and the ISC's risk management standard would better position VA to address these risks.

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Members of the Committee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Triana McNeil, Director, Homeland Security and Justice, at McNeilT@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Media Relations may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this statement are Andrew Curry (Assistant Director), and Heather May (Analyst in Charge). Other staff who made key contributions to the reports cited in the testimony are identified in the source products.

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Submission for the Record

Line of Duty Deaths

United States Department of Veterans Affairs Police Services

Police Officer Marvin C. Bland
Location: VA Bedford Healthcare System, Massachusetts
End of Watch: September 6, 1985

Police Officer Leonard B. Wilcox
Location: Brecksville VA Hospital, Ohio
End of Watch: January 31, 1986

Police Officer Mark S. Decker
Location: Brecksville VA Hospital, Ohio
End of Watch: January 31, 1986

Police Officer Ronald Hearn
Location: VA Bronx Healthcare System, New York
End of Watch: July 25, 1988

Police Officer Garry A. Ross
Location: Washington VA Medical Center, Washington, D.C.
End of Watch: December 24, 1990

Police Officer Horst Harold Woods
Location: VA New Mexico Healthcare System, New Mexico
End of Watch: January 10, 1996

Police Officer Jose Oscar Rodriguez-Reyes
Location: San Juan VA Medical Center, Puerto Rico
End of Watch: April 24, 2002

Police Officer Ronald A. Leisure
Location: Palo Alto VA Medical Center- Livermore, California
End of Watch: November 14, 2014

Senior Police Officer Jonathan B. Hickman
Location: James A. Veterans' Hospital, Florida
End of Watch: December 15, 2020

Special Agent Gregory Cleveland Holland
Location: VA Law Enforcement Training Center, Arkansas
End of Watch: August 13, 2021

Police Lieutenant Joseph E. Burns
Location: VA Boston Healthcare System
End of Watch: December 8, 2022

Corporal Raymond Kuuchi
Location: VA Law Enforcement Training Center, Arkansas
End of Watch: September 2, 2024

Questions for the Record

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Questions for the Record
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
"Protecting Those Who Served: A Review of VA Police Operations"

May 13, 2026

Questions for the Record from Senator Tammy Duckworth

Question 1: Since January 1, 2025, how many VA Police exit survey respondents have mentioned the lack of retention incentives as a contributing factor to their departure from the Department?

VA Response: Among 115 substantive responses, 28% of respondents indicated that the lack of some form of incentive or special salary rate (SSR) impacted their decision to leave.

Question 2: What were the top five reasons VA police cited in their exit surveys for leaving the Department in 2024, 2023 and 2022? Please provide a percentage breakdown of the top five responses for each calendar year.

VA Response: The top five reasons VA police officers cited for leaving VA in 2024, 2023, and 2022, are listed below by year:

2024	Count	% of Total
I wanted to change careers	11	12%
Insufficient pay	9	10%
I wanted/needed to geographically relocate	7	8%
Opportunity for advancement	6	7%
Personal/family matters such as caring for a parent or a child	5	6%

2023	Count	% of Total
Insufficient pay	10	15%
I wanted to change careers	8	12%
I wanted/needed to geographically relocate	7	11%
Lack of trust/confidence in senior leaders	5	8%
The work was not meaningful or enjoyable	3	5%

2022	Count	% of Total
I wanted to change careers	6	16%
Lack of trust/confidence in senior leaders	6	16%
Unethical behavior on the part of leadership or the organization	3	8%

Job stress/pressure	3	8%
Personal/family matters such as caring for a parent or a child	2	6%

Question 3: How many VA police officers left VA to work for a federal law enforcement agency at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in fiscal years 2025, 2024 and 2023? The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)? Please specify by fiscal quarter.

VA Response: During fiscal years (FY) 2023-25, 105 VA police officers left VA to work for the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The table below provides detailed information for these departures:

FY & Quarter (Q)	VA Employee Count by Agency Transferred To		Total
	DOJ	DHS	
FY 2023	13	13	26
FY 2023 Q1	4	1	5
FY 2023 Q2	0	1	1
FY 2023 Q3	5	3	8
FY 2023 Q4	4	8	12
FY 2024	4	25	29
FY 2024 Q1	0	9	9
FY 2024 Q2	2	6	8
FY 2024 Q3	2	3	5
FY 2024 Q4	0	7	7
FY 2025	5	45	50
FY 2025 Q1	1	5	6
FY 2025 Q2	2	12	14
FY 2025 Q3	0	4	4
FY 2025 Q4	2	24	26
Total	22	83	105

Source: HR Smart

Question 4: Of the approximately 160 VA police officers who, as of April 10, 2026, left the Department for another Federal agency since January 1, 2025, how many of these officers left the Department to work for a federal law enforcement agency at DHS? Please specify by agency.

VA Response: The following table shows the number of police officers who left VA to work for DHS between FY 2025-26. VA does not track sub-agencies within DHS.

FY & Q	DHS
FY 2025	45
FY 2025 Q1	5
FY 2025 Q2	12
FY 2025 Q3	4
FY 2025 Q4	24
FY 2026	100
FY 2026 Q1	81
FY 2026 Q2	17
FY 2026 Q3	2
Total	145

Source: HR Smart

Question 6: How many additional VA police officers have left the Department for another Federal agency since April 10, 2026?

VA Response: Based on available data in HR Smart, there are four police officers who left VA to work for another Federal agency since April 10, 2026.

Question 7: When a VA Medical Center (VAMC) director identifies a need for a locally specific Special Salary Rate (SSR) to increase the competitiveness of a VA career category, where is such a request routed and what methodologies does the Secretary use to determine whether to formally submit that requested SSR to OPM?

VA Response: VA establishes SSRs for groups or categories of title 5, hybrid title 38, and title 38 positions in one or more geographic areas to address significant challenges in recruiting or retaining well-qualified employees. Medical Center Directors (MCDs) determine whether to request SSRs by evaluating the following factors:

- Significantly higher non-Federal pay rates in the relevant area, location, or occupational group;
- Remoteness of the area or location making the position difficult to fill; and
- Documented recruitment and retention challenges supported by recruitment, retention, and turnover data.

There are two distinct approval pathways for SSRs:

- For title 5 occupations (including title 5 health care occupations), MCDs validate the need and then submit recommendations to the Under Secretary for Health (USH). VA coordinates these requests through the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration for concurrence and then submits them to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for approval.
- For hybrid title 38 and title 38 occupations, MCDs validate the need and submit requests to the USH for approval. After approval, VA processes SSRs internally.

- Under 38 U.S.C. 7455(d) as delegated by the President under EO 12747, VA must notify OPM if it intends to establish special rates under 38 U.S.C. 7455 for personnel covered by section 7455(a)(2)(B) and (C), which includes VA police officers. OPM may approve or disapprove the proposed special rates as specified in section 7455(d).
- OPM approval is not required for special rates established under VA's PACT Act authority at 38 U.S.C. 706(i) using the special rate authority at 5 U.S.C. 5305.

Question 8: Aside from SSR requests, what other tools are VA facility directors authorized to use as of May 12, 2026, to increase the competitiveness of a career at the VA and mitigate recruitment and retention challenges?

VA Response: In 2025, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs directed the consolidation of the VA police force under a unified chain of command in OSP. Under this new structure, law enforcement professionals now lead VA Police, positioning the Department to apply uniform standards, enhance training, and offer stable, long-term career opportunities for police officers across all VA facilities.

For recruitment, VA focuses outreach on transitioning Service members and early-career talent, recognizing that approximately 76% of our GS-0083 police officer workforce are Veterans. VA's branding and marketing strategies highlight the meaningful career paths available within VA Police as well as the comprehensive total rewards package offered to its officers.

To better support police operations, VA is establishing a dedicated Human Resources (HR) support structure for VA Police, including teams located in Washington, DC, Little Rock, Arkansas, and additional sites Nationwide. This specialized support structure ensures more consistent, informed, and responsive HR service delivery. In parallel, VA is expanding the use of continuous open announcements and direct hiring authorities to streamline hiring. These tools, combined with VA's 30-day hiring model pilot and skills-based assessment, reduce time-to-hire while generating high-quality referral lists for immediate selection.

To remain competitive in the labor market, VA continues to apply available incentives, including SSR and recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives authorized under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act when needed to address critical staffing requirements.

The Department completed a comprehensive review of all VA Police positions and established a structured career path that extends from entry-level positions through the Senior Executive Service. As part of this effort, the entry-level police officer position has been increased to a GS-6 grade level. Additionally, VA is collaborating with OPM to revise an outdated classification standard to move VA away from traditional requirements toward a modern, competency-based qualifications framework that promotes professional development and advancement within the force. This revision is independent of VA's position management activities and of each agency's responsibility

to apply the standard properly; grades continue to be determined by applying the factor level descriptions to the duties assigned and performed.

Question 9: Since January 20, 2025, how many, if any, requests from VA facility directors to authorize a SSR for VA police at their facility have been denied internally at VA? For each denial, please list the Medical Center that originated the request, the denying office and the rationale for that denial.

VA Response: Since January 20, 2025, no SSR adjustments for police officers have been denied internally at VA.

Question 10: Since January 20, 2025, how many requests from VA to authorize a SSR for VA police at a given facility or geographic area has the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) denied? For each denial received, please list the geographic area and OPM's expressed rationale.

VA Response: Since January 20, 2025, no SSR adjustments for police officers have been denied by OPM.

Question 11: Of the 3,761 VA police officers who currently benefit from a tailored pay schedule, how many are in Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN) 12, and at which facilities?

VA Response: As of June 5, 2026, the number of VA police officers in the continental United States on an SSR was 3,525. Following are the counts of those police officers who are at facilities in what was formerly known as VISN 12 (recently consolidated under VISN 3 as part of the Veterans Health Administration's Restructure for Impact and Sustainability effort):

Station Code	Count
537 - Jesse Brown VA Medical Center (VAMC) Chicago IL	44
550 - VAMC & Natl Cem Danville IL	21
556 - Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center (FHCC)	22
578 - VA Hospital Hines IL	31
585 - Oscar G. Johnson DVAMF & VR&E	6
607 - VA Hospital Madison WI	12
676 - VAMC Tomah WI	13
695 - Clement J. Zablocki VAMC	35
Total	184

Source: HR Smart

Question 12: Of the 3,761 VA police officers who current benefit from a tailored pay schedule, how many work at facilities classified by VA urban, rural and highly rural, respectively?

VA Response: As of June 5, 2026, the number of VA police officers in the continental United States on an SSR was 3,525 (3,333 officers in urban areas and 192 officers in rural areas).

Question 13: Has VA received any communication from OPM indicating that SSR approval for position categories overseen by VA OSP is currently on pause?

VA Response: No, VA has not received any communication from OPM indicating that SSR approval for position categories overseen by VA OSP is currently on pause.

Question 14: In your testimony, you stated that HRA had recently plussed up OSP by an additional 107 officers, upon request from OSP. Can you please elaborate upon what this means and whether this number represents authorized positions or completed hires?

VA Response: The 107 officers mentioned in the testimony refers to an increase in authorized positions, not completed hires.

Question 15: Will you commit to encouraging Secretary Collins to commit to speedy and thorough implementation of the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) three recommendations for executive action outlined in GAO-26-107952, Facility Security: VA Should Fully Implement Federal Security Requirements and Improve Performance Reporting? When can this Committee expect the three recommendations to be actioned and closed out?

VA Response: VA is committed to fully addressing the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) recommendations in GAO-26-107952 regarding the implementation of Federal security requirements and performance reporting.

On June 29, 2026, GAO confirmed that it considers Recommendation 1 implemented. VA is implementing recommendations 2 and 3.

Question 16: Will you commit to providing the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee with the comprehensive report and all related recommendations produced by the Facility Assessment and Mission Analysis Tiger Team within 30 days of completion of their report?

VA Response: Yes.

Question 17: What challenges has the Health and Resiliency Tiger Team faced in adapting VA's Whole Health initiative for law enforcement needs?

VA Response: VA continues to make progress. VA Police now operate under a unified chain of command that includes Facility Chiefs, District Chiefs, and Region Chiefs, providing a strengthened blueprint for success as the organization moves toward full implementation.

VA is in final negotiations with the National Association of Government Employees, which remains the final step before implementation can proceed. VA also completed its course curriculum for wellness trainers and has scheduled five courses for FY 2027.

Question 18: What can Congress do to support the implementation and success of the VA Police Health and Wellness Program?

VA Response: VA welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with Congress to further strengthen and advance the VA Health and Wellness Program.

Question 19: How are you working to ensure that VA facility directors feel empowered to contact OSP for support when they face persistent challenges meeting their facility police staffing standards?

VA Response: VA relies on regular, structured communication to ensure that facility directors are empowered to seek support from OSP. Both local police service leadership and the district chiefs maintain consistent, active engagement with facility directors. These ongoing communications provide directors with timely updates, opportunities to discuss any challenges, such as police staffing issues, and a direct avenue to seek guidance or support from OSP. By cultivating an open and collaborative environment, VA encourages and supports directors in elevating concerns, with the assurance that their leadership remains actively engaged and responsive to their operational needs.

Question 20: Since January 20, 2025, how many times and for what facilities has OSP approved a facility-specific exemption from VA's Ongoing Assessment requirements for police staffing, requiring VA facility directors to reassess their standards in coordination with OSP every two years? Please explain the rationale for each exemption.

VA Response: As of January 20, 2025, OSP had not approved any facility-specific exemptions from VA's Ongoing Assessment requirements for police staffing. No facility directors have requested exemptions from the requirement to reassess police staffing standards with OSP every 2 years. Consequently, no rationale for exemptions exists, as no exemptions have been requested nor granted.

Question 21: Since January 20, 2025, how many times and for what facilities has OSP collaborated with a VA facility to initiate a standards reassessment, outside of the two-year reassessment requirement, due to significant changes in facility operations?

VA Response: Since January 20, 2025, OSP has not collaborated with any VA facility on an out-of-cycle reassessment. No out-of-cycle reassessment has been required.

Question 22: VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report 24-00614-72, "Healthcare Facility Inspection of the Lovell Federal Healthcare System in North Chicago," noted that Lovell Federal Health Care Center (FHCC) is experiencing enhanced

provider burden due to a recent surge in military recruits, many entering under waivers with complex medical needs, and the facility has since experienced sharp increases in emergency care visits. What steps has OSP taken to ensure VA police staffing at Lovell Federal Health Center (FHCC), including overnight coverage, is sufficient for these two significant changes in services?

VA Response: Captain James A. Lovell FHCC maintains continuous 24/7 police coverage, including overnight shifts. VA established a National Open Continuous Announcement to expedite the hiring of GS-6 police officers and received more than 4,000 applications.

Question 23: Is Lovell FHCC able to share resources with Naval Station Great Lakes' security force when police staffing is insufficient? If so, please describe how the request and sharing process works.

VA Response: Although the FHCC is not located on Naval Station Great Lakes, the Navy Medicine Readiness and Training Command Great Lakes Security operates as an on-site U.S. Navy security element. However, the Department of War (DoW) cannot augment police operations beyond investigations involving military personnel. DoW personnel cannot provide shift coverage because they are unarmed, lack Police Officer Standards and Training (POST) certification, and are not issued weapons. In addition, the Posse Comitatus Act (18 U.S.C. § 1385) prohibits sharing military security forces with Naval Station Great Lakes. While the Navy Criminal Investigative Service maintains jurisdiction over Navy personnel residing and working at the facility, it is an investigative entity, and patrol or staffing support falls outside its mission.

Question 24: Since January 20, 2025, which VA medical centers have experienced zero or one police officer on the premises overnight more than once? More than once a week?

VA Response: The following VAMCs experienced no police officers or one police officer on the premises overnight more than once a week between January 20, 2025, and June 22, 2026:

Facility	More than once in a Week
Colmery-O'Neil Veterans' Administration Medical Center, Topeka, Kansas	Yes
Fort Harrison VAMC, Fort Harrison, Montana	Yes
Anchorage Midtown VAMC, Anchorage, Alaska	Yes

Question 25: What steps is OSP taking to improve overnight police staffing and ensure the safety of Veterans?

VA Response: OSP's Office of Security and Law Enforcement (OSLE) is taking several steps to strengthen overnight police staffing and reinforce the safety and security of Veterans, staff, and visitors across our facilities. These efforts include:

- Consolidation under a single, unified chain of command: Consolidation will enhance our ability to efficiently surge staffing resources and respond rapidly to emerging needs across all facilities.
- Targeted recruitment and hiring: OSP prioritizes the recruitment of qualified police officers for overnight shifts and streamlining onboarding processes to bring new hires on board more efficiently.
- Optimizing shift coverage: OSP/OSLE works closely with facility leadership to review current scheduling models and align staffing levels with peak overnight operational needs.
- Enhanced support for existing officers: To improve retention and overnight coverage, OSP evaluates incentives, professional development opportunities, and wellness resources to better support officers who work during high-demand hours.
- Improved coordination with local leadership: OSP/OSLE collaborates with VAMCs to identify site-specific challenges and deploy tailored solutions, including the temporary use of supplemental staffing when appropriate.
- Continuous monitoring and assessment: Staffing levels, response times, and safety metrics are reviewed regularly to ensure that our overnight operations remain effective and responsive.

These efforts reflect OSP's continued commitment to maintain a safe environment and ensure Veterans always receive the highest level of protection.

Question 26: Will you commit to encouraging Secretary Collins to commit to speedy and thorough implementation of the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) three recommendations for executive action outlined in GAO-26-107952, Facility Security: VA Should Fully Implement Federal Security Requirements and Improve Performance Reporting? When can this Committee expect the three recommendations to be actioned and closed out?

VA Response: VA is committed to fully addressing GAO's recommendations in GAO-26-107952 regarding the implementation of Federal security requirements and performance reporting.

On June 29, 2026, GAO confirmed that it considers Recommendation 1 implemented. VA is implementing recommendations 2 and 3.

Questions for the Record from Senator John Boozman

Question 27: What changes is VA making through the police consolidation/reorganization efforts that relate to the Law Enforcement Training Center?

VA Response: As part of police consolidation efforts, VA is aligning onboarding processes with course offerings. The VA Law Enforcement Training Center (LETC) will provide POST training for up to 500 incoming officers per fiscal year. The LETC will launch an 11-week POST course beginning in FY 2027, which will reintroduce all current online prerequisites into in-person modules, and update the overall curriculum to prepare for VA Fourth Mission readiness, covering topics such as civil unrest and natural disaster response. Training will focus on campus security reporting, vulnerability assessments, and strengthening infrastructure tools for Infrastructure Survey Tool Specialists. POST training will also run a formal physical fitness program and conduct VA Police Physical Training testing.

Question 28: Under current structure, LETC is funded primarily through agreements with individual Medical Centers that have been allocated flexible funds for officer training. When a medical center's policing needs change throughout a fiscal year this creates inconsistencies for LETC's budget. Is VA considering moving LETC to an appropriated account under OSP? Are any additional authorities needed? What efforts is VA taking to create stability in funding police training?

VA Response: VA is considering the best funding approach for LETC to ensure stable resources, predictable police training throughout the year, and accurate planning for future training needs without relying on outdated (year-old or greater) staffing assessments that could create funding shortfalls.

Question 28: What is the fill rate for initial officer training vs the projected training slots the VA has forecasted through LETC? Is LETC currently facing a deficit?

VA Response: As of June 22, 2026, LETC made 495 training seats available for new officers with 274 officers trained. Several specialty courses and one POST class have been cancelled due to low enrollment; students were deferred to future sessions.

Question 29: Over the last 10 Fiscal Years, how often has initial officer training vs projected training slot disparities create a deficit for LETC?

VA Response: Disparities between initial officer training needs and projected training slots created deficits for LETC in 6 of the last 10 fiscal years. To prevent future deficits, LETC used historical data to build the FY 2026 schedule with the capacity to train 495 students.

Questions for the Record from Senator Angus King

Question 30: As we discussed during the hearing, Togus was forced to cut seven vacant VA police positions in April. You stated the VA is working on a facility-by-facility review of the police force to define standards for these positions and you confirmed that Togus has not necessarily lost these seven police positions.

30a. Can you please provide details of the review, specifically as it is being conducted at Togus?

VA Response: VA is updating the VA Police manpower model through a collaborative review involving VA headquarters and VA Police subject matter experts in the field. This effort will quantify police workload at each facility and identify the resources needed to secure VA facilities and protect patients, visitors, employees, and VA property. Once complete, the review will establish police workload-based manpower requirements for every facility. As part of the review, Togus VAMC and other VA locations provided police workload factors and data, which the Department is using to determine the effectiveness of the updated model and overall application.

30b. Who is involved?

VA Response: Staff from HRA's Manpower Management Service, OSP/OSLE, and VA Police subject matter experts from the field are involved.

30c. What factors are being considered?

VA Response: The VA Police manpower model is following VA's standard 5-phased approach for manpower analysis (Planning, Front End Analysis, Data Collection/Analysis/Validation, Study Outcomes/Recommendations, and Approve/Document Requirements). This structured, analytical approach includes a comprehensive review of all VA Police policies, operational and security requirements, and unique facility characteristics to identify workload factors.

30d. How long has that review been ongoing?

VA Response: This effort began in the fall of 2025.

30e. When can we expect the review to be completed?

VA Response: This effort is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2026.

30f. When can we expect to have these police positions restored on Togus' organizational chart so that they can start recruiting?

VA Response: VA is actively recruiting for police officers at the GS-6 level for Togus VAMC through a national open continuous announcement.

Questions for the Record from Senator Thom Tillis

Question 31: Congress included workforce expansion and incentive authorities in the PACT Act specifically because we knew VA demand would increase and that certain occupations were already experiencing critical shortages. At the same time, both GAO and AFGE testimony indicate that VA Police officers remain one of VA's most severe shortage occupations.

How has VA utilized PACT Act hiring and retention authorities for VA Police specifically, and why are we still seeing significant staffing shortages, burnout, and retention challenges despite Congress providing these additional workforce flexibilities?

Are there additional authorities the Department believes Congress needs to consider to better support recruitment and retention moving forward?

VA Response: Prior to the 2025 President Donald J. Trump Administration, VA police operated under and reported to individual medical centers without a unified chain of command, resulting in inconsistent standards and limited accountability. This decentralized structure also limited career advancement, making it difficult to retain experienced officers and led to many leaving for other opportunities.

In 2025, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs directed the consolidation of the VA police force under a unified chain of command in OSP. Under this new structure, law enforcement professionals now lead VA Police, positioning the Department to apply uniform standards, enhance training, and offer stable, long-term career opportunities for police officers across all VA facilities.

Due to these efforts, VA focused on outreach and recruitment efforts for transitioning Service members and early-career talent, recognizing that approximately 76% of our GS-0083 police officer workforce are Veterans. VA's branding and marketing strategies highlight the meaningful career paths available within VA Police as well as the comprehensive total rewards package offered to officers.

To better support police operations locally and Nationwide, VA is establishing a dedicated HR support structure for VA Police, including teams located in Washington, DC, Little Rock, Arkansas, and additional sites Nationwide. This specialized support structure ensures more consistent, informed, and responsive HR service delivery. In parallel, VA is expanding the use of continuous open announcements and direct hiring authorities to streamline hiring. These tools, combined with VA's 30-day hiring model pilot and skills-based assessment, help reduce time-to-hire while generating high-quality referral lists for immediate selection. To remain competitive in the labor market, VA continues to apply available incentives, including SSR and recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives authorized under the PACT Act when needed to address critical staffing requirements.

The Department completed a comprehensive review of all VA Police positions and developed a career path that extends from entry-level positions through the Senior Executive Service. As part of this effort, the entry-level police officer position has been elevated to a GS-6 grade level. Additionally, VA is collaborating with OPM to revise an outdated classification standard that is 38 years old (TS-87, April 1988). This effort moves VA away from traditional requirements toward a modern, competency-based qualifications framework that promotes professional development and advancement within the force. This revision is independent of VA's position management activities and

of each agency's responsibility to apply the standard properly; grades continue to be determined by applying the factor level descriptions to the duties assigned and performed.

Department of Veterans Affairs
October 2026

Senator Duckworth, thank you submitting a question for the record regarding my testimony on May 13, 2026, before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee at a hearing titled "Protecting Those Who Served: A Review of VA Police Operations."

I appreciate your question regarding GAO-26-107952, "Facility Security: VA Should Fully Implement Federal Security Requirements and Improve Performance Reporting." While the GAO gives highly technical recommendations regarding facility security, it is beyond the scope of my position to effectively answer how these recommendations are being implemented by VA in facilities across the nation.

However, I do want to take this opportunity to highlight the best ways to improve the recruitment and retention of the VA police force, and in turn, the safety and security of our veterans, their families, and VA employees.

First, VA must improve the staffing 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

¹ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, VA OIG 23-00659-186, "OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration's Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2023." August 22, 2023.

² *Id.* at 8.

³ U.S. Dep't of Veterans Affairs, VA OIG 24-00803-22 "OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration's Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2024." August 7, 2024. VA OIG 24-00803-22 at 10.

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

The VA must reverse this trend to recruit and retain VA police officers to keep veterans, their families, and VA employees safe.

Second, to improve staffing, VA must improve compensation for VA police officers. 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 proposed 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 Even if the proposed downgrades do not take effect, VA police officers have more lucrative opportunities working for other police forces, and VA must be empowered to increase compensation and retain its officers.

Third, after decades of advocacy, Congress pass legislation 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

⁴ U.S. Dep’t of Veterans Affairs, VA OIG 25-01135-196 “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2025.” August 12, 2025. VA OIG 25-01135-196 at 9.

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/>

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 73 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.

Thank you again for your question, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to improve the recruitment and retention of VA police officers.

Statement for the Record



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Statement for the Record

Submitted to: United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Regarding: Protecting Those Who Served: A Review of VA Police Operations

Submitted by: ZeroEyes

Date: May 20, 2026

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

ZeroEyes appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement for the record.

VA Police are entrusted with protecting America's veterans, healthcare workers, visitors, and critical medical infrastructure across the nation's largest integrated healthcare system. Their responsibilities continue to expand amid evolving threats and increasing operational demands.

At the same time, law enforcement agencies nationwide — including those within the federal government — continue to face significant recruitment and retention challenges. As staffing shortages place increased strain on existing personnel, technology can play an important supporting role in enhancing situational awareness and strengthening overall facility security.

In FY 2024 and 2025 VA police reported 74,706 crimes: 7 percent were weapon law violations and 17 percent were assault. These include the VA reporting 233 aggravated assaults and three murders.

A 2026 GAO Report, GAO-26-109020, found that "law enforcement officers comprise one of VA's top nonclinical occupation shortages" and "one factor leading to understaffing is budget constraints which required the agency to weight competing priorities in hiring clinical and nonclinical staff. As a result, they said that officers were not always available to patrol facilities, potentially making them less safe."

In their report, GAO noted concerns from interviewed VA management regarding metal detectors impeding foot traffic and altering the welcoming environment of VA facilities, as well the requirement to increase staffing to utilize metal detectors. The GAO under-cover video also showcases how metal detectors are limited to an audible alert. Metal detectors are also not directly integrated to provide real-time notifications to VA or local police during an incident, in a way that ZeroEyes weapons-detection technology can.

ZeroEyes believes artificial intelligence-enabled weapons detection technology can serve as a valuable force multiplier in support of the VA Police mission. AI-weapons detection technology can provide rapid alerts to VA police, as well as to local law enforcement for satellite VA facilities without permanent VA police presence.



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Founded by former Navy SEALs and military veterans, ZeroEyes is a U.S.-based artificial intelligence company focused on helping prevent shootings and acts of targeted violence through early firearm detection. Our platform integrates with existing digital security camera systems and uses AI to identify visible firearms in real time.

When the system identifies a potential firearm, the alert is immediately reviewed by the ZeroEyes Operations Center, staffed 24/7 by trained military and law enforcement veterans for human verification before notification is transmitted to security personnel or law enforcement. Verified alerts are typically delivered within seconds, enabling faster awareness and response by law enforcement during potential emergencies.

Importantly, ZeroEyes was designed with privacy and civil liberties considerations in mind. The platform does not use facial recognition technology; does not perform behavioral or demographic profiling, and; does not continuously monitor or store personal information for surveillance purposes.

The technology is designed solely to identify visible threats and rapidly deploy alerts.

Today, ZeroEyes technology is deployed across K-12 schools, higher education, healthcare facilities, public transportation systems, government facilities, and corporate environments throughout the United States. The platform is also FedRAMP Ready, and all AI models are developed and trained within the United States using domestically controlled infrastructure.

As Congress, the Administration, and the Department continue exploring ways to strengthen safety across VA facilities nationwide, AI-enabled weapons detection technology offers an opportunity to enhance layered security measures while supporting — not replacing — the dedicated professionals serving within VA Police departments.

The protection of veterans, healthcare workers, and visitors must remain a top priority. We believe advanced threat-detection technologies can help provide VA Police additional tools to respond more effectively and improve the overall safety posture of VA medical facilities nationwide.

ZeroEyes appreciates the Committee's continued leadership and attention to the safety and security needs of America's veterans and those who serve them.

Respectfully submitted,

Mike Lahiff
 CEO
 ZeroEyes