

VA official: 9 in 10 complaints shelved

By Donovan Slack

The chief watchdog at the Veterans Affairs Department investigates less than 10 percent of the nearly 40,000 complaints it receives annually about problems within VA, even when they concern potential harm to veteran health, Deputy Inspector General Linda Halliday said.

The Office of the Inspector General, responsible under federal law for rooting out mismanagement and abuse throughout VA, simply doesn't have the resources, Halliday said during a Sept. 22 hearing of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

"There is a serious discrepancy between the size of our workforce and the size of our workload," she

told lawmakers.

She said her office has roughly 650 professional staff members while the vast department they investigate has more than 350,000 employees and a budget of more than \$160 billion.

"The OIG is not right-sized to respond to all the complaints" it receives, she said.

That explanation was not good enough for VA whistleblowers at the hearing, who said that even the investigations Halliday's office does conduct are cursory and often target the employees who report problems, rather than the problems they are reporting.

"VA OIG investigations have been half-assed and shoddy," said Shea Wilkes, a social worker at the Shreveport, Louisiana, VA who

was criminally investigated by the inspector general after he reported hidden wait lists for care at the facility.

"The VA OIG has not been independent, but is working with the VA to do damage control, whitewash and intimidate truth-tellers and potential whistleblowers," Wilkes charged.

He co-founded VA Truth Tellers, a group of more than 40 whistleblowers from VA medical facilities that provide care to more than 650,000 veterans each year. He said many have had similar experiences with the IG's office.

"The overwhelming majority would answer the VA IG is a joke," Wilkes said.

Halliday took over the inspector general's office in July after the

previous leader, Deputy Inspector General Richard Griffin, abruptly retired amid criticism from the whistleblowers' group.

Halliday said she is trying to change the culture in the inspector general's office and attempting to reposition resources so her office can investigate more complaints, particularly those concerning veteran medical treatment.

She said she also has ordered mandatory whistleblower protection training for her staff.

"I made it a high priority and my first priority to reinforce that the OIG values whistleblowers and that we are hearing and learning from the more recent complaints," Halliday said. □

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