

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. 1461  
MARCH 21, 2017**

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF SHIRLEY PARKER BLOMMEL, PRESIDENT, LOCAL 390  
ST. CLOUD VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM  
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO**

Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share the views of Local 390 of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE). Local 390 represents 1,642 bargaining unit (BU) employees working as medical professional and support personnel at the St. Cloud, Minnesota VA Health Care System (St. Cloud VA), a quarter of whom are veterans.

I came to work at the St. Cloud VA as a licensed practical nurse (LPN) in 2008, after working at several different private practices in rural and urban areas, including a maternity ward, urology practice and community based nursing home. At the VA, I started out in the nursing home and then I worked in primary care and the residential rehabilitation treatment program (RRTP). I worked in primary care until 2014 when I began working full time as a union representative.

I was elected vice president of Local 390 in 2012, and I have served as president of my local since 2014. Our bargaining unit covers a wide range of positions at the St. Cloud VA Main Campus and Brainerd, Alexandria and Montevideo community outpatient clinics (CBOC).

After one year at the St. Cloud VA for one year as a nurse working on the floor, I signed up to be a union member, went to meetings and learned I could make a difference. Also, my dad was infantry in the Army and I wanted to give back for all he sacrificed. I realized that by getting involved in the union, I could help front line employees and learn how to work collaboratively with management to improve the veteran experience.

Personally, it's taken on something more for me now because my son is a veteran. I've taken more of a personal ownership of what I do.

Being a local officer has been a very fulfilling experience and has taught me a great deal, especially that labor-management relations are not about I'm right and they're wrong but rather that we have different perspectives but a shared goal of wanting to improve care. When the union and management work collaboratively, we can move toward the same positive outcome.

As a local officer, I have the opportunity to make sure employees are getting proper training and that the workplace is safe. Our members all want to provide the best care to veterans, but they cannot do this without adequate training and a safe working environment.

I come before this Subcommittee today at the request of my Representative, Congressman Walz, and I am here to talk about how I try to address problems at my facility using official time. I must confess that I am concerned about retaliation from management when I go back because over the last two years, the environment at St. Cloud became very hostile. In 2015, veterans using the St. Cloud VA went to the media to complain about a lack of providers and increased primary care panels. Congressmen Walz and Emmer came our facility and spoke with BU employees and got us some help. The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service conducted a five-day mediation and we also got a visit from former VA Secretary McDonald. The outcome of this process was that the medical center director retired and we now have new leadership at our facility.

There are many other examples of how I have used official time to keep the St. Cloud VA workforce strong, make the work environment safer and collaborate with management carry out the agency's mission and take great care of veterans at our facility.

For example, Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) inspectors came to our facility in 2013 and found a long list of violations. They spent 20 days at our facility. After correcting the violations, medical center leadership and I went to their district office to review the charges and make sure staff had correct training.

On a frequent basis, I represent housekeepers in their disputes with their supervisors. All of our housekeepers are combat veterans and they play a critical role in patient safety by keeping operating rooms and other areas free of infection. Many of these veterans suffer from anxiety, substance abuse, PTSD or other mental health issues. When a combat veteran in the bargaining unit has to take leave to get care at a VA treatment center, supervisors sometimes give them a very hard time when they return and the veterans end up feeling stigmatized and targeted. Instead of the supervisor saying, "Good for you, I am glad you got treatment", they often harass them for being low on sick leave, even though the veteran sought treatment for a condition he acquired in the military.

When these veterans come to the union for help, we explain their rights under the Family Medical Leave Act and we reach out to management to smooth out tensions and ask for greater understanding from management.

I frequently have conversations with employees because they are feeling intimidated and bullied by some of the comments made by managers. We ask the employees about problems such as how schedules are changed without notifying the employee, which then leads to management charging them with AWOL for not showing up for the new shift. As a union official, I have been able to resolve these types of misunderstandings informally at an early stage.

The union plays an essential role in addressing other arbitrary management actions that create unnecessary conflicts that interfere with the agency mission. I assisted a food service

worker who prepares meals for veterans. He is an excellent employee who would not hurt a flea and greets everyone he sees and never had any trouble on the job. Then one day, as a favor to a coworker who could not attend the morning huddle, he shared management's guidelines for the day with the team. When the service line director showed up, she chastised him for not speaking loudly enough. He tried to explain that his throat was bothering him. She issued a reprimand anyway. We challenged the reprimand and instead of it staying in his file for three years, the union was able to get it removed after three months.

I represented another food service worker who was the target of manager accusations because she had a medical notification related to her inability to work extra shifts because of a back injury. The manager went around and talked to everyone about her medical condition, which intimidated the employee a great deal. I was able to talk with the manager about the employee's rights and needs. As a result, the manager stopped harassing her and the employee continues to be a productive employee to this day.

When I first became the union vice president, I was only on 50% official time. As the need increased for us to be present, management frequently asked me to come in on a day off from my RRPT duties. After I became president of the local, it became clear that management's expectation was that the president would be working only administrative hours. Management likes the continuity of having me work 100% official time. I need to be there when management calls a meeting, or schedules grievances under the required timeframes. If I am to be effective, my availability has to overlap management's availability. In addition, the local needs official time so that management can send shop stewards to the many training classes that are scheduled on health and safety and other matters.

In addition, to representation of individual employees, my regular duties as union president including:

- Attending monthly meetings called by management including director meetings, meetings with nurse executives and staff meetings,
- Meeting with service lines to talk about existing and new policies,
- Meeting with management to discuss policy changes and how it will impact working conditions, and how we can work in a collaborative manner to improve veteran care,
- Discussing new directives from VA Central Office and how they will impact work flow; then I go to the employees to ask about the workflow and how can we do it better and share this information with management,
- Resolving disagreements between employees, and
- Mentoring new employees.

If H.R. 1461 were to become law, I would only have 25% official time. This would have an adverse impact on the veterans as well as the employees at St. Cloud. I need to time to

address the many new directives that come down from the Veterans Health Administration. I would not have enough time to sit down and work things out with management and determine how to implement the new requirements.

For example, just recently, a new directive on the Query State Prescription Drug Monitoring Program came out. This has a big impact on working conditions; providers will have to start a query when veterans get narcotics or changes in prescription. The union has to work with management to determine which positions are best suited to assist with the queries. Also, we need to work together to make sure our providers understand who should be delegate exactly and make sure all our Is are dotted and our Ts are crossed.

Duty time was also essential to implement another recent directive on how to upgrade urgent care to an emergency department (ED). It is a complex directive and there are many new requirements that must be met, including inpatient beds and having social workers available on call.

I have no problem providing medical care to my veterans. But I also think that my duties as a union official are also very important for taking care of veterans.

I also want to state that I am a very good steward of the use of official time at my local time. I make sure that shop stewards on official time only take 30 minute breaks. If they go over, I have a conversation with them. I am a work horse myself and I work very hard and I expect the other local officers to do the same. I have asked some shop stewards to step down because I insist on proper use of official time. There is zero abuse of official time at my local; we are using less than allowed under the contract at the present time.

H.R. 1461 would also prohibit me from lobbying. I am here today on duty time. I used duty time two years ago to work with Congressmen Walz and Emmer on the staffing problems already discussed, including meeting with the Congressmen's DC staff who came to St. Cloud, and to conduct a meeting between the lawmakers and the BU employees.

I am also very concerned about two other provisions of this bill and how they would impact the union's ability to work with management to carry out the agency's mission. If members could drop their union dues deductions at any time, instead of the current one year commitment, it would be a financial diaster to our local. These dues are essential to paying for member training, and arbitration fees, among other needs.

Finally, I think a longer probationary period is unnecessary and would be harmful, especially to the many veterans among our new hires. A good manager knows within six months whether an employee is good enough to stay on after probation. I can recall a case involving another LPN who was on probation and management promised to provide training to improve his performance. Instead, management just said goodbye without keeping its commitment on the training, right after forcing him to cover a holiday weekend.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the views of AFGE Local 390 on H.R. 1461.

**BIO OF SHIRLEY PARKER BLOMMEL**

Shirley Parker Blommel has worked at the St. Cloud Veterans Affairs Health System since 2008 as a licensed practical nurse (LPN). Ms. Blommel earned her LPN degree at the St. Cloud Technical College in 1982. She worked in two small rural hospitals in Minnesota for almost six years. Then Ms. Blommel transferred to Fairview Ridges Hospital, a large urban facility in Burnsville, Minnesota where she worked for five years in the maternity ward. Upon relocating to St. Cloud, she worked in a private urology medical practice and a community based nursing home. At the VA, Ms. Blommel has worked in the nursing home, RRTP (rehab residential treatment program where veterans get housing and treatment for mental health conditions chemical dependency) and primary care where she currently works. Ms. Blommel was elected Vice President of AFGF Local 290 in 2012, and has served as President of the local since 2014.

In her spare time, Ms. Blommel is a Master Gardener and active in the Women's Guild of her church. She is also a Trustee of the Eastern Area Labor Council of the Minnesota AFL-CIO.