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VA Officials Skirt Congressional Hearing

Legion National Commander blasts lack of transparency, accountability

WASHINGTON (October 21, 2015) – Already deeply concerned about a recent Inspector General's report that found senior VA officials misused relocation funds, American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett expressed disappointment that VA witnesses declined to appear before a congressional committee this morning to explain their actions.

"This is not some partisan issue between Congress and the Veterans Benefits Administration," Barnett said. "It is about providing answers to the serious charges of the IG that the directors of the Philadelphia and St. Paul. Minn., VA Regional Offices (VAROs) inappropriately used their positions of authority for personal and financial benefit. Veterans deserve answers. The witnesses could have taken the easy route and explain their actions or they could have taken the evasive route. They chose the later. Chairman Jeff Miller and the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs are to be commended for unanimously voting this morning to issue subpoenas which will require the witnesses to appear next month so that they can explain their actions. Veterans have waited long enough."

VA Deputy Inspector General Linda Halliday was the only witness to show up at the hearing, which was attended by Barnett and other Legionnaires. Her report determined that Philadelphia VARO Director Diana Rubens and St. Paul VARO Director Kimberly Graves used their prior positions to coerce the previous directors to accept reassignment and create openings that they themselves would fill, while retaining their higher salaries for their new lower-level positions.

Moreover, Rubens and Graves collected $274,019 and $129, 467 respectively in relocation costs. According to the IG, when Rubens informed then-VA Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey that

she wanted “to take advantage of the Philly Director opening,” Hickey responded that she would “be all in to help and make it happen.”

Although Hickey resigned on Oct. 16, Barnett pointed out that VA is still seriously lacking in transparency and accountability. “It is not about one person resigning. It is about a culture at VA that allows people to think that they can get away with waste, fraud and abuse, while veterans continue to wait for their health care and disability claims to be delivered in a timely manner. The American Legion will be at the next hearing. And the next one and the next one after that. We support the need for a strong VA health care system but we are not going to tolerate a department that puts the careers of government workers ahead of the needs of veterans. Not only should bad actors at VA be fired, in some cases they should be prosecuted.”

With a current membership of 2.2 million wartime veterans, The American Legion was founded in 1919 on the four pillars of a strong national security, veterans affairs, Americanism, and youth programs. Legionnaires work for the betterment of their communities through nearly 14,000 posts across the nation.

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