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OPERATIONS, SECURITY AND PREPAREDNESS  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
"VHA RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION: IS BUREAUCRACY HOLDING BACK A  
QUALITY WORKFORCE?"  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE  
SUBCOMMITTEES ON HEALTH AND OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS**

**MAY 17, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Members Brownley and Mrvan, and members of the Committees. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) health care hiring and staffing opportunities, as well as the state of VA's human capital management programs. I am joined today by Ms. Jessica Bonjorni, Chief, Human Capital Management, Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

We are here today to discuss the steps we are taking to recruit and retain VA's number one asset, our employees. We know that an investment in our employees is an investment in Veterans.

The Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 (PACT Act), which was signed into law on August 10, 2022, marked the largest and most significant expansion of Veteran care and benefits in decades, empowering VA to deliver additional care and benefits to millions of Veterans and their survivors. We are grateful for this opportunity, and now that the bill has become law, it is our job to implement it in a way that is seamless, efficient and timely for the Veterans we serve—and most importantly, ensure that eligible Veterans can receive the care and benefits they deserve.

VA has taken steps to implement the priorities within title IX of the PACT Act. Title IX reflects the investment needed in VA's workforce to successfully implement all other titles in this important law. The Act provides a broad range of flexibilities for recruiting and retaining staff to serve Veterans, their caregivers and survivors. VA is grateful to Congress for including these tools in the PACT Act and for supporting investments in its workforce to address ongoing challenges with recruitment, hiring and retention. VA quickly established an integrated project team (IPT) with internal and external stakeholders to identify the policies, procedures, systems and training required to implement each section of title IX. IPT meets on a weekly basis to address any issues that arise during implementation and track progress. Implementation has resulted in the following several new tools to help with recruitment and retention:

- Removing restrictions on hiring housekeeping aides;
- Establishing a program to buy out service contracts in rural facilities;
- Modifying statutory limitations on awards and bonuses;
- Enhancing systems to improve hiring;
- Increasing limits on expedited hiring of post-secondary students and college graduates;
- Increasing student loan repayment limits;
- Increasing the cap on special contribution awards;
- Increasing the limits for recruitment, relocation and retention incentives and payment of retention incentives as a lump sum upfront;
- Increasing the limits for and the number of critical pay positions; and
- Increasing the limits for special salary rates.

Ensuring that VA has the appropriate mechanisms in place to track, measure and provide oversight of PACT Act title IX implementation is a VA priority. We will continue to develop and refine metrics ensuring we can measure the effectiveness of these authorities and the impact on VA's recruitment and retention efforts. VA is tracking progress through recurring reports and dashboards with oversight by VA governance processes.

VA is hiring more staff across the Department to ensure that care and benefits are delivered in a timely manner. VA is also focused on improving employee experience to achieve better outcomes for Veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors, which makes sure that we keep the Veteran at the center of everything we do. VA is implementing new hiring authorities and new retention authorities to grow and maintain a diverse, talented workforce with a shared mission to provide more care and benefits to Veterans. VBA is using the recently approved Direct Hire Authority for its mission critical occupations. VBA was able to increase its total workforce by more than 10% (more than 2,700) employees in the first 7 months of fiscal year (FY) 2023, compared to less than 3% growth in the workforce over the same period in FY 2022.

We are proud to report that our emphasis on hiring more competitively led to a record number of more than 48,500 hires in VHA last year, and we are well on our way to exceeding that number this year. VHA's total workforce grew by 11,628 employees (3.1%) in the first 6 months of FY 2023. This represents VHA's highest growth rate in more than 20 years.

VA currently stands at 439,415 employees and continues to grow each year in response to increased demand for its services, improved access to care and benefits, reduced wait times, improved quality, enhanced Veteran satisfaction and overall mission growth. VHA accounts for approximately 89% of VA employees, and most of the additional staffing needed at VA in the past 5 years has been in clinical occupations, which account for approximately 63% of VA employees. As the largest integrated health care delivery system in America, VA's workforce challenges mirror those faced in the private health care industry. Across the private health care sector, hospitals and ambulatory care centers have reported higher turnover, increased labor costs and

increased reliance on travel nurses. While VA's turnover rate has historically been extremely competitive at or below 10% annually, that rate increased to 10.1% in fiscal year 2022, due in part to an improved economy and greater competition with the private sector coupled with Coronavirus Disease 2019 pressures and burnout. VA's aggressive hiring and retention efforts together with leveraging PACT Act authorities have resulted in significantly improved retention so far in FY 2023 and growth, leading us to the point where we are currently providing more care, and more benefits, to more Veterans than at any time in our Nation's history.

Despite challenges, VA's unique mission attracts new employees yearly, and nearly 30% of VA's workforce are Veterans themselves, who identify closely with our mission. Other unique benefits attracting employees include working for a nationwide health care organization that provides flexibility to move to facilities in other parts of the country without leaving VA employment, while maintaining a single professional license or credential. VA benefits also include scholarships for employees to gain education in a critical shortage occupation, loan repayment to help those who already completed their education, liability protection, work schedule flexibilities, telework options and the opportunity to participate in cutting-edge medical research.

VA is responding to concerns raised by customers and other stakeholders about delays in the hiring and onboarding process through rollout of its Candidate Care Model. The Candidate Care Model is a framework and set of tools supported by customer experience principles that will assist VHA hiring managers and Human Resources (HR) specialists in providing an outstanding onboarding experience for candidates. VHA has spearheaded initiatives to standardize and improve the onboarding process, including work done by VHA HR standardization teams, an onboarding deep dive conducted by the Veterans Experience Office and an onboarding rapid process improvement workshop conducted by VHA Human Capital Management. The result is a new modernized and interactive onboarding experience that redesigns candidate touchpoints with fewer people across fewer systems, infused with consistent, candidate-friendly messaging.

To mitigate some of the hiring challenges in clinical occupations, VA continues to lead the way in using telehealth and mobile deployment clinics to reach Veterans living in areas defined as health professional shortage areas. VA is a leader in virtual health care delivery and is well positioned to expand in this area. Additionally, VA continues to use direct hiring authorities; recruitment and retention flexibilities and incentives; hiring initiatives; virtual trainee recruitment events; improved employee engagement; HR modernization; workforce planning; targeted recruitment of military spouses and Service members transitioning from the Department of Defense; national recruiter programs for hard-to-fill occupations and specialties including in historically underserved communities and regions; and strategies for filling Medical Center Director positions throughout VA.

We also appreciate the close collaboration of Committee staff and look forward to continuing future legislative efforts centered especially around more pay

flexibilities and hiring provisions that are critical to recruiting and retaining health care professionals in an increasingly competitive labor market.

## **Conclusion**

I am proud to be part of this noble mission to care for the Nation's Veterans. I look forward to working with each of you on this Committee on health care hiring and staffing opportunities across VA, as well as investing in our current employees so they can continue to provide the best care and service to deserving Veterans and their families. This concludes my testimony. My colleague and I are prepared to respond to any questions you may have.