From: Raughter, John B.
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Legion Commander to VA: 'Hold People Accountable'

WASHINGTON (November 2, 2015) – The leader of the nation's largest veterans organization called a senior VA official's concession during a congressional hearing tonight that the department has an accountability problem "one of the understatements of the year."

American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett said he was pleased that VA Principal Deputy Under Secretary Danny Pummill appeared to indicate that some disciplinary action is underway for Philadelphia VA Regional Office (VARO) Director Diana Rubens and St. Paul VARO Director Kimberly Graves. "Under Secretary Pummill would not say exactly what disciplinary action is being taken, but he did cite the appeals process allowed by the Veterans Accountability Act. This is a sign that VA is taking the IG Report seriously."

The IG Report accuses Rubens and Graves of using their senior positions to pressure the previous VARO directors to accept transfers so they themselves could fill their lower-level positions while retaining their higher salaries and collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars in relocation allowances. Both Rubens and Graves repeatedly invoked their Fifth Amendment Rights against self-incrimination when questioned at the hearing. They were dismissed from the hearing by Miller when it became clear that they would not answer questions.

"As veterans, we have defended the Constitution and we fully support the rights of the witnesses to invoke the Fifth Amendment. At the same time, we hope the Justice Department conducts a vigorous investigation looking at all of the evidence," Barnett said. "The VA Inspector General's report is damning. The financial records are extremely disturbing. The American Legion is optimistic that the VA said it would implement the IG Report recommendations. We now expect VA to demonstrate that it is serious about holding its senior officials accountable when they put their own interests ahead of veterans. Chairman Jeff Miller, Ranking Member Corrine Brown and all of the members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee deserve credit for its bipartisan attempts to get answers."

Barnett also praised Baltimore VARO Director Antione Waller for his forthrightness. "Waller confirmed that he was indeed pressured to leave St. Paul and transfer to Baltimore because of pressure from Rubens and Graves. Los Angeles Director Robert McKenrick said he wasn't coerced, but admitted to having reservations about accepting the position and said that he knew he could be fired for refusal. Rubens and

Graves combined received more than $400,000 in relocation expenses. This is exactly why The American Legion agrees with Rep. Jackie Walorski that VA 'suffers from a crisis of confidence.' The American Legion will continue to monitor VA's progress in implementing the IG recommendations. The system is extremely flawed but it is still worth saving. We call on VA to engage with veterans, American taxpayers and the press."

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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