

OUR TURN SEN. JEFF FLAKE AND JON RICHES

Serve Veterans First Act will guarantee fast care before union work



Today, nearly three years after a scandal at the Department of Veterans' Affairs revealed staggering wait times for care, we still have veterans being forced to wait far too long for critical care.



Meanwhile, an arcane practice within the federal government, known as "official time," allows those

VA employees entrusted with the care of veterans to spend their time on the clock working for unions instead of the jobs taxpayers pay them to do.

In fact, a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that federal employees were paid with taxpayer dollars for over one million hours of exclusively union work during the 2015 fiscal year. Even as veterans in Arizona were forced to wait up to 300 days for critical appointments to receive care.

For veterans in need of urgent medical care, the misuse of public resources

presented by "official time" can create life-or-death situations.

The same GAO review showed that, in addition to the hundreds of thousands of part-time hours dedicated to official time, the VA paid and is likely still paying more than 340 salaried employees to perform full-time union work. These employees include nurses, mental-health providers, and other health-care professionals — people who are key to caring for veterans.

According to the Office of Personnel Management, the VA spent nearly \$50 million on official time during fiscal year 2014, the most recent year for which data is available.

Official time across the federal government costs taxpayers more than \$162 million every year. With our staggering \$20 trillion in debt, we would like to completely eliminate paid union time, but beginning with an agency as crucial as the VA seems a good place to start.

Veterans are waiting — and, in some cases, dying in the process — for care. Three years after the VA inspector gen-

eral found lengthy wait times for care had contributed to the death of veterans, the VA remains plagued by untimely care. As of August 2015, there were still some 22,000 patients waiting for an appointment at the Phoenix VA. Of those, nearly 5,000 veterans had been waiting for more than 30 days to see a provider.

Tragically, in 2015, 215 patients died with VA appointments pending, and the VA inspector general found that untimely care at the Phoenix VA may have contributed to the death of at least one veteran.

These facts lead to tough questions: Why is the federal government spending huge amounts of taxpayer dollars to fund private union activity? At a time when men and women in uniform are returning home from service, why is the VA sending health-care professionals who were hired to care for them to a union desk rather than a hospital bed?

This mistreatment of veterans and abuse of taxpayer resources need to end.

The Serve Veterans First Act does that. Working together we have crafted legislation prohibiting the use of official time until the VA can certify veterans are receiving timely care.

The legislation requires that the VA inspector general — an independent watchdog agency — determine no veteran has waited for care for more than 30 days before any VA employee can use official time for union activities.

Veterans have delivered on the promises they made to us. Now it's our turn deliver on the promises we made to them.

By ensuring that the VA uses taxpayer funds for patient care rather than private union activities, we can remind those who seem to have forgotten that the VA exists to serve veterans and their families, not unions.

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