



Veterans Affairs' Intimidation of Whistleblowers Must Stop

By [Nicole Kaeding](#)

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Mismanagement within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is chronic. The agency mismanages [its projects](#) and [its patients](#).

Last year's scandal at the Phoenix VA [centered](#) on allegations that veterans waited months for treatment while never being added to the official waiting lists. The [VA secretary resigned](#) and the agency focused on changing course.

New reports suggest that agency reforms still have a long way to go.

A congresswoman at a recent congressional hearing [described](#) the VA as having a "culture of retaliation and intimidation." Employees who raise concerns about agency missteps are punished.

The [U.S. Office of Special Counsel](#) (OSC), which manages federal employee whistleblower complaints, reported that it receives twice as many complaints from VA employees than from Pentagon employees, even though the Pentagon has double the staff. [Forty percent](#) of OSC claims in 2015 have come from VA employees, compared with 20 percent in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

During the hearing, a VA surgeon [testified](#) about the retaliation he faced following his attempts to highlight a co-worker's time card fraud. From July 2014 until March 2015, his supervisors revoked his operating privileges, criticized him in front of other employees and relocated his office to a dirty closet before demoting him from chief of staff.

Another physician was [suspended](#) from his job shortly after alerting supervisors to mishandled lab specimens. A week's worth of samples were lost. Several months later, he reported another instance of specimen mishandling and his office was searched. He became a target of immense criticism.

In addition to these sorts of cases, [Carolyn Lerner](#), head of OSC, [told](#) Congress that in some cases a whistleblower's own VA medical records are illegally accessed to discredit them.

One VA whistleblower [claims](#) that his VA medical records were accessed "by a dozen different people from October 28, 2014, to March 10, 2015." Apparently, other employees were trying to retaliate against him because he attempted to flag the [VA's mishandling of suicidal patients at the Phoenix facility](#). His only treatment during this time period was to purchase a new pair of glasses.

These stories paint a dark picture of the VA system. A VA neurologist [said](#), "The story of VA is a story of two different organizations; there is the VA that takes care of veterans, and there is the VA that takes care of itself."

Congress and the VA should try to clean up these messes. Veterans' health care needs improvement, and employees should be free to highlight these issues without the fear of retribution.

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