



The VA is facing criticism for putting veterans at risk by creating wait lists.

Lawmakers laud VA whistleblowers

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07/08/2014 08:57 PM EDT

Updated 07/08/2014 11:45 PM EDT

House lawmakers charged Tuesday that a culture of corruption at the Department of Veterans Affairs allowed the agency to freely retaliate against whistleblowers.

At a hearing of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, lawmakers peppered four federal whistleblowers on ways to fix the VA's reputation of acting against employees who raise concerns about health care quality or fraud and said the VA needed a broad cultural change.

Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-Fla.) praised the whistleblowers for focusing on the "essential mission of the VA."

"Whistleblowers serve the essential function of providing a reality check on what is actually going on in the department," Miller said. "Whistleblowers dare to speak to truth to power. None of these whistleblowers lost sight of the essential mission of the VA. They understand people are not inputs and outputs on a central office spreadsheet."

The VA is facing broad criticism from Congress for putting veterans at risk by creating wait lists for patients to receive medical care. The controversy toppled the VA's former secretary, Eric Shinseki.

President Barack Obama has nominated Bob McDonald, the former chief executive of Procter & Gamble, as the next VA secretary.

The witnesses suggested a range of solutions to the VA's problem, including blocking the VA's ability to unilaterally move doctors or employees to different facilities when under investigation and stop the agency from putting a gag on whistleblowers from speaking with their colleagues.

Jose Mathews, the chief of psychiatry at the St. Louis VA, endorsed a Senate and House proposal that would allow the agency to quickly fire senior employees involved in mismanagement.

The condemnation of the VA's action against whistleblowers was bipartisan.

Maine Rep. Michael Michaud, the top Democrat on the panel, said changing the culture at the VA is a difficult task.

"Changing the culture is not easy. It cannot be done legislatively and it cannot be done by throwing additional resources at it," Michaud said. "Talk is cheap. Real solutions are hard to find."

House and Senate negotiators are working to finalize legislation to give new powers to the secretary to fire employees accused of mismanagement and would give veterans who faced long waits the ability to leave the VA system for treatment.

The witnesses said the retaliation was pervasive and often personal. Christian Head, an associate director at the Greater Los Angeles VA system said colleagues compared him to a snitch after he provided testimony against documents accused of fraud. He said his pay was also withheld for two weeks after making complaints.

"Retaliation is alive and well," said Head, who provided a 270-page document to the committee with his allegations. "Retaliation exists because there is a culture. This culture of retaliation is really the cancer."

The VA would often force whistleblowers into administrative leave after they raised concerns about lagging health care quality stemming from overworked nurses or understaffed medical centers, the witnesses said.

"There is a sense of mission that is lacking and I'm really hoping that this committee, with its powers, will take aggressive actions," said Mathews.

