

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0305

The Honorable Andy Biggs
House Veterans Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
**Hearing: “Protecting Whistleblowers and Promoting Accountability: Is VA Doing Its
Job?”**
October 29, 2019

I thank Chairman Chris Pappas and Ranking Member Jack Bergman for allowing me to participate in the House Veterans Affairs Committee. I also thank Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) for the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP) for her service to our nation.

The VA has come under heavy scrutiny from Congress, government watchdogs, and the media for its failure to properly implement the functions of OAWP. I first learned of the problems plaguing OAWP when two whistleblowers visited my office to disclose their concerns of potential wrongdoing.

That’s why, before the Inspector General released his report on OAWP, I sent a letter to Secretary Wilkie seeking answers to the issues raised by the whistleblowers. My letter included concerns related to the influence of the Office of General Counsel at OAWP, the cancellation of the Mentor and Outreach program, and the fulfillment of section 733 of the Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act which requires training regarding whistleblower disclosures for VA employees.

And although the Inspector General report and Assistant Secretary Bonzanto’s written testimony addressed some of my concerns, I am appalled that I received a response from Secretary Wilkie just over an hour before this hearing commenced. I had originally requested a response by October 7, 2019. I have a hard time believing that I would have received a response at all from the Secretary had we not communicated to the VA that I would be a participant in this hearing. It is unacceptable for the VA to take nearly two months to respond to these serious congressional oversight matters.

There is no doubt that whistleblower protections at the VA are important. But whistleblower protections versus accountability is a false choice. The concepts are not in conflict as some have asserted. They are mutually reinforcing.

Many of my constituents receive health care at the Phoenix VA – a one-star system – that was the epicenter of the 2014 wait-list scandal. Five years have passed since that scandal and it seems that very few improvements have been made. For the Phoenix VA to be successful, there must be accountability. President Trump, along with Congress, has given the VA the authority to fire or demote employees who are not doing their job.

We should not tolerate negligent employee conduct on critical health care for our veterans. Assistant Secretary Bonzanto has the potential to help bring real change to the VA. Leadership is important, and I urge Assistant Secretary Bonzanto to take ownership of the problems that have been plaguing OAWP since its inception.

I look forward to working with the VA and members of the Committee to ensure that OAWP's responsibilities are carried out according to congressional intent.