

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 31, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a review of the culture, policies, and practices of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA or the Department) to determine the extent to which systemic racism impacts the VA, including whether VA employees and veterans in the benefits offices, medical centers, and other facilities under its jurisdiction experience racial discrimination in the workplace.

A recent national survey¹ by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), which represents more than 270,000 of VA's nearly 400,000 employees,² revealed that "[s]eventy-eight percent of employees surveyed [...] reported that racism is a moderate to serious problem at the VA," "[s]eventy-six percent of employees surveyed said they had experienced racially charged actions while working at the VA," and "[f]ifty-five percent of respondents reported that they had also witnessed racial discrimination against veterans while on the job."³ Disturbing allegations of "derogatory language, discrimination and stereotyping"⁴ by VA employees include "racial slurs used by white VA staff," "Black employees ... instructed to

¹ American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), "78 Percent of Union Veterans Affairs Employees Surveyed Say Racism is a Problem at the VA," press release, August 7, 2020, <https://www.afge.org/publication/78-percent-of-union-veterans-affairs-employees-surveyed-say-racism-is-a-problem-at-the-va/>.

² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "COVID-19 Pandemic Response, Weekly Report: August 18-24, 2020," https://www.va.gov/health/docs/VA_COVID_Response.pdf.

³ American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), "78 Percent of Union Veterans Affairs Employees Surveyed Say Racism is a Problem at the VA," press release, August 7, 2020, <https://www.afge.org/publication/78-percent-of-union-veterans-affairs-employees-surveyed-say-racism-is-a-problem-at-the-va/>; ConnectingVets, "Nearly 80% of Veterans Affairs staff say racism is a 'moderate to serious problem' at VA," Abbie Bennett, August 7, 2020, <https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/most-veterans-affairs-employees-say-racism-a-problem-at-va>; Washington Post, "Most VA workers see racism against colleagues and veterans, union survey finds," Alex Horton, August 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/08/07/veterans-affairs-racism/>; Government Executive, "Vast Majority of VA Employees Have Either Witnessed or Experienced Racism at Work, Survey Finds," Erich Wagner, August 10, 2020, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2020/08/vast-majority-va-employees-have-either-witnessed-or-experienced-racism-work-survey-finds/167583/>.

⁴ Government Executive, "Vast Majority of VA Employees Have Either Witnessed or Experienced Racism at Work, Survey Finds," Erich Wagner, August 10, 2020, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2020/08/vast-majority-va-employees-have-either-witnessed-or-experienced-racism-work-survey-finds/167583/>.

act as a ‘living display’ of Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman and George Floyd” in recognition of Juneteenth, and “Black nurses being called ‘girl’ in New York, disproportionate discipline and retaliation against Black staff in Milwaukee, [and] plots to fire Black employees in Poplar Bluff, Missouri.”⁵ A common thread in these reports of racism and other demeaning treatment at VA facilities is that employees who complained faced retaliation when they attempted to elevate their concerns to their superiors.⁶

In reaction to the survey’s findings, a VA spokesperson stated that “VA does not tolerate harassment or discrimination in any form,” that “[a] VA employee encountering discrimination or harassment is encouraged to contact their Equal Employment Opportunity manager, Employee Threat Assessment Team, or VA’s Office of Resolution Management,” and that [t]heir concerns will be looked into right away.”⁷ VA has an Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion (ORDMI), which is tasked with the “prevention, resolution, and processing of workplace disputes, including complaints of discrimination”⁸ and is dedicated to “grow[ing] a diverse workforce and cultivat[ing] an inclusive work environment.”⁹ In addition, VA has a Center for Minority Veterans, which works “to ensure all veterans receive equal service regardless of race, origin, religion, or gender.”¹⁰ The Department has also released a lengthy “Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan,”¹¹ which is commendable. However, the findings of the AFGE survey and the staggering accounts of racism and discrimination reported by VA employees and veterans suggest that these concerns are not being adequately addressed by the Department.

Reports that racism is a serious problem at VA are especially concerning and demand rigorous scrutiny as our country works to confront systemic racism across our institutions. As VA is the federal government’s second-largest agency¹² and employs nearly 400,000 people,¹³

⁵ ConnectingVets, “Nearly 80% of Veterans Affairs staff say racism is a ‘moderate to serious problem’ at VA,” Abbie Bennett, August 7, 2020, <https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/most-veterans-affairs-employees-say-racism-a-problem-at-va>.

⁶ ConnectingVets, “Nearly 80% of Veterans Affairs staff say racism is a ‘moderate to serious problem’ at VA,” Abbie Bennett, August 7, 2020, <https://connectingvets.radio.com/articles/most-veterans-affairs-employees-say-racism-a-problem-at-va>; Letter by Alma L. Lee, President National Veterans Affairs Council #53, AFGE, AFL-CIO to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, August 6, 2020, <https://images.radio.com/connectingvets/AFGE%20letter%20to%20SecVA%20Robert%20Wilkie.pdf>.

⁷ Government Executive, “Vast Majority of VA Employees Have Either Witnessed or Experienced Racism at Work, Survey Finds,” Erich Wagner, August 10, 2020, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2020/08/vast-majority-va-employees-have-either-witnessed-or-experienced-racism-work-survey-finds/167583/>.

⁸ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion (ORMDI), www.va.gov/orm/.

⁹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion, Mission & Vision, <https://www.diversity.va.gov/about/mission-vision.aspx>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Center for Minority Veterans (CMV), <https://www.va.gov/centerforminorityveterans/about/index.asp>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2017-2020, <https://www.diversity.va.gov/products/files/StrategicPlan.pdf>.

¹² U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, FY 2018 - 2024 Strategic Plan, <https://www.va.gov/oei/docs/va2018-2024strategicplan.pdf>.

¹³ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “COVID-19 Pandemic Response, Weekly Report: August 18-24, 2020,” https://www.va.gov/health/docs/VA_COVID_Response.pdf.

over 30 percent of whom are veterans themselves,¹⁴ VA has an obligation to live up to its core values of “Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence.”¹⁵ Racism and racial discrimination at VA must be taken seriously, and the steps to address it must be robust and enduring. Therefore, we request that GAO undertake a review of this issue and address the following questions:

1. What does the available data and other information reveal about the prevalence of racism and racial discrimination against VA employees and veterans in the offices, medical centers, and other facilities under VA jurisdiction?
 - a. What systems or processes are used by VA to report, track, and manage allegations of racism against VA employees and veterans in facilities under VA jurisdiction?
2. How effective are VA’s current policies and practices in addressing incidents of racism, whether covert or overt, against VA employees and veterans?
 - a. To what extent are unions that represent VA employees included in the formulation of policies and practices to address racism, and assessments of the efficacy of those policies and practices?
3. How effective is the current training for VA employees in addressing racism and racial discrimination in the workplace? Please include an assessment of whether VA employees have a common understanding of what constitutes racism and racial discrimination in the workplace.
 - a. To what extent are unions that represent VA employees included in the design and delivery of training programs practices to address racism and racial discrimination in the workplace?
4. What does the available data and other information reveal about the impact of racism and racial discrimination against VA employees in VA facilities on the Department’s ability to retain and attract personnel of color? Please include an assessment of the impact of racism and racial discrimination against VA employees on promotions of personnel of color within bargaining unit positions and the promotion of personnel of color to leadership positions and their overall professional development.
5. What does the available data and other information reveal about the impact of racism and racial discrimination against veterans in VA facilities on their willingness to utilize VA services and the quality of care they receive? Please include an assessment of the impact of racism and racial discrimination against veterans on their willingness to utilize VA services and the quality of care they receive.
6. What progress did VA make towards accomplishing and implementing the objectives, strategies, and measures set out in the Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2017-2020?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions about this request, please contact the following staff: Feras Sleiman (Feras_Sleiman@warren.senate.gov), Jonathan Rue

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Budget in Brief, 2021 Budget and 2022 Advance Appropriations Requests, <https://www.va.gov/budget/docs/summary/fy2021VAbudgetInBrief.pdf> (“These dedicated employees come to work for America’s Veterans and have a close connection with Veterans – over 33 percent are Veterans themselves.”).

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Code of Integrity, <https://www.va.gov/HEALTHCAREEXCELLENCE/docs/VHA-Code-of-Integrity-March-2019-FINAL.pdf>.

(Jonathan_Rue@warren.senate.gov), Brian Cohen (Brian_Cohen@warren.senate.gov), and Sara Kugler (Sara_Kugler@warren.senate.gov) for Senator Warren, and Will Rogers (Will_Rogers@schatz.senate.gov) and Michelle Dominguez (Michelle_Dominguez@appro.senate.gov) for Senator Schatz.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Brian Schatz
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies