



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

ON

TRANSFORMING THE VA WORKFORCE: ASSESSING PROGRESS ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND
INCLUSION INITIATIVES

MAY 6, 2021

Chairman Pappas, Ranking Member Mann and Members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning, my name is Dr. Sheila Elliott and for more than thirty years I have been serving veterans at the Hampton VA in Hampton Roads, Virginia. This community is my home, and it has been an honor to serve our nation's veterans in my own community. In the time that I have worked at the VA I have seen a lot of initiatives comes and go. Over time I have also seen how things at the Department have changed, and sadly, how they have remained the same. I appreciate the Subcommittee providing me with the opportunity to participate in today's hearing, and I hope that you will find my three decades of experience as an employee and a union representative useful.

I want to use my time with you today not just to share my own story, but to share those of my brothers and sisters in VA's across Virginia and our country. As a leader in my union, I have had the unique opportunity to represent my coworkers in the workplace and to see firsthand how VA policies get implemented at the facility level. Sometimes we are able to work together to make change and see progress; but far too often we hear wonderful talk from VA Headquarters, but fail to see grand ideas become reality on the ground. That's the perspective I want to share with you today; voices from the frontline workforce at the VA.

Let me begin by saying the obvious: it is imperative that the VA take issues of diversity, inclusion, and equality seriously. One immediate step the Department can take is ensure that every facility has a fulltime EEO Manager and EEO Counselor on site and that those positions get filled when a vacancy occurs. For example, at my facility when an EEO Manager left we had to wait one full year before that vacancy was filled. One year is too long for any position to

remain vacant, let alone one that exists to make sure people are treated fairly. The VA must not let that happen again.

Another area where I would like to see the VA improve is in providing remedies for employees. Right now, oftentimes the only avenue available for an employee seeking assistance is to file a Reasonable Accommodation request with HR. Which is a process that has not been handled particularly well by the Department. In my own experience I have witnessed the VA treat employees who need assistance terribly. One case that comes to mind is an employee with a disability who requested – and was denied – telework. Imagine for a moment today, as we sit here at a virtual hearing, that a good employee with a genuine need was denied something as simple as telework by the VA. It's not fair, and it's not right.

Reasonable Accommodation requests should not be the only avenue available for an employee to get assistance, or for an employee to continue working at the Department. One thing the VA can do immediately is to empower their managers at every level to provide simple accommodations for employees who may need assistance. This means allowing the lowest-level, frontline supervisor to have the authority and authorization to provide relief without having to go through HR. Empowering frontline supervisors in this way will allow the process to be streamlined and for employees to get the assistance they need.

Another troubling employment practice that my union colleagues and I have seen is a willful violation of the Americans with Disability Act. AFGE has received reports from employees who have been pushed out of the job they were hired to perform and into lower paying positions. We have also seen managers push employees toward filing for early disability

retirement. These practices must end, and they must end now. The VA must support its workforce, not try to find creative ways to eliminate positions.

Another important issue is hiring practices. It has been my experience that non-white applicants have a much more difficult time getting hired and promoted by the VA than their white counterparts. Last summer AFGE conducted a survey on management selection at the VA. This survey showed that in 2019 40,578 Black individuals applied for management positions; only 2.5% were selected. Again, in 2020 our survey found that of the 17,257 Black individuals who applied for management positions only 2.5% were selected. The VA must work harder to ensure that its management and senior officials look more like the veteran population and its workforce.

These are just a handful of examples I have seen or heard about from my brothers and sisters at the VA. Ultimately, if the VA is truly serious about providing a fairer and more equal workplace, it has to get serious about holding management officials and Human Resources accountable. The VA must demand more from its leaders at every level, and the Department must act when facility-level supervisors routinely fall short. This means, at a minimum, making sure crucial positions are filled and that non-white applicants are given a fair chance to rise and excel. I look forward to working with this Administration to make permanent changes at the VA, and I think the members of this Subcommittee share that goal too.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today, and I look forward to answering your questions.