

VA's Newest Scandal: Whistleblower Retaliation

By John Parkinson July 9, 2014



Jose Mathews, left, and Christian Head, right, testify during a hearing on "VA Whistleblowers: Exposing Inadequate Service Provided to Veterans and Ensuring Appropriate Accountability" before the House Veterans Affairs Committee on July 8, 2014 in Washington, D.C. Alex Wong/Getty Images

The Veterans Affairs scandal is taking a new turn as a special counsel is receiving a growing number of complaints from employees that the agency retaliated against them for attempting to expose problems.

Carolyn Lerner, special counsel with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, told the House Veterans Affairs Committee Tuesday night that her office is investigating 67 cases of alleged retaliation against whistleblowers at the VA.

"The number increases daily," Lerner said, adding that since June 1, her office has received 25 new complaints of retaliations from employees claiming they were whistleblowers.

Several VA staffers testified before the committee that they were victims of retaliation. The hearing stretched late into the night Tuesday.

Jose Mathews, the former chief of psychiatry at the St. Louis health care system, told Congress that after he tried to point out problems at the VA to his senior management he was removed from his position and detailed to another assignment while an administrative investigation was initiated.

"I was told I was spending too much time with veterans," Mathews testified. "They already professionally assassinated me."

Christian Head, the legal and quality assurance associate director at the Veterans Affairs Los Angeles Health Care System, said he was also a victim of retaliation.

"I was labeled a rat," Head said, adding there is a "cancer" within the VA's leadership that perpetuates the idea that employees should be silent. "We should stand up and do the right thing."

Katherine Mitchell, who works at the Phoenix VA, told the committee that the agency has intimidated any employee who raises information that could be detrimental to the agency, discouraging new doctors from considering the VA for employment. "Just because someone has an MD doesn't mean they have ethics," Mitchell said. "I wouldn't recommend that people get a job at the VA as physician until there are changes."

Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn., said Mitchell had raised a "nightmare scenario" because the VA's demand for doctors will increase as more and more veterans seek care following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Real change is difficult," Rep. Mike Michaud, the committee's top Democrat said. "We all want Veterans Administration employees to feel comfortable raising their voices without fear it'll mean the end of their careers."

Head says he fears retaliation and his bosses are "very much aware" he was coming to testify at the Capitol, but he maintained confidence that coming forward "was the right thing to do." "I think veterans support me," he said. "The reality is I'm always looking over my shoulder."