

Trump's VA Terminates 500, Suspends 200 for Misconduct

Five hundred and forty-eight Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees have been terminated since President Donald Trump took office, indicating that his campaign pledge to clean up “probably the most incompetently run agency in the United States” by relentlessly putting his TV catch phrase “you’re fired” into action was more than just empty rhetoric.

Another 200 VA workers were suspended and 33 demoted, according to data newly published by the department as part of VA Secretary David Shulkin's [commitment](#) to greater transparency. Those disciplined include 22 senior leaders, more than 70 nurses, 14 police officers, and 25 physicians.

Also disciplined were a program analyst dealing with the Government Accountability Office, which audits the department, a public affairs specialist, a chief of police and a chief of surgery.

Many housekeeping aides and food service workers – lower-level jobs in which the department has employed felons and convicted [sex offenders](#) – were also fired.

Scores of veterans have died waiting for care while VA bureaucrats falsified data to procure monetary bonuses, but fixes have been slow to come by largely because the union that represents VA employees has used its political muscle with Democrats to emphasize job security for government employees.

Former President Barack Obama originally appointed Shulkin as a VA undersecretary. By the end of the Obama administration, however, Shulkin had grown increasingly frustrated with the American Federation of Government Employees union and other groups defending bad employees' supposed right to a government check even when they hurt veterans.

“Just last week we were forced to take back an employee after they were convicted no more than three times for DWI and had served a 60 day jail sentence ... Our accountability processes are clearly broken,” Shulkin said at the White House.

In addition to reluctance by managers to vigorously pursue firings, the overturning of firings after the fact by the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) – often with little public acknowledgment – has been a longstanding problem.

Shulkin asked for [new legislation](#) that reduces the role of MSPB, especially when firing senior leaders. Congress passed the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act in answer, and Trump signed the bill in June.

The published data predates those new powers, and does not note which disciplinary actions were later overturned.

One record shows a “senior leader” being removed January 20, while another record shows a “senior leader” being demoted April 21. Those appear to refer to the same person – disgraced Puerto Rico VA director [DeWayne Hamlin](#) – who returned to work in a lesser job after he appealed to the MSPB.

Former Obama Secretary of Veterans Affairs Bob McDonald seemed to have so little grasp on firing employees that in August 2016, he said that he had fired 140,000 employees, a figure that made little sense since that would be nearly half the workforce.

He said “you can’t fire your way to excellence” and blamed “negative news articles” for a morose culture, rather than the individuals perpetrating the misconduct described in those articles.

Though high-level hospital officials were affected, according to the data covering the first six months of the Trump administration, relatively few disciplinary actions occurred

in the central offices where Washington bureaucrats work. Those employ fewer people than the hospitals, but repeated scandals have also shown such employees looking out for one another to preserve each others' jobs.

There were five firings in the Veterans Health Administration Central Office, including one senior leader. There were also two in the Office of General Counsel, and one in the office of Congressional and Legislative affairs.

The data does not include employees' names, and does not show which employees were on new-employee probationary status. Employees can be fired much more easily during their first year.

During the Obama administration, McDonald lamented that in the private sector "you cut a deal with the employee and you're able to buy them out," but said you cannot do that in government.

Yet VA repeatedly made five and six-figure payments to bad employees to get them to quit after they threatened to gum up the works by appealing disciplinary actions. The department even allowed Hamlin to offer a low-level employee \$300,000 to quit after she refused to help management retaliate against a whistleblower who exposed Hamlin's arrest.

The agency paid more than \$5 million in settlements to employees under McDonald, which had the effect of encouraging bad employees to relentlessly appeal and make unsupported charges of discrimination when they were targeted for discipline, in an often-successful attempt to convert punishment into reward.

Shulkin said he "will look to settle with employees only when they clearly have been wronged ... and not as a matter of ordinary business."

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