

Save our VA!

Lobbying Fact Sheet
February 2020

Scope of the Problem

Last September, the VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) analyzed 140 facilities and **found 96% of them reported at least one significant shortage. (39% reported at least 20 shortages.)**

-The top clinical shortages concerned mental healthcare. **61% of VA facilities reported severe shortages of psychiatrist last year.**

-Other clinical positions facing severe shortages include **psychologists, primary care doctors, gastroenterologists, psychologists, and nurses.**

The results of this neglect and, at times, hostility to the department are enormous, and have ramifications in every corner of the country. Care has been delayed from Colorado to Connecticut due chiefly to a shortage of providers. This was recently demonstrated at the Washington, D.C. VA where, due to shortages in the sterile processing department, providers faced roadblocks in accessing clean tools and equipment. Late last year, surgeries were temporarily halted in Atlanta due to, among other things, staff shortages.

The Trump Administration's Role in the Crisis

According to U.S. law, the VA Secretary is statutorily obligated to "maintain the bed and treatment capacities of all Department medical facilities, including the staffing required to maintain such capacities, so as to ensure the accessibility and availability of such beds and treatment capacities to eligible veterans in all States."

Secretary Robert Wilkie is **willfully violating this requirement**. In a hearing last year before the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Wilkie said he was "concerned" over the vacancy crisis but added, "I would not be honest with you if I told you that my focus would be filling 49,000 vacancies." The number of vacancies grew by **over 3,000 in just the last year**. It's been under Trump that VA watchdogs first warned of "severe occupational staffing shortages."

Trump has made the problem worse in myriad ways. Including by:

-implementing formal and informal hiring freezes

-making the VHA a harder place to work through unprecedented attacks on public sector unions, employee bashing, and changes in working conditions and benefits. Evidence of this work can be found in the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, multiple executive orders, and radicalizing of the National Labor Relations Board

-The Trump administration has failed to fill one of the most critical vacancies in the VA. There is currently no permanent Undersecretary for Health. Instead, Richard Stone functions as acting undersecretary with the title Executive in Charge. Stone recently told a group of VSO leaders that the VA is not even sure how many vacancies it, in fact, has.

-refusing to implement five recommendations from the OIG to improve the vacancy crisis

How to Fix the Problem

Despite a nationwide shortage of clinicians, the VA has shown itself capable of hiring up quickly. From 2012 to 2013, for instance, the department hired 5,300 new staff.

Congress should ensure that:

-VA employees are offered good benefits and pay that is competitive with salaries of private sector healthcare workers in their area. A recent survey of exiting VA staffers found a majority were satisfied with their jobs. Half said that more benefits -- like alternative schedules or tuition assistance -- would have encouraged them to stay.

-Fully address OIG recommendations, which include:

-Creating a national VHA staffing model that incorporates data to predict changes in veteran demand for health care.

-Ensuring the VA's Under Secretary for Health consistently implements and uses a position categorization approach across all facilities.

-Reviewing the VA reports on regrettable losses and implementing effective measures to reduce such losses

-Tasking the VA Under Secretary for Health to create a plan of action that will address the underlying causes of severe occupational staffing shortages

In addition, long standing problems in hiring policies and procedures should be addressed, including the problem of cumbersome hiring processes and serious shortages in HR staff.