

AFGE Local 2199

Newsletter 8/1/23

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Union Warns GOP Proposal Would 'Devastate' the Social Security Administration, The Department of Veterans Affairs is replacing Montana VA Director Judy Hayman following months of concerns raised by Montana's congressional delegation, Katherine Foley: Stop legislation what would jeopardize veteran care We Calling all AFGE 2199 members!! We are looking for self-driven individuals that have a passion to help others and to make the VA a safer, better, place to be employed.



Upcoming Events

Local 2199 is going to be doing t-shirt to show local AFGE pride. There will be a design contest for 3 categories, Local 2199, Local 2199 Pride , and Local 2199 BLACK. More details to come.

Membership Meeting

Membership meetings are held every 2nd Wednesday of the month. We welcome all to attend. The link to attend the meetings are on the website and once you book the meeting then the link will be sent to you via email.

Lunch & Learn

New Year, new dates for leadership to be swinging by all CBOCS to check in and see how things are going and for questions and info sessions.



Education is the most powerful
weapon which you can use to
change the world.

— *Nelson Mandela* —

AZ QUOTES

**“Dear Past, thank
you for all the
lessons. Dear
Future, I’m now
ready.”**

EVERYDAY POWER



Union Warns GOP Proposal Would 'Devastate' the Social Security Administration

"More cuts to SSA will result in a rapid increase of wait times, force SSA offices to close in many communities, and reduce service hours to the public."

A union representing more than 750,000 federal employees warned Wednesday that the House GOP's proposed cuts to the Social Security Administration for

the coming fiscal year would deeply harm the **already strained** and understaffed agency, potentially forcing it to close offices and slash service hours.

Such impacts would "devastate the agency's ability to serve the American public," Julie Tippens, legislative director of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), wrote in a letter to the top members of the House Appropriations Committee.

Last week, a Republican-controlled appropriations subcommittee **approved legislation** that would cut the Social Security Administration's (SSA) budget for fiscal year 2024 by \$183 million below the currently enacted level. President Joe Biden's 2024 budget proposal, by contrast, called for a **\$1.4 billion increase** for the agency.

The full House Appropriations Committee still must approve the measure, one of a dozen government funding bills that Congress is looking to pass by September 30 to avert a government shutdown.

Tippens noted that "seniors and disabled individuals already face long lines to get help at field offices"—conditions that would only worsen under the GOP proposal.

"Someone calling SSA's helpline faces an antiquated phone system that frequently drops their calls and where the average wait time is 35 minutes,"

Tippens wrote. "A worker with disabilities trying to claim their earned disability benefit faces a wait time of over seven months to get an initial decision and up to two years or longer to schedule a disability hearing. More than 10,000 Americans die, and another 5,000 Americans are forced to declare bankruptcy, every year while waiting for their disability hearing."

"More cuts to SSA will result in a rapid increase of wait times, force SSA offices to close in many communities, and reduce service hours to the public," she added, urging lawmakers to reject the funding reduction.

"Social Security is one thing the American people should be able to count on, yet the House Republican bill would disrupt access to those earned benefits."

The GOP's proposed cuts to the Social Security Administration come after House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) **announced plans to establish a bipartisan "commission" to examine ways to cut Social Security.**

Two weeks after McCarthy's remarks, the 175-member Republican Study Committee **released a proposal that would raise Social Security's full retirement age to 69, a change that would cut benefits **across the board**.**

Rep. John Larson (D-Conn.), a **leading proponent of Social Security expansion in the House, **warned** last week that Republicans' attack on the Social Security Administration is their "first step" toward cutting benefits.**

"Social Security is one thing the American people should be able to count on, yet the House Republican bill would disrupt access to those earned benefits," said Larson. "Already, years of underfunding, combined with the Covid-19 pandemic, have significantly worsened Social Security Administration's service, and led to lengthy delays during a time of rising need."

"The House Republican bill will only pile onto this problem, making it harder and harder for Americans to access their earned benefits," Larson continued. "I will continue to fight for the Social Security Administration to have the funding and staffing it needs to improve customer service to the American people."



VA Montana Director Judy Hayman, pictured here at a VA meeting with U.S. Sen. Jon Tester in June 2023, was removed from her directorship, the Department of Veterans' Affairs announced July 20.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is replacing Montana VA Director Judy Hayman following months of concerns raised by Montana's congressional delegation.

VA will announce a comprehensive review of Montana VA Health Care and Duane Gill will become Montana VA acting director next week.

Hayman remains employed by Veterans Affairs.

Sources close to the story tell Lee Montana Newspapers that among the issues surfacing ahead of the leadership change was Montana VA's hiring of a felony sex offender once featured on the TV show "To Catch a Predator." When a concerned employee questioned Hayman about the

hire that employee was told to keep quiet.

VA officials in Washington, D.C., and Montana would not comment on the hiring when asked by Lee Montana Newspapers, sticking to prepared remarks about operational oversight concerns. The VA hospital at Fort Harrison had been investigated for mismanagement earlier this year following complaints.

A January report by the Office of Inspector General found instances of patient mistreatment and missed diagnosis at the VA Miles City Community Living Center and at the Fort Harrison VA Medical Center. In one case a veteran diagnosed with COVID-19 was later determined at a private hospital to also have terminal metastatic lung cancer.

“Leadership failures at VA Montana will not be tolerated, period. I’m glad to see VA taking action, because the fact is anything that prevents even a single veteran from accessing the timely, high-quality care and benefits they deserve is a non-starter for me,” said U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, a Montana Democrat, in an email. Tester is chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "I’ve been in touch with VA Montana’s new acting director, as well as Secretary McDonough and Under Secretary for Health Elnahal on this issue and will continue to work with them to ensure VA Montana lives up to the needs of Montana’s veterans.”

The news of Hayman's being replaced was quickly politicized by Republicans in Montana’s congressional delegation, particularly U.S.

Sen. Steve Daines. Daines as chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, is overseeing efforts to unseat Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

“The fact that it took this long for the Administration to make a much-needed leadership change in Montana shows the Biden administration is not prioritizing care for our veterans,” Daines said in a press release. “Unfortunately, the Democrat-controlled Senate also continues to fail in its responsibility to conduct oversight and hold the VA accountable. This must change immediately, or our veterans will continue to be dishonored for their sacrifice.”

U.S Rep. Matt Rosendale identified medical malpractice and hiring practices as the cause for the change in leadership. The two-term Republican said in a press release that there had been reports of a doctor at Fort Harrison performing unauthorized surgeries.

“I am pleased by the VA’s decision to require a comprehensive review of the Montana VA Health Care System and the change in leadership. I am hopeful this will result in better practice which will allow our veterans to be properly served,” said Rosendale, who serves on the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and its Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

Staffing and care at Montana VA facilities have been at crisis levels for some time. In April 2022, Montana VA temporarily closed its Miles City long-term care center citing safety concerns related to staffing shortages

and patient treatment.

Thursday, Katherine Foley, Fort Harrison representative for the American Federation of Government Employees, identified 350 job vacancies.

"The change in command at VA Montana was deeply needed and something I have been pressing the VA secretary on for several months," said Rep. Ryan Zinke in a text. "My office has and will continue working with concerned veterans and employees who bring light to dangerous and unacceptable conditions at the VA."

The mistreatment of patients cited in the inspector general's January report identified instances dating back to 2018. In one case an elderly veteran who fell was left on the floor by nursing staff. In another case, a patient attempting to decline medical treatment, a basic right, was forced to participate in physical therapy.

In the case of the patient with a missed diagnosis for metastatic lung cancer, staff at one point recognized the need for imaging of a suspected lung problem but didn't follow through. Over many days the patient's low oxygen levels and other symptoms were attributed to COVID-19, which the patient had tested positive for when admitted.

A community hospital later identified the cancer, before returning to patient to VA care, where he died four days later.

Katherine Foley: Stop legislation what would jeopardize veteran care

Coming off the back of patriotic celebrations commemorating the Fourth of July, veterans all over the nation are at risk of seeing a significant decline in the quality of care they receive at VA hospitals due to a group of conservative politicians attempting to revive the failed 2017 Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act in the United States Congress.

The latest version, the Restore Veterans Affairs (VA) Accountability Act of 2023, claims to address the original's flaws, which was signed into law in June 2017. However, a closer look reveals that it actually aims to jeopardize the quality of care provided to our nation's heroes and undermine the rights and job security of dedicated VA workers like myself.

As president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 3570, representing more than 1650 employees, including program analysts like me, at the Fort Harrison VA Medical Center, I'm fighting against the passage of this bill to protect VA workers and veteran care.

My union joins me — the American Federation of Government Employees National VA Council, representing over 291,000 VA workers nationwide, a third of whom are veterans.

Like its predecessor, the 2023 VA Accountability Act threatens civil servants at the VA who have tirelessly served those who have sacrificed for our country. Regrettably, Representative Matt Rosendale (MT-2) has chosen to lend his support as a co-sponsor to this disastrous legislation — and every one of us should be outraged.

Over the last six years, federal courts, arbitrators, and federal agencies, including the Federal Labor Relations Authority and the Merit Systems Protection Board, have repeatedly ruled against the VA, finding that the agency abused its authority by misapplying the Accountability Act. Even VA Secretary Denis McDonough recognized the issues of the 2017 law

and ordered the VA to abandon its use of it earlier this year. The VA submitted a statement to the subcommittee this month stating it does not support the bill.

Additionally, this new legislation distracts from the real issues plaguing the VA healthcare system, like staffing. The Fort Harrison VA reports more than 350 vacancies at my facility alone.

Throughout the VA, there were approximately 50,000 employee vacancies nationwide, even before the Honoring Our PACT Act of 2022 passed last year, which took a necessary step to expand benefits for 6.2 million veterans but has exacerbated the strain on an already critically under staffed healthcare system. The shortage of clinical staff in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) facilities has escalated, with 88% of frontline employees reporting the need for additional staff .

Despite a severe staffing shortage, VA hospitals consistently outperform non-VA hospitals on all ten core patient satisfaction metrics, as shown in a nationwide survey conducted by Medicare. This exceptional performance is due to the unwavering commitment of VA workers who ensure veterans can connect with providers who comprehend their specific needs. Trust in the VA's ability to deliver healthcare is reflected in the fact that 90% of veterans rely on the VA for their healthcare needs.

The 2023 Accountability Act poses a significant threat to VA employees' job security and rights, jeopardizing the dedicated individuals devoted to caring for our nation's heroes and the veterans we serve. The legislation's ease of employee termination, the weakening of employee protections, and limited emphasis on professional growth undermine the quality of care our veterans receive.

I urge Representative Rosendale to reconsider his support for this bill and instead place the well-being of VA workers at the forefront and focus his efforts on improving veterans' access to exemplary healthcare. Veterans across the nation—and especially at the Fort Harrison VA — deserve better.

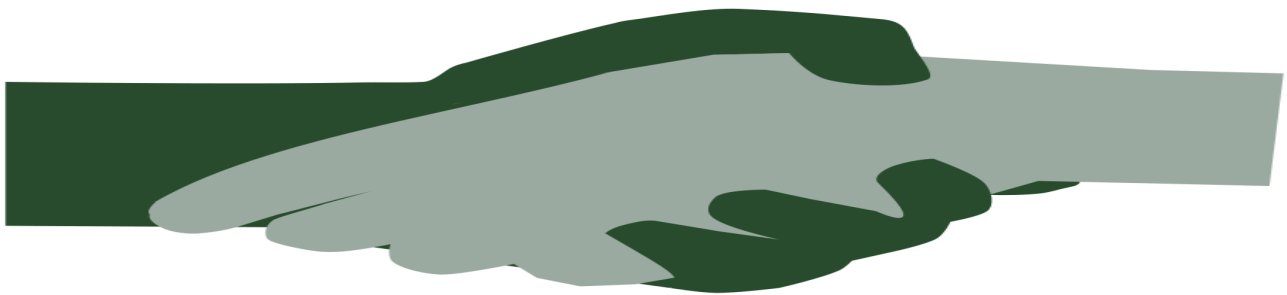


Your partnership with AFGE doesn't have to end when you retire.

AFGE Retirees are front and center in our efforts to honor and defend government employees. That means advocating for a productive, healthy, and secure retirement as well as good jobs, pay, and benefits for those who are still working.

- Stay connected with friends through social activities and volunteer opportunities
- Keep informed about issues affecting retired and active government employees
- Take action to protect retirement security, jobs, and government employee pay
- Save money on a host of benefits – Retirees receive all AFGE discounts and benefits
- Share your skills with the next generation of union leaders and activists

LEARN AND LEAD



BECOME A STEWARD

Transparency and Availability

Union officers are to provide more transparency and availability. What does this mean for the members? This means that if you need a rep to assist you then you will get one quickly. If you want to know what is happening in the local chapter, then we will have a monthly briefing to inform you of upcoming events. Our goal is to keep everyone informed of local events and events happening on the national level that will affect the VA and the employees.

AFGE LOCAL 2199 **Union**

President — Robert Johnson
Treasurer/Secretary- Tina Dameron
Executive Vice President - Jeff VanCuren
VHA Vice President - Lisa-Marie Manning
VBA Vice President -Susan (Jackie) Neilsen
Sergeant At Arms - Caitlinn Tanaka
Chief Steward - Robert Malone
Fair Practice/YOUNG Cord. - Taylor Wensel
PRIDE Coordinator- Eli Blevins
B.L.A.C.K.- Coordinator-Kendra Childs
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