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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6025

<http://appropriations.senate.gov>

February 24, 2025

The Honorable Douglas Collins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Collins,

For years the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has suffered from a shortage of doctors, nurses, and other staff dedicated to serving America's veterans. This staff shortage and VA's notoriously sluggish hiring process have contributed to long wait times and poor service for veterans. We are therefore alarmed that VA recently fired, among others, clinicians and crisis hotline staff, as part of the indiscriminate mass firing of recently hired VA personnel, and request your urgent attention to the questions conveyed in this letter.

VA recently announced the firing of "more than 1,000 employees" and claimed in its press release that "mission-critical positions" were exempt. This claim is false. Clinicians, researchers, and Veterans Crisis Line employees were fired, apparently solely on the basis that they were recent hires.

We hope it goes without saying that clinical staff who provide medical care and employees who field calls from suicidal veterans are indeed "mission-critical." VA's indiscriminate termination of such personnel is self-defeating and risks the immediate disruption of veterans' health care and services. The potential consequences — delayed clinical appointments or neglected phone calls from veterans in crisis — could be life threatening. Furthermore, the indiscriminate termination of mission-critical VA staff suggests a failure to grasp the basic operational challenges that have undermined the quality of VA care for years.

Veterans across the country will undoubtedly suffer as a result of these firings. In addition to the clinical implications of these actions, veterans will likely experience delayed disability benefit decisions, burial reimbursements, and education claim processing due to these terminations. There are veterans in ongoing clinical trials where researchers have been terminated, putting the future of their research into question, and all but ensuring that veterans will not see the benefits of these trials. This research helps develop novel cancer treatments and addresses other critical health issues facing veteran populations, such as opioid use and pain

management. Unfortunately, these positions cannot be backfilled as a result of the January 20, 2025 Executive Order titled “Hiring Freeze”.

VA will likely realize in short order it does need to refill these mission-critical positions— just as the Departments of Agriculture and Energy are now scrambling to rehire foolishly terminated specialists in bird flu and the protection of America’s nuclear stockpile. When VA determines that these positions *are* necessary in order to provide world class service to veterans, taxpayers will be required to once again fund the hiring process, required background checks, and necessary training.

Appropriations Subcommittee staff has sent questions to VA about these actions and the positions that have been impacted – beginning January 21 and most recently about the firing actions on Friday, February 14, which have still not been answered. Identifying and locating these newly vacant positions is a Congressional oversight obligation as we work to determine whether veterans in our home states will be affected by these actions. The majority of the following questions have been sent to your team in the last month. Please kindly provide responses in writing or via a briefing by March 6, 2025:

Hiring Freeze Executive Order and implementation guidance:

- Does General Counsel read the prohibition on contracting to acquire services that are “substantially similar to those provided by a civilian” to mean that VA will not be expanding care in the community provider network?
- How many people (broken out by VBA/VHA/NCA/other, and then again by job station – (VACO vs non-VACO) had a job offer that was accepted prior to Jan 20 but had start dates after Feb 8, 2025, and therefore had their offers revoked?
- How many people were then contacted when it was determined that their positions would be exempt (broken out as above)? Did 100% of those employees choose to move forward with the VA employment offer?
- Please provide the number of employees at each VHA facility, VBA regional offices, NCA cemetery, VBA CO, VHA CO, NCA CO, BVA, and each General Administration office, as of Jan 20, 2025.
- Due to concerns about community capacity to care for veterans in the event wait times increase as a result of this action, how many private community providers are under contract to provide reimbursable healthcare services to Veterans as of Jan 20, 2025 – either as part of one of the CCN contracts or through separate provider agreements?
- How many employees who were removed/on leave/otherwise impacted as a result of having DEI responsibilities also have VA job responsibilities other than DEI efforts?
- As of Jan 20, 2025, what is the average number of daily referrals for community care? Please provide whatever snapshot VHA has of wait times by facility for in-house care on that date.

Researchers and Hiring Freeze

- How many researchers with NTE positions on active projects have already been terminated since the hiring freeze went into effect? What projects were they working on?

- How many researchers are at VA who have NTE positions on active projects which expire this year?
- How many researchers with NTE positions are also clinicians who treat patients?
- Was an exemption to the hiring freeze for researchers requested within VA? To OMB? To DOGE? If an exemption was requested, who/which entity denied it?

Deferred Resignation Program:

- Please provide a breakdown of the number of employees who indicated their desire to accept the deferred resignation program by state, as well as by office or administration (VHA/VBA/OALC, etc).
- Are the positions that these employees resigned from able to be filled during the hiring freeze?
- Are the employees who intend to utilize the deferred resignation program still working at their assigned facility?

Mass Firing Actions

- Were all of the terminated employees probationary employees?
- How did VA determine which employees would be terminated? Was there any software or non-VA personnel involved in the process?
- Please provide a state-specific breakdown of these employees' duty stations, as well as a breakdown of their office or administration.
- Please provide job titles of employees who were terminated, and a breakdown of whether these roles were administrative or veteran-facing.
- How many of the jobs that these probationary employees were fired from are also on the list of jobs exempt from the hiring freeze?
- The public press release said that the first line SES supervisor had the opportunity to request that a probationary employee be exempted from the firing actions - who makes the ultimate decision, even if the SES requested an exemption?
- How many terminated employees were veterans?
- Has VA moved to rehire or otherwise negate the termination of any employees who received firing notices? If yes, please provide information about the numbers of employees this has impacted and their job titles.

The ability of veterans to access healthcare within statutory wait times, have requests to receive care in the community processed, get decisions on disability claims, have call center staff answer their questions about their eligibility for benefits and more are all at stake.

Sincerely,



Jon Ossoff



Jack Reed



Gary Peters