

President Trump Vows to Get Tough on Bad VA Employees

President Donald Trump signed an executive order Thursday aimed at cracking down on bad employees in the Department of Veterans Affairs by improving accountability and whistleblower protections.

The order directs Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. David Shulkin to establish within 45 days an Office of Accountability and Whistle-blower Protection, and to appoint someone to serve as its executive director. The office's directives will be to:

- advise and assist Shulkin in using, as appropriate, all available authorities to discipline or terminate any VA manager or employee who has violated the public's trust and failed to carry out his or her duties on behalf of veterans; and to recruit, reward and retain high-performing employees;
- identify statutory barriers to Shulkin's authority to discipline or terminate any employee who has jeopardized the health, safety, or well-being of a veteran; and to recruit, reward and retain high-performing employees and report such barriers for consideration as to the need for legislative changes;
- work closely with relevant VA components to ensure swift and effective resolution of veterans' complaints of wrongdoing at the VA and
- work closely with relevant VA components to ensure adequate investigation and correction of wrongdoing throughout the VA and to protect employees who lawfully disclose wrongdoing from retaliation.

One likely outcome from this effort will be shining a bright light on the need for civil service reform throughout the

federal government. Although the president hasn't specifically talked about seeking such reforms from Congress, he did make it clear once again prior to signing the order that he intends to "protect the people that are protecting us."

The following are his complete comments at the order signing ceremony:

I'm pleased to be here. And we're joined by so many members of Congress. It's been really a fantastic period of time for me. And I'm honored also to be at the Department of Veterans Affairs, because I will tell you this has been something, right from the beginning of the campaign—does not get any more important for me than making life really great for our phenomenal veterans. That I can say.

So we're sharing the stage with a lot of great people, a lot of great friends. A couple of my friends are out in the audience today—Ike Perlmutter, Laurie Perlmutter. Where are they? Where are they? Where are they? These are incredible people, incredibly successful people. And they just have an affinity for helping the veterans and for helping David. And I want to thank them. Unbelievable. Thank you. Dr. Moskowitz, also.

And we're going to protect those who protect. And we're going to protect the people that are protecting us. First of all, Secretary Shulkin—and I call him the 100-to-nothing man, because in a totally obstructionist group of Democrats—we say that with affection—he got not only the Republicans but he got all of the Democrat votes. And he won at a 100-to-nothing clip. So I guess—boy, do they know. I hope they're right, you know.

But David is doing a phenomenal job. He was voted unanimously out of the United States Senate, and he's worked ever since then, day and night, to reform and improve the VA.

I'm also pleased that we're joined by so many members of Congress. We have with us Senators Ernst—where's Joni Ernst? Where is Joni? What a tremendous woman. And right from the beginning, she has been—and she knows more about veterans than anybody. Thanks, Joni. Really appreciate it.

Senator Isakson—thank you, Senator. Thank you very much. Senator Moran and Senator Tester. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, all. Along with Congressmen Arrington, Bergman, Bridenstine, Dent, Roe and Wenstrup. I look forward to serving our veterans with all of you.

And I can tell you, this group, whether they're Democrat or Republican, they're here to help. And we're going to help, and we're going to make this so good, it's going to be one of our crown jewels. And it's happening already.

As part of that process, Secretary Shulkin has carried out a really thorough review—he had some very inside understanding of the VA because he's been here—but a thorough review of the VA to uncover all of the problems and challenges that we inherited, of which there are so many. Based on those findings, we're putting plans into place to fix those problems and give our veterans the health care they need and the health care they deserve.

And they were so for me during this recent election, and I can promise them, and they know it's going to happen—we're not going to let them down. We have a team the likes of which has never, ever been assembled. That includes outside people who are so brilliant and so good—like Ike and Laurie. And they're helping us. And they don't fail.

Much work lies ahead, but we will not rest until this job is totally done. During these first 100 days—which, as you know, I've been saying there's a very extreme emphasis placed on these 100 days, Joni. It's not quite as big as they're saying. But we have really laid a foundation—had a

lot of legislation passed, which nobody understands. I think it's 28 bills as of this moment. Somebody said, by the time it ends, it's 32 bills. And tremendous legislation. But we've already made huge strides to improve the VA and the VA services.

We've imposed new standards of accountability and transparency, including a new website that publishes wait times at every VA hospital. This is a website that works. This is not the \$5 billion Obamacare website. Do we remember that? Nobody remembers that. Does anybody remember the \$5 billion website? No, I don't think so. We don't have to remember it anymore.

We've implemented same-day mental health services at all 168 VA medical centers, so that the veterans in crisis can find help at the VA, without any delay.

Last week, I signed the Veterans Choice Improvement Act—very proud of that—so that more veterans can see the doctor of their choice, and don't have to travel long distances or wait forever for VA care. They were waiting on lines for seven days, eight days, nine days, two weeks. Some instances were horrible. They we're waiting so long—they had a very curable problem and they died before they got to see the doctor. It's not going to happen any longer.

Already this year, using the Choice Program, veterans have received 42 percent more approvals to see the doctor of their choosing. But that's just the very beginning of what we have planned. So much more is coming.

Today, we're taking another bold step forward. I'm signing an executive order to create an Office of Accountability and Whistle-blower Protection at the Department of Veterans Affairs. This executive order makes it clear that we will never, ever tolerate substandard care for our great veterans. With the creation of this office, we are sending a

strong message: Those who fail our veterans will be held, for the first time, accountable.

At the same time, we will reward and retain the many VA employees who do a fantastic job—of which we have many. And I will tell you, some of the doctors in the VA, I've heard it from so many people, they're the finest in the world. These are great, great people. We have to get our vets to those doctors. But we have some of the finest doctors in the world.

We have also some of the most honest employees, and some of them expose wrongdoing, and we will make sure that they're protected.

We're also calling on the Senate to pass legislation to give the Secretary the authority he needs to ensure all VA employees are held accountable for how they treat our veterans.

Today's action is historic. But it is only the start of our reforms. Our veterans have secured this nation with their blood, sweat and tears, and we will not let them down. These are our great, great people. We will always stand with those who stood for freedom and who stood for us. They protected us. They've made it all possible, and now we're going to protect and take care of them.

So I'd like to thank David and his family, and all of the people that are working so hard at the VA. They haven't had enthusiasm—David was just telling me—like this for many, many years. And the veterans see what's happening—because I'm getting so many different messages through all forms of communication, of which we now have many. But they're very, very happy, very pleased with what's going on.

So, David, we want to God bless you and your family. We want to wish you a lot of luck, with a lot of talent, because you have a big job ahead.

I want to wish everybody Godspeed. And we will do a fantastic job at the VA, rest assured. Thank you very much. And we're going to sign right now. Thank you very much. Thank you. {eoa}