

February 16, 2017

Dear Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, Chairman Meadows, Ranking Member Connolly, Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, Chairman Arrington, and Ranking Member O'Rourke:

I am writing in regard to the hearing that is being held by the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and the Subcommittee on Government Operations, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, on Official Time in the Department of Veterans' Affairs to share my experience as a VA employee and whistleblower. In 2011, I testified before the US Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs regarding access issues to mental health services in the VA. When VA officials learned that I was to testify, they began to retaliate against me to dissuade me from testifying. Subsequent to my testifying I was subjected to additional, prolonged retaliation by VA administration. Performance evaluations were downgraded, duties were removed, I was uninvited to meetings, and staff was pressured not to associate with me. This retaliation occurred in spite of the Senate Committee benefitting from insider knowledge as well as making it clear to the VA that retaliation was unacceptable. It also occurred in spite of the fact the VA was given funds to hire more clinical staff based in part on the testimony I provided.

Because of the retaliation, I contacted my local AFGE representatives and they were only able to help me at designated periods of time when they were allowed to use official time. My union representative was a member of the clinical staff at the facility and only had 1-2 hours per day to do representational work, and use official time to research OPM regulations, as well as write up and file the grievances. Through the use of official time my union representative could attend meetings with me in attempts to address the retaliation. The use of official time helped me fight the unjustified actions and made a tremendous difference in my being able to successfully resolve my case.

Given the amount of time needed to address the retaliation I suffered, I have concerns that people, dedicated caring professionals, would not be able to put in the amount of personal time needed to help defend cases such as mine. If official time had not been available to the AFGE representatives we may not have been able to defend my case as successfully as we did, and it would have set a precedent that when VA employees are whistleblowers management can retaliate without consequence. What is worse, it would have sent the message that medical professionals risk being mistreated or losing their jobs if they come forth with issues concerning patient care or safety.

Therefore, it is my strongly held belief based on my experiences with retaliation that official time is absolutely necessary to help protect veterans, workers, and whistleblowers, as well as to ensure qualified, hardworking employees are not subjected to injustices like the ones I faced.

Sincerely,

Michelle A. Washington

Michelle A. Washington, Ph.D.
Psychologist
AFGE Member