



# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**STATEMENT BY**

**MR. DENNIS “SARGE” GUERRERO  
VICE-PRESIDENT OF AFGE LOCAL 3511  
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO**

**BEFORE**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS**

**ON**

**“PENDING LEGISLATION”**

**MARCH 25, 2026**

Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Member Ramirez, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) to participate in today's Subcommittee Hearing on "Pending Legislation." My name is Dennis "Sarge" Guerrero, and I serve as the Vice-President of AFGE Local 3511 at the Audie L. Murphy Memorial Veterans' Hospital in San Antonio, TX. I am a 20-year U.S. Air Force Security Forces Combat Veteran who proudly served our country during Operation Desert Shield, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Desert Fox, and in Albania providing security for Kosovo refugee camps. For the past 18 years, I have continued to serve our nation and my fellow veterans as a VA police officer having attained the rank of sergeant.

On behalf of AFGE and its National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC), representing over 800,000 federal and District of Columbia government employees, 325,000 of whom are proud, dedicated Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees, it is a privilege to testify today. Specifically, I plan to focus my testimony on legislation affecting the VA workforce, including thousands of VA police officers serving across the nation.

**H.R. 8010, the "VA Police Recruitment and Retention Act"**

AFGE and the NVAC strongly support H.R. 8010, the "VA Police Recruitment and Retention Act" introduced by Rep. Kennedy (D-NY). If enacted, this legislation would prohibit the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the VA from downgrading the positions of VA police officers, retroactive to October 1, 2025.

OPM's actions to downgrade the positions of police officers, which is the bureaucratic way of saying pay cuts, is counter the VA's mission "[t]o fulfill President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have served in our nation's military and for their families, caregivers, and survivors."

VA police officers have a critical and unique role in protecting the safety of veterans, their families, and VA employees every day. As AFGE has highlighted to this committee during previous hearings, VA police officers receive training at the Law Enforcement Training Center and additional specialized and tailored training in crisis intervention to help prevent veterans from harming themselves or others. Moreover, as 90 percent of officers are veterans themselves, these officers can tap into their own experience when both communicating with and policing veterans, building relationships with the veterans they serve, and understanding the nuances of the physical facilities where they police. As a fellow VA officer from the Great Lakes Region recently articulated to me:

“VA medical centers are complex environments that present unique law enforcement challenges. Officers respond to violent incidents, mental health crises, domestic disputes, narcotics activity, and threats against staff and patients.”

This unfortunately happens across the country. Officers frequently interact with veterans armed with guns and knives or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

This was tragically put in stark relief this month, after a VA social worker Nicholas Crews was murdered at a VA clinic in Jasper, Georgia, demonstrating not only the bravery and dedication required of VA police officers as well as the broad scope of their responsibilities.

The plan to downgrade VA police officer positions in the 0083 series is even more dire when considered in conjunction with the significant staffing shortage facing the VA Police Force. A VA OIG report entitled “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2023”<sup>1</sup> noted that 73 facilities had a severe shortage of VA Police in the 0083 series, with more common shortages found for only seven

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<sup>1</sup> “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2023,” August 22, 2023. VA OIG 23-00659-186.

positions.<sup>2</sup> An updated 2024 version of the report noted that VA police shortages “were reported by at least 20 percent of facilities since FY 2018.”<sup>3</sup> This has further worsened in the current FY 2025 report, as the VA OIG states:

“In FY 2025, the OIG found that 58 percent of facilities (80 of 139) designated Police as a severe occupational staffing shortage, making it the most frequently reported nonclinical shortage occupation and most frequently reported of all occupations. The Police occupation was among the top five most frequently reported nonclinical shortages in each year since 2019, when VHA first made official designations for clinical and nonclinical occupations, and the seventh most frequently reported shortage among all occupations in 2018.”<sup>4</sup>

On the ground in VA facilities, the shortages referenced by OIG also hinder the ability of officers to perform their duties. In some facilities, expensive new security screening equipment sits unused as there are not enough officers to operate this equipment. There are other facilities where only one or two officers are available to respond to emergencies. In some cases, short staffing in IA facilities limits response to one emergency at a time. The staffing problem is also acute for Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) where the nearest officer is often miles away.

Short staffing and inadequate pay harms officer morale. One officer recently told me, “[m]orale across VA is low. [D]owngrading people only pushes more people to leave.” Additionally, with the staff shortage at the level it is, VA facilities must further rely on extensive use of overtime, which often leads to the denial of annual leave for officers, leading to further burnout of the officers that remain.

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<sup>2</sup> *Id* at 8.

<sup>3</sup> “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2024,” August 7, 2024. VA OIG 24-00803-22 at 10.

<sup>4</sup> “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2025,” August 12, 2025. VA OIG 25-01135-196 at 9.

This is particularly problematic when VA police officers have other opportunities to serve in other federal agencies or in state, county, or local police forces that pay starting salaries significantly higher compared the planned downgraded GS-5 salary. For example, in Buffalo, NY, a GS-5 Step One makes \$42,597 annually,<sup>5</sup> while an entry level City Police Officer (Step 1) earns \$57,453.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a GS-5 Step one makes \$41,341 in the Virginia Beach Region,<sup>7</sup> while a Police Recruit at the lowest level of the pay scale makes \$54,863 in the City of Hampton, Virginia.<sup>8</sup> Severe staffing shortages, low retention, and poor morale require attention and solutions, not downgrades in positions and pay.

The VA should do everything in its power to recruit and retain its police force. While AFGE is pleased that the planned downgrades have been “paused,” AFGE still fully supports H.R. 8010, the “VA Police Recruitment and Retention Act,” as it is a necessary first step to stem the tide of departures from the VA Police Department. AFGE strongly encourages the swift passage of H.R. 8010 to prevent any future downgrades from OPM and looks forward to working with the committee to pass this bill. AFGE welcomes the opportunity to work with the committee on other legislation that would support the VA Police force, including increased hiring, addressing higher wages, and granting VA Police Officers Federal Law Enforcement Officer retirements, commonly referred to as “6(c) benefits,” and thanks Chairwoman Kiggans and Representative Kennedy for co-sponsoring H.R. 3226, the “Law Enforcement Officers Equity Act” to achieve that goal.

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<sup>5</sup> See GS Salary Table 2026-BU. <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/salary-tables/26Tables/html/BU.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> See City of Buffalo, “Department of Police Recent Salary Figure FY2026” at 176 (10 of 23 on linked PDF) <https://www.buffalony.gov/ImageRepository/Document?documentId=14525>

<sup>7</sup> See GS Salary Table 2026-VB. <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/salary-tables/pdf/2026/VB.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See City of Hampton Virginia Police Department Step Plan Effective January 10, 2026. <https://www.hampton.gov/DocumentCenter/View/48497/Police-Division-Step-Plan-PDF>

## **H.R. 7948, the “VA Employee Family Care Expansion Act”**

AFGE supports H.R. 7498, the “VA Employee Family Care Expansion Act” introduced by Ranking Member Ramirez (D-IL). If enacted, this bill would codify the ability for a VA employee to utilize the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to care for the parent of a spouse. AFGE and the NVAC had previously negotiated this right into its Master Collective Bargaining Agreement, which is currently the subject of litigation.

While no VA employee would ever wish to be in the position to use FMLA to care for someone, it is unfortunately something that many of us, including myself, have had to do. Sadly, this month, my father of blessed memory passed away, and I used FMLA to take care of him and be with him in his final days. Having the ability to use this leave was a relief to me and my family and didn't force me to make a choice between being a son and being a VA police officer serving my fellow veterans. Had it not been my father, but one of my in-laws in this situation, not being able to use this leave would have been devastating and forced a cruel choice for me and my family.

Passing this legislation and restoring this right to VA employees is a commonsense policy that would allow VA employees to better serve our nation's veterans and improve recruitment and retention. AFGE urges its swift passage.

## **Draft legislation to establish an entitlement to a supplemental period of unpaid parental leave for employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs**

AFGE supports the draft legislation being considered by this subcommittee to establish entitlement to a supplemental period of unpaid parental leave for employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs. If enacted, this bill would codify a VA employee's right to four additional weeks of Leave Without Pay (LWOP) for the purposes of parental leave following the birth or

adoption of a child. AFGE and the NVAC had previously negotiated this right into its Master Collective Bargaining Agreement, which is currently the subject of litigation.

Passing this legislation and restoring this right to VA employees is a commonsense policy that would allow the dedicated workers who take care of our nation's veterans, many of whom are veterans themselves, the ability to stay home with a new child, if they choose, for an extra month with no pay. Enacting this policy will help VA stay competitive with other employers who offer similar or more generous options and improve recruitment and retention. AFGE urges its swift passage.

**Draft legislation to establish a professional certification requirement for certain sterile processing technicians of the Veterans Health Administration**

Chairwoman Kiggans' draft legislation would amend Title 38 to prospectively require that sterile processing technicians attain a certification from an accredited institution prior to working at the VA and gives incumbent sterile processing technicians up to two years to earn this certification. The bill also does not apply to positions the Secretary of Veterans Affairs considers as entry level.

AFGE appreciates Chairwoman Kiggans' intent in improving the training of Sterile Processing Technicians at the VA. However, the current version of the bill raises several questions that require clarification before AFGE can take a position on this legislation.

First, the bill neither defines which certification is required, nor which institutions are accredited. Further, it does not consider whether the VA can offer this certification in-house instead of relying on private companies. Currently, these technicians take an internal certification course called the VA Certified Registered Medical Supply Technician (VA-CRMST). Technicians must finish the certification within their first year at the VA and complete 400 hours

of work prior to testing. Additionally, there are 12 hours of continuing education requirements for these employees. VA has standardized the VA-CRMST for VA technicians and allows it to be completed during the workday with no individual expense for VA employees. What is the extra benefit to VA and its employees to further require, for example, the Certified Registered Central Sterile Technician (CRCST) certification, recognized by the Healthcare Sterile Processing Association?

Second, what is the uniformity of the programs recognized by the Healthcare Sterile Processing Association? Do all these companies and their programs cover the same material, or is there variation in the programs and curriculum? Further, are any of those programs currently tailored for employees at the VA, as the VA's VA-CRMST program is?

Third, who will bear the cost of attaining the CRCST certification? Asking incumbent technicians who are between GS-3 and GS-6, making a starting salary of \$36,745 to \$51,442 in Washington, DC to pay for a certification costing thousands of dollars is cost prohibitive, especially when it can be done in-house. Moreover, while new employees would be required to have this certification prior to employment, the burden placed on current employees and earning this certification after hours is significant and may hurt with retention of these employees.

AFGE looks forward to learning more about this bill as it is considered by the subcommittee.

**Draft legislation to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to recoup awards, bonuses, and relocation expenses paid to former employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs under certain conditions**

Rep. Self's draft legislation would allow the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to recoup bonuses and relocation expenses of former employees of the VA. AFGE opposes this legislation

as it is an extension of the powers granted to the Secretary under the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017 (Accountability Act). The VA has abused the powers of the Accountability Act since its inception almost nine years ago. In turn, AFGE has justifiable concerns as to how the bill would be implemented. Granting this power to claw back money from former employees since the law was enacted on June 23, 2017, poses problems for former employees who, after potentially almost a decade, do not have the ability to rebut the VA's claims. AFGE urges the subcommittee not to advance this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and present AFGE's views on these bills. I look forward to answering your questions.