

ENSURING VA'S SECURITY: HOW
CAN CONGRESS BEST SUPPORT
VA'S LAW ENFORCEMENT?

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
INVESTIGATIONS
OF THE
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:03 p.m., in room 390, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jen Kiggans [Chairwoman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Kiggans, Bergman, Rosendale, Luttrell, Mrvan, Pappas, and Cherfilus-McCormick.

OPENING STATEMENT OF JENNIFER A. KIGGANS, CHAIRWOMAN

Ms. KIGGANS. Good afternoon. The subcommittee will come to order. Thank you all for being here today for this oversight hearing on the challenges and needs of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) Police Force and how Congress can support them in fulfilling their critical mission.

Before we proceed further, I ask unanimous consent for Representative Morgan Luttrell to participate in this hearing. This week we celebrate Police Week, and I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight our brave men and women in uniform. VA police do critical work to ensure our Nation's heroes safely receive the care and benefits they have earned. I would like to take a moment to say thank you to the current and former VA police and other first responders who have joined us today. I am excited to welcome Chief Soto and Chief Chester, along with former VA police officer of the year, Mr. Hunt.

The VA police play a vital role in ensuring the safety and security of VA facilities, employees, and the veterans they serve. In fact, many VA police are veterans themselves. The stakes are high, and VA police face unique challenges that make it hard for them to carry out their duties. VA police are often in dangerous and difficult situations. It is essential they receive the training and support necessary to handle these situations safely and effectively. As Senate Veterans Affairs Ranking Member Moran pointed out in a recent letter, Congress must explore ways to enhance training programs for VA police officers and put the pressure on the VA to provide them with tools and resources needed to protect themselves and others. VA police are often the only individuals equipped to

help a veteran who enters the facility with the intent of taking their own life. Suicide prevention training is paramount for all police officers and is required by law, but recent data shows it has not, so far, been a priority of the Department. Another issue facing the VA police is the need for improved coordination and communication with other law enforcement agencies. The VA police, often in emergency situations, work alongside other Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies, and it is crucial that they have effective communication channels in place to coordinate their efforts and respond to emergencies quickly.

Today, I hope to learn more about the technologies and best practices that could help reduce these communication challenges. On top of these issues, VA police have constant issues with recruitment. Through the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, Congress authorized critical skills incentive payments, which can help VA police with staffing shortages due to pay. Congress, however, must continue to work with VA to address staffing shortages and ensure VA police have the resources they need to fulfill their mission.

VA police play a vital role in ensuring the safety and security of VA facilities and the veterans they serve. As such, Congress must make sure VA police have the tools they need to carry out their critical mission. Thank you again for being here today, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on how we can best support the VA police force.

With that, I now recognize Ranking Member Mrvan for his opening comments.

OPENING STATEMENT OF FRANK J. MRVAN, RANKING MEMBER

Mr. MRVAN. Thank you, Chair Kiggans. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the issues impacting our VA police officers and other essential security staff. This hearing is very timely considering it is National Police Week.

I want to start by thanking those first responders, active and retired, that are here today. Thank you for your dedication to keeping our veterans, caregivers, and VA staff safe day in and day out. The VA police have an important duty and great responsibility in protecting veterans and the VA providers. They also play a key role in ensuring VA facilities are a welcoming community for every veteran, a community many belong to themselves. Nearly 90 percent of VA police are veterans.

This committee has led several hearings and roundtables in recent years to discuss the challenges facing the VA police force. However, it is long overdue that Congress takes the feedback we have received and creates solutions. For example, over half of the medical facilities surveyed in Fiscal Year 2023 by VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) reported a severe police shortage, that is 73 facilities. These significant shortages have persisted since at least Fiscal Year 2018 and partially driven by disparities in officer pay and benefits. Based on exit survey data from 2021 and 2022, nearly 30 percent of respondents departed the VA police service due to pay and benefit issues.

Today, our VA police force, our police officers, are still not treated equitably with their other Federal law enforcement counterparts. The bipartisan H.R. 1322, the Law Enforcement Officers Equity Act, take steps toward creating that equity. In granting these dedicated Federal employees their earned retirement benefits, VA stands to create a significant gap in institutional knowledge and expertise at the hands of resolvable issues like pay and benefits. That is extremely distressing considering our veterans and VA providers rely on adequate security in order to access care and perform their responsibilities.

I urge my colleagues in the Committee on Oversight and Accountability to work with me to advance this bill. Further, oversight performed by the Government Accountability Office and VA's Office of Inspector General have identified serious deficiencies in risk management efforts and actual physical security outcomes. Both entities have indicated that the VA lacks a comprehensive security strategy.

VA also has a convoluted and decentralized governance structure. This has led to a lack of understanding of what is required of both frontline workers and security administrators. VA has reportedly begun the process to develop these documents, but we have not yet received an update or plans of implementation. Recent events, such as the tragedies in Atlanta and Kansas City, underscore the need for increased attention to policies, regulations, and trainings so we can strengthen VA security.

I am extremely concerned about the reports that only one third of VA police have completed their required suicide prevention training. This Congress, this subcommittee has considered legislative proposals to update weapons detection technology at VA facilities across the enterprise. I have been and continue to be supportive of the efforts to create a safer VA. However, I believe these proposals must be driven first and foremost by veterans and what they need to help them feel safe at VA facilities.

We should also ensure that veterans feel that they can access their care with ease. We need to work with VA providers and security personnel to understand what solutions will empower them to perform their job fully and safely. Finally, we must study and incorporate best practices into VA security strategies.

I look forward to hearing from the healthcare providers, the organizations here today on these efforts. This week, we learned that VA has taken steps to start piloting this technology at VA medical centers across the country. While I support VA taking proactive steps to improve safety and security at its facilities, I am concerned that this is the first time we are hearing about this pilot. To my knowledge, VA has not yet brought veterans along with this change either. I look forward to sitting down with Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) to hear what veterans want and need to make them feel safer at all VA facilities. I urge the VA to do the same.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, Ranking Member Mrvan. We will now turn to witness testimony. Testifying before us today on our first panel, we have, from the VA, Mr. Alfred Montoya, the Deputy Assistant Undersecretary for Health Operations at the VA. We have Mr. Troy Brown, Senior Security Officer at the VA. We have Ms.

Brandy Soto, the Chief of Police, Little Rock Veteran Affairs Medical Center. Mr. George Chester, Chief of Police, Detroit, Michigan Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). From the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the 2012 VA Police Officer of the Year, Mr. Bryan Hunt, AFGE President Local 2384.

[Witnesses sworn.]

Ms. KIGGANS. Let the record reflect that the witnesses answered in the affirmative. You may be seated. Mr. Montoya, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to provide your testimony.

STATEMENT OF ALFRED MONTOKA

Mr. MONTOKA. Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to join you during National Police Week to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs law enforcement and how Congress can best support VA personnel in their efforts to serve and protect our veterans, employees, and visitors on VA property. Your past support has been imperative in ensuring we accomplish our mission, and we look forward to continuing that close collaboration.

I am joined today by Chiefs Troy Brown, VA's Senior Security Officer; Brandy Soto of Little Rock, Arkansas; George Chester of Detroit, Michigan. I would also like to recognize Chief Troy Covington of Martinsburg, West Virginia and Major Mark Moran, a physical security specialist, who are seated behind me.

The VA police force is crucial in securing VA facilities through specialized law enforcement. Its role is multifaceted, encompassing law enforcement, security, and public safety responsibilities across VA medical centers, regional offices, and other facilities nationwide. Officers Jason Ledbetter and Chief Gene Parker at the Kansas City, VA exemplify that role. Without hesitation, they put themselves directly in harm's way to safely disarm a veteran with a loaded pistol, his finger on the trigger, the hammer cocked. Because of their quick action, professionalism, and compassion, they got that veteran to surrender, and he was later admitted to receive the mental health care he needed.

Our officers are highly trained to handle various situations, from patrols and emergency responses to crisis intervention, while prioritizing the needs of veterans. We strive for open, secure facilities while balancing visitor access, threats, policies, and standards. Adequate security requires planning to protect people, resources, and property, prevent theft, and use aids like security screenings and body cameras.

The Federal Law Enforcement Accreditation Board certifies the VA's Law Enforcement Training Center (LETC), which offers a variety of courses for students and staff. VA has also partnered with law enforcement agencies and other government organizations, including the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Commerce, the Army, the Navy, and the Bureau of Prisons.

Each of our officers is also proudly outfitted with body cameras, which protect the rights and well beings of veterans and staff members and foster a culture of trust and professionalism within the VA community. By capturing critical incidents and interactions. These cameras provide valuable insights that can inform training,

policies, and decision-making processes, ultimately ensuring a safer and more secure environment for all individuals at VA facilities.

VA police faces challenges in recruiting qualified law enforcement candidates due to competition and negative perceptions. To address this, VA has a dedicated recruiting team that uses local initiatives, virtual events, and marketing campaigns to position itself as an employer of choice. Ensuring competitive pay to attract and retain qualified personnel is challenging, as discrepancies between agencies or regions can lead to retention issues. Federal law enforcement follows the general schedule, or GS pay scale, with entry level officers beginning at grades five or six and more experienced and supervisory staff at higher grades.

Officers can progress through pay steps within their grade and locality pay and availability pay apply as appropriate.

Pay parity and equity are crucial. Regular market analyses and salary surveys can align compensation with industry standards. Fiscal year 2022 saw difficulties in recruitment and retention. VA developed a shortage occupation blueprint for VA police to maximize incentives and implement referral programs. The number of VA police officers—the number of police officers in VA rather, increased by 7.4 percent in Fiscal Year 2023 and 5.1 percent in Fiscal Year 2024. Currently, there are 4,254 officers on the force. The retention efforts in Fiscal Year 2024 show a positive trend with losses being 20 percent less than in Fiscal Year 2023 and 25 percent less than in Fiscal Year 2022.

Our informed and intentional retention efforts have directly impacted hundreds of officers' decisions to remain in the VA police force, such as Officers Kara Morton, Timothy Stanton, Jerome Bell, and Gwendolyn Smith at the Durham VA Medical Center. These extraordinary officers answered the call of a terrified veteran's wife whose husband, a veteran in crisis, had overdosed in their car while sitting in a parking garage. They saved that veteran's life thanks to their compassion and quick action. Their actions exemplified the VA police force's commitment to ensuring a safe and secure environment for veterans, employees, and visitors alike.

In closing, VA is firmly committed to enhancing our capabilities through ongoing training, modernization, and resource allocation. The proposed Fiscal Year 2025 budget will support these efforts and enable us to attract the best talent, invest in technology, and foster stronger partnerships.

Thank you for allowing me to be here today. My team and I look forward to responding to your questions.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF ALFRED MONTOKA APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, Mr. Montoya. Mr. Hunt, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to provide your testimony.

STATEMENT OF BRYAN HUNT

Mr. HUNT. Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting AFGE to participate in today's hearing. My name is Bryan Hunt and I serve as the President of AFGE Local 2384 at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg, West Virginia. I am a U.S. Army

combat veteran who proudly served our country during Operation Iraqi Freedom in the global war on terrorism.

I am a service connected veteran who both works and receives my health care at the VA. Additionally, for 12 of my 17 years at the VA, I served as a VA police officer, including being named VA police officer of the year in 2012.

On behalf of AFGE and its National Veterans Affairs Council, representing 304,000 VA employees, it is a privilege to testify today. Specifically, I plan to focus my testimony on the approximately 2500 VA police officers AFGE represents, 90 percent of whom are veterans themselves. AFGE has several recommendations for the subcommittee that can help the VA with recruitment and retention for VA police and help it better serve veterans.

The single most effective action that Congress can take to help with the recruitment and retention of the VA police force is to extend law enforcement officer or LEO status to VA police. The current definition of a law enforcement officer relied upon in us code for LEO retirement does not include VA police. In turn, VA police do not receive retirement benefits on par with Federal law enforcement officers at other agencies.

AFGE strongly supports H.R. 1322, the Law Enforcement Officers Equity Act, which would grant these benefits to VA police. This bipartisan bill currently has 83 cosponsors, including Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, Ranking Member Mrvan, Representative Pappas, and five other committee members. Providing full LEO status to VA police would significantly help the VA police with recruitment and retention.

Currently, the VA hires new recruits, sends them to the VA Law Enforcement Training Center, and then sees these officers depart the VA for police positions with other agencies that do have these benefits or to State or local departments.

Granting full LEO status to VA police will diminish this turnover, help the VA maintain a stronger and better trained police department with higher morale. Additionally, it is important to note that at a hearing before the subcommittee a year ago, Tracey Therit, VA's Chief Human Capital Officer, stated the VA very much supports the Law Enforcement Officer Equity Act.

Speaking from my own experience, after serving 12 years with the VA police, I reluctantly took another position at my VA medical center. This position offered higher pay and room for advancement. To be frank, if the VA police received LEO benefits, I would not have left my position. I would still be a VA police officer today, protecting my fellow veterans.

The VA police have a mission to protect those who served and I am proud to have been a part of that mission. The VA needs to recruit and retain a young and viable police force where future officers are not faced with a difficult decision that I had to make for me and my family. I urge members of this committee to cosponsor H.R. 1322 and support its passage.

Next, the VA needs to improve the staffing levels of VA police to address documented severe shortages. To address this, VA has created GS-7 senior police officer positions and AFGE urges VA to continue to improve upward mobility. Furthermore, AFGE also supports changing statute to allow Federal police officers to ad-

vance from GS-7 to GS-9 without a year as a GS-8, which is currently required.

AFGE is also concerned about the broad discretion local facility management has in its police department budget. AFGE has heard reports that some directors are intentionally characterizing their facilities in ways that justify having a police force, a smaller police force than what is required. We urge the VA to enforce its staffing models consistently.

Furthermore, AFGE wants to highlight that VA police are funded from the same budgets as other medical center personnel. Medical center directors are forced to choose between hiring medical professionals or police officers. AFGE believes the committee and VA should consider a dedicated funding source for VA police to ensure that veterans protection is not a second tier funding priority.

Finally, one of the key strengths of the VA police is the level of training officers must undergo to serve the veteran population, including crisis intervention training. This training is an extremely important and specialized investment that is intended to save lives. However, the high attrition rates of VA police who undergo this training puts an added strain on the VA resources when considering cost of training. This is exemplified by the LETC charging over \$14,000 for a VA police officer standard training course taken out of the medical center's budget and does not include the crisis intervention training required by VA Veterans Comprehensive Prevention, Access to Care, and Treatment (COMPACT) Act.

AFGE urges the committee to study how much VA spends on training, as well as a breakdown of costs for officers who leave shortly after receiving training. Additionally, the VA should calculate how it can save money by providing LEO benefits and improved use of special salary rates and retention bonuses. Improving retention would reduce the need for the VA to repeatedly provide training to new officers who are back-filling positions due to poor retention. AFGE looks forward to working with the subcommittee to improve the recruitment, retention and morale of the VA police.

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF BRYAN HUNT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, Mr. Hunt. We will now move to questions, and I yield myself 5 minutes. Chief Soto, I am glad to hear there has been a small uptick in VA police officers nationwide. Have the VA's efforts helped with recruitment and retention in Little Rock?

Ms. SOTO. Thank you for that question, madam. Our recruitment efforts have definitely improved in Little Rock with our efforts to be able to offer the relocation incentives, the recruitment incentives, the benefit of having a CSI option has definitely improved us as well. We go out and we market and search for those great candidates to be able to come and join our police force. Short answer, yes, ma'am, they have.

The retention is a problem when it comes to them—being here in Little Rock, we have to offer more of a better benefit to be able to keep them in our ranks as opposed to them jumping to Little Rock Department or North Little Rock Department or a civil or

Federal agency. Part of the argument that Mr. Hunt, I definitely appreciate that, and what Ranking Member Mrvan specified when it comes to retention and retirement. That is a very, very important tool that we need to be able to keep them on board as well as training, giving them their training. It is a benefit for us in Little Rock because we have LETC, the Law Enforcement Training Center right next door. We offer we are able to give them our—with the support from our Medical Center Director, we are able to give them the opportunities to go and have—be trained at the Law Enforcement Training Center.

Ms. KIGGANS. Is the VA police force having the same problems as our civilian police forces have, where they are kind of robbing or trading with each other for positions? Are you in the mix?

Ms. SOTO. Yes, ma'am. We usually say we steal from Peter to pay Paul. We definitely use that analogy. I have lost several good officers to our local civilian law enforcement. I have lost several good officers to the Parks Department, you know, different types of Federal agencies because they are well trained. They are very experienced. In Little Rock, I have a dual campus, so they are able to get that experience under their belt. Then they get advertised out and they go and improve their work-life balance in a different agency.

Ms. KIGGANS. We just do not have enough. Chief Chester, along those same lines, how about in Detroit? What have you been seeing?

Mr. CHESTER. Yes, ma'am. Thank you. Thing is that we have had a chance to improve our recruitment because of the special salary rate (SSR). Compared to Detroit Police Department that received a raise, we were able to look at our SSR, get an increase in our SSR to retain some of our officers. Because prior to that, I did lose some of my officers to go to other police agencies within our community.

Ms. KIGGANS. Okay, good. Mr. Hunt, congrats, first of all, on being honored as VA police officer of the year. We are happy to have you here. I am glad you are still working at the VA. I am sure the VA police would have loved to have kept you. I know you talked a little bit about some of the things that, the reasons you left and the law enforcement officer's status, and some of the benefits and perhaps better pay and career growth opportunities for you.

What would you say is the number one reform needed to keep quality police officers like yourself in the police force?

Mr. HUNT. Thank you for the question, Congresswoman. I would say the single most are the 6(c) LEO benefits. We just cannot, the VA can just not compete with other Federal agencies. When these officers get on with the VA, they realize that, frankly, they are getting a raw deal, because they can go to every Federal agency and get these benefits and they start shopping around.

Ms. KIGGANS. We will work on that. Then how about, Mr. Brown? Before my Senate colleagues engaged you about compliance with the Compact Act and its required suicide prevention training, it is my understanding that a large majority of VA police officers lacked the necessary training. What are you doing to rectify this and make sure they get that important training?

Mr. BROWN. Madam, Chairwoman, thank you for the question. Recently, we redesigned our training modules for crisis intervention training. We have posted it on a SharePoint, our talent management system, in order for us to better aggregate the data and be able to provide that data. We do believe that our data was low when we initially responded to those questions. However, we had to develop ways to make sure we can collect that data and provide accurate information.

We have a series of different things that are happening where we are requiring the Medical Center Directors and Network Directors to respond in attestation that they have ensured that that training has been completed. Those, those responses are due early June. We have a requirement for all training for not only the 0083 police officer, the 4,200 that Mr. Al Montoya quoted, but all 6,000 employees, including the Chiefs, the Deputy Chiefs and the supervisory ranks. We anticipate for that training to be completed before the end of the fiscal year. It requires an interactive, interactive exercise with our community law enforcement and our community partners, social work and mental health. While many police officers have completed the training, the modules, they are coordinating the effort to get the community engagement interactive exercise completed as well.

Ms. KIGGANS. Who actually conducts that training?

Mr. BROWN. It will be the police officers, our mental health partners, our social work partners, along with the community partners in the same occupational series or occupation as in law enforcement, mental health, and social work as well.

Ms. KIGGANS. Part of it includes the simulation, right?

Mr. BROWN. Yes, ma'am. Tabletop simulations, coordination. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. KIGGANS. Do you feel like the training is effective?

Mr. BROWN. Yes. The training is in addition to what we are leaning toward in a full effort, which is having each police officer certified in crisis intervention through Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) International. That is a larger accomplishment that we need to work to achieve.

Meanwhile, while we are working toward the industry standard of crisis intervention training, certification and/or instructors, we have the CIT training modules that we have vetted through CIT International. It includes behavioral health, suicide prevention, deflection training, de-escalation training. Every police officer who attends the Law Enforcement Training Center as a new incumbent has to complete that training. Every police officer will receive that training annually, and we will also push toward the certifications and instructor certifications as well.

Ms. KIGGANS. Good. Thank you very much for that answer. Now I will yield 5 minutes to Ranking Member Mrvan.

Mr. MRVAN. Thank you, Chairwoman. Mr. Montoya, the VA data indicated that the average vacancy rate across the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) for the department police officer is about 31 percent. How does that compare to other occupational series across the VA?

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes, Ranking Member Mrvan, thank you for that question. You know, I think when we look at the vacancy rate for

our police officers, this is one where it is trending in the right direction. Right now, we are actually seeing that at about 22.1 percent. As far as how it compares to other occupations, I will have to take that one back to the record to be able to provide to the committee.

One thing, though, that I am very proud about right now is that this last quarter, our quit rate amongst VA police officers is at about 1.2 percent. I think we are really on track to having that quit rate be less than 6 percent if we keep along those lines, which last year that quit rate was just about 8 percent.

Mr. MRVAN. Then to follow up, what has the VA learned from the exit surveys from departing police officers? Are there any trends in terms of reason why police officers are leaving VA?

Mr. MONTROYA. Yes, so that is, again, an excellent question. I think I will turn back to my previous experience as a Medical Center Director, where I actually met with police officers as they were deciding to leave Federal service really asked them, why. Why, you know, with a mission such as the VA, why would you leave? Many times, it was based on pay. It was based on opportunities related to pay. For those specific exit survey questions, I would actually like to turn to Chief Brown, who I think could answer that.

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir. Ranking Member Mrvan, what we noticed in 2018 when assuming this position as a new role in VA, we realized that we needed to modernize the police force. In old Marine Corps terminology, we thought that it would be best to tear the current system down to the ground and restart.

What we created was a modernization effort for each police officer to be able to grow from a GS-5, for the lower level, those who had minimum experience, to a GS-15, as well as having varying pathways in different directions between training, physical security, criminal investigations, and operations, to give them an opportunity to use a path in their experience and what they desire to grow within the organization.

What we are learning is that that created an opportunity for them. People are retained. We are able to send police officers to training outside of the Law Enforcement Training Center. We have a new partnership with the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, as well, in FLETC.

We have a partnership with U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) for our SkillBridge program, where we go into the military within the 6-months of a military personnel Expiration Term of Service (ETS) and recruit and retain them into the police department. We actually send them to a place that they desire to live, and we place them in an area that they want to live in with their family. It is a transition and military SkillBridge program that we are instituting.

We are doing many things to be attractive, moving toward 21st century law enforcement. We are building the ecosystem around the troops, having those resources that they desire. We are moving in toward energy weapons. We want to make sure that they understand the decision they have to make before they send the bullet downrange. We want to make sure that we have industry standard training available for the troops and be able to provide those re-

sources for them so they can want to stay, and they want to grow within the VA system.

Mr. MRVAN. Mr. Hunt, thank you for sharing your experience with the committee, and thank you for your service to the VA. We greatly appreciate you being here today. Can you share again why you decided to leave the VA police force?

Mr. HUNT. Thank you for the question, Congressman. Yes, basically I was taking stock of my career. I would been at the VA for 12 years. I enjoyed being a VA police officer. It is, I will say, it is an honorable mission.

As I was taking into account the type of job, the things, the requirements, what you are putting—the nature of the work, and you realize that your pay and benefits are the same as the other employees. Outside, at that time, outside the VA police, there was a more opportunity for advancement to move up in your career. That opportunity was not there. I made the decision that based on that, to move on.

I did not want to leave the VA. As a veteran, I love working in the VA and serving veterans, so I tried to stay within the VA, but I had to move out of the police service in order to advance my career.

Mr. MRVAN. If I could, the H.R. 1322, the Law Enforcement Officers Equity Act, which I am proud to be a cosponsor, expands the definition of Federal law enforcement officer to include VA police officers. This would finally correct the inequity between the VA and the Federal law enforcement personnel with their retirement benefits. Can you speak to how this legislation may help retention, the retention of the VA police officers?

Mr. HUNT. Yes. Thank you for the question, Congressman. Yes, as I stated earlier, we bring high-quality officers on. We put them through this excellent training. The new officers, sometimes they do not know these 6(c) benefits exist, or maybe new to the Federal police force. They get on VA police, we train them, we season them, and then they come to realize, it is there, that they are kind of getting a raw deal because their other Federal officer counterparts are receiving these other benefits that they do not. Then they begin looking to those agencies.

Mr. MRVAN. Thank you very much. With that, I yield back.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you. The Chair now yields 5 minutes to General Bergman.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman. A perfect week, since it is National Police Week, to have all of you in here. I know there must be at least one Marine in the crowd because you referenced the Marine Corps. How many military? All Marines, Navy, Army, Air Force. All right. No space, no space cadets in there yet right? Oh, space guardians. I am sorry.

All right, well, you know, thanks to all of you and your understanding of security beyond the level of what you are doing now, because you got some good training in your respective services and the responsibility for 400,000 VA employees and roughly 7 million annual patients. I am not going to be parochial on this, but I want to use as an example lower Michigan. Chief Chester, you have got, you are Dingell. Yes? Or are you at Ann Arbor?

Mr. CHESTER. Detroit, sir. John D. Dingell.

Mr. BERGMAN. Dingell. Okay, so you are at Dingell, you are downtown Detroit. We have got Ann Arbor VA. We got Battle Creek. We got Saginaw in the lower peninsula. Okay. We will not even talk about Iron Mountain because, you know, that is a long distance.

When it comes to your ability to recruit and more importantly, retain, let us assume for the sake of discussion here that you get a good police officer who, let us say they are a Dingell and they want to move. They want to go up to Saginaw or they want to go to Battle Creek or they want to go west. Is it, do they have the, do you have the ability to transfer people? Is there a program that exists? Again, this is more about retention than it is anybody else. I mean, is that a real thing? Or do we need to consider making it a real thing? Or how does that help you?

Mr. CHESTER. Yes, sir. That is a real thing. We do have officers that transfer. It is if I have a vacancy, I will post it. Thing is, is that they can apply or we do have a direct hire where we can do direct hires where that person can reach out to us and submit their resume. I can look at it and then from there it is submitted to HR is where they do resume review. If they meet the criteria, they can transfer to our facility. I am not sure if Mr. Montoya has something else that he would like to add.

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes, sir. General Bergman, it is always good to see you. We do have those authorities in place right now to be able to move officers, should they wish to, from facility to facility across VA.

Mr. BERGMAN. When you do that and when you talk about standardization of training, standardization of procedures. If they went from, let us say, Dingell to Ann Arbor to Saginaw to Battle Creek, using that example, would they see the same Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)?

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes, so they generally would see the same SOPs. I think what is great about this example that you are using, as well, is that the organizational structure from VA police to VA police department is the same. Right. That is a standardized approach that Chief Brown was able to roll out and really push across all VA police departments across the country.

Mr. BERGMAN. How do we then, if we can transfer within and you have got your, if you will, your career force, are we able to be—where are the limiting factors in VA police force being competitive when, let us say, Detroit Police or Ann Arbor Police or, you know, Saginaw Police, or Battle Creek Police to, you know, keep going down that road? Are we competing? Are we losing people to those police departments?

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes, sir. As we are—thing is that we do lose people to those police agencies because part of the issue is just say, for instance, with a Detroit Police Department, they go from a starting entry pay to top pay within 5 years. With us there is the steps where it takes almost 18 years to get to a step 10. That is part of the issue also. Like we may have a new officer that comes on before he reached top pay to a GS-6, step 10 is 18 years. For a Detroit Police Officer, for him to go from entry level to top pay is 5 years.

That is part of the issue. That is why we are losing some of our police officers that come on board. They get well trained, they are highly marketable, but then they go to some other agencies where they can reach top pay in 5 years.

Mr. BERGMAN. Okay, well, thank you. I see my time is about up. I think we may have an opportunity in using the four examples of the VA hospitals to do, kind of, a comparison with recruiting and retention when it comes to competing with the other law enforcement agencies. With that, thank you again for all you do and still doing it with a smile on your face and helping those vets.

I yield back.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, General Bergman. The Chair now yields 5 minutes to Mr. Pappas.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks very much, Madam Chair. It is good to see you all here. Thank you all for your service and for what you do for veterans each and every day. Mr. Montoya, thanks for your testimony here. I have to say, you still have a lot of fans in New Hampshire. We are grateful for the job that you did at the Manchester VA, and I think you have a unique perspective here to offer, and it came out in that last exchange, just as someone who has been a Medical Center Director who has worked with a variety of different personnel at VA, including our police forces, and so we appreciate your contributions to this discussion.

Mr. Hunt, maybe I could turn to you, and I think what you provided the Committee was perhaps one of the best examples of just testimony on the unique role of the VA police force. I am wondering if you could chat a little bit more with us about the training that prepares recruits to come into this unique situation. Do you feel that it is adequate and are there any other tools that Congress can help provide, as we think specifically about the issue of veteran suicide to help equip our VA police officers what they see each and every day?

Mr. HUNT. Thank you for the question, Congressman. Yes. The thing that comes to mind for me are mental hygiene hold orders. Those vary by state. In West Virginia, for example, where I worked, if there was a suicidal veteran, and the staff reports to me as a police officer or even other staff, hey, this veteran, he is threatening suicide. He is leaving, he is walking out the door. I do not have the, as a VA police officer or any police officer really in West Virginia, have the authority to stop him from leaving, and neither do the staff. In West Virginia specifically, it requires a mental hygiene order from a mental hygiene commissioner. Once that is issued, then we can go intervene with the veteran. At that point, there may have been—a tragedy may have taken place.

If there was some type of legislation that the VA could use VA wide, how to handle, you know, hold orders for suicidal veterans, I think that would be a great tool for the veterans, the police, and the staff.

Mr. PAPPAS. I appreciate that. You mentioned in your testimony the expense of sending new officers to the Law Enforcement Training Center. You know, that is a cost and an investment that is lost if an officer leaves, say, within the first few weeks or first few months of their service. I am wondering if it is reasonable to believe that other investments, like in retirement benefits, some of

the other provisions that you mentioned in your testimony are smart with respect to the retention issue that we are struggling with?

Mr. HUNT. Thank you for the question, Congressman. Yes, I would—the short answer is yes. Higher retention rate equals less money being spent on training. I said earlier that money comes from the VA medical center's budget. The higher the retention at the hospital, the more money the hospital has to spend out of its own budget to send the police officers to be trained. Yes, in my opinion, yes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Yes. Mr. Montoya, I do not know if you want to reflect on that at all, in terms of where we stand with retention, in particular. Have we seen any progress being made in terms of the statistics the last few years?

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes. Congressman Pappas, it is also good to see you. It has been a long time, but certainly enjoyed my time there up in New Hampshire. In my oral testimony, I mentioned, referenced our retention efforts and the work that has happened so far. I actually think that we have been doing quite a good job since 2022. When we think back to 2022, it was a hard recruitment and retention time for VA police officers.

Thanks to Troy Brown and the Chiefs all coming together, doing the Blueprint for VA police. It really allowed us to bring forward those tools that we needed to decrease the retention. What we have now is 7.4 percent. Our police officers increased by 7.4 percent in Fiscal Year 2023, 5.1 percent in Fiscal Year 2024. When we look at retention in Fiscal Year 2024, it showed a positive trend, with losses being 20 percent less than Fiscal Year 2023. Now, compare that to 2022, and it is actually 25 percent less. It definitely shows that the Blueprint that has been created along with the recruitment retention tools is definitely making an impact.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thanks for that. I hope you would also agree that some of the other provisions that Mr. Hunt talked about, some of the legislation that is pending, could also move the needle with respect to recruitment and retention.

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes. The way I look at it, both in my role now and in my previous role as a Medical Center Director, is that you have to use all the tools in your toolbox to be able to recruit and retain your staff. Whether that be the special incentives or retention or special salary rates, certainly everything that we have available is what we are throwing at the retention issues and recruitment issues that we have. Certainly anything extra would help toward that retention.

Mr. PAPPAS. Well, thanks very much. Mr. Brown, you had mentioned about some responses that were due in June. I know I am out of time now, but just to highlight that, I would certainly be interested in seeing that, along with the other subcommittee members here.

Mr. BROWN. Yes, Congressman.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thanks very much. I yield back.

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you. The Chair now yields 5 minutes to Mr. Luttrell.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Mr. Chester and Ms. Soto, Chiefs of Police at your medical facilities, you are the senior officers at those places, correct?

Ms. SOTO. Yes, sir.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Who is your touchpoint when you go up into the organization at Veterans Affairs? Would that be Mr. Brown?

Ms. SOTO. You go through our VISN Chiefs and it ultimately goes to Mr. Brown.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Mr. Brown, you are the ultimate touchpoint in Veterans Affairs?

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Do you communicate down and inside the organizations at every single VA facility across the country?

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir. Absolutely.

Mr. LUTTRELL. We have out of 1300 or, excuse me, 4500 officers across the country. Roughly 1300 completed the suicide prevention awareness training?

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir.

Mr. LUTTRELL. When we talk about crisis intervention that they have to perform annually—

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir.

Mr. LUTTRELL [continuing]. do you have the numbers with you on how many officers have completed the crisis intervention program to date?

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir. As I mentioned earlier, every VA police officer and new incumbent has to complete the CIT training during the POST course, the police officer standardized training course.

Mr. LUTTRELL. If they do it annually, so they have to do it every single year. Even the current police officers?

Mr. BROWN. Current police officers, the number is, the hard number is 1295, which we responded to. Also, we had just recently—

Mr. LUTTRELL. 1295 for suicide prevention. Is crisis intervention and suicide prevention the same thing?

Mr. BROWN. It is included in the module, sir. Yes, sir. Our behavioral health sciences and suicide prevention is all combined inside of our Law Enforcement Training Center training during that police officer training certification. It is a 400-hour certification course to become a police officer.

Mr. LUTTRELL. At the VA facility that I am—that is in my district, I get a lot of feedback from my veterans about red-flag laws—

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir.

Mr. LUTTRELL [continuing]. inside the VA. Who is responsible for creating the red-flag laws that exist inside the VA in each individual medical center? Mr. Montoya.

Mr. MONTOYA. Yes, sir. I will have to take that question for the record and come back to you.

Mr. LUTTRELL. We do not have a name for this specific—

Mr. MONTOYA. I actually do not know who creates the red-flag, sir. I know exactly what you are talking about in medical records, but I do not know the person that does that.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Okay. I see this and I, in absolute respect, in your services and thank you for both sides, military and now, and I can

only imagine the complexities of everything that you deal with every single day.

When I see the numbers of the absence of training when it comes to crisis intervention and you are dealing with a veteran in distress. Okay? These red-flag laws, and I have been trying to get to the bottom of them myself and I want to talk to the person directly responsible for creating those regulations. Okay, Mr. Montoya, if you can give me that answer, I would really appreciate it, because I see a systemic—I do not know if it is systemic, but I see a problem in my area that the red-flag law seems to be once they are hung, they are never unhung. I have veterans that are sometimes in duress when they are engaging in the veteran community, in the VA facility. Obviously, the ones that they are going to engage with are the officers. If the officers are not completely trained up on crisis intervention, are they engaging with those veterans correctly? That is a problem, and I want to make sure that that problem goes away. Does that make sense?

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes, it totally makes sense, sir. We certainly will come back to you with the information you requested.

Mr. LUTTRELL. I would love to have an answer next week, if you do not mind, because I can assure you—

Mr. MONTOKA. I will try—

Mr. LUTTRELL. When I go home—every time I go home—I can promise you I have some wonderful individuals in my district that make sure that this is the one thing that I am engaging with as a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and I want to get to the bottom of this so I can answer their question thoroughly.

Mr. MONTOKA. Absolutely.

Mr. LUTTRELL. If this is—if the—if the red-flag is something that, if we do not have a sound, concrete answer on exactly what—how this is playing out and it is different in every facility, that is a bad thing. Okay?

Mr. MONTOKA. Yes. I will tell you, I am going to put on my hat as a former Medical Center Director. I do recall, actually, at all the medical centers that I was at, that there was a disruptive behavior committee (DBC). All of the instances that come up from a veteran that may have a potential flag or does have a flag goes through that DBC is what it is called, that has clinicians on it, providers on that, and they make that decision based on all of the information that they have in that veteran's—

Mr. LUTTRELL. A single red flag can last 2 years. Correct?

Mr. MONTOKA. It actually can be removed from the record. The process to be able to do that is to go back through that disruptive behavior committee, to be able to have them look at it again to make sure that there is not a threat.

Mr. LUTTRELL. Okay. Madam Chair, I yield back. Thank you.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, Mr. Luttrell. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Rosendale for 5 minutes.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you all for coming in today. Really do appreciate it. I am proud to support law enforcement and believe that the VA law enforcement plays an essential role in ensuring the security of veterans and the VA facilities. We have seen a troubling increase in crime at VA facilities. Despite the number of veterans frequenting VA facilities

having gone down due to telehealth and care in the community. Policing is a hard job that requires courage, strength, and grit. I have seen firsthand the important work that police officers in Montana and across the country do to make our community safer.

Additionally, we must ensure that police officers' Second Amendment rights are not being infringed upon when they receive health care at the VA facilities. I am working on legislation that would bolster the Second Amendment rights of all citizens at the VA, whether they be private citizens or law enforcement, as a direct result of requests from patients that are currently attending there. They think that their rights are being infringed upon, and we have recognized that they actually have been. There is those who would try to make it even more difficult for the patients to be able to feel comfortable in exercising their Second Amendment rights.

Mr. Brown, the testimony that you provided mentioned negative media coverage and public sentiment toward law enforcement can deter individuals from pursuing careers in policing. Mr. Montoya also stated negative perception, just said, negative perception, as a major hurdle in maintaining an adequate law enforcement presence at the VA. I am sure that this also contributes to the 8 percent quit rate that you also referenced.

I have just got a couple of simple questions for you, Mr. Brown. Do you think rhetoric calling for defunding the police harms recruitment?

Mr. BROWN. The word defunding seems harmful. There is a misunderstanding—

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Do you think that saying, and I quote, "law enforcement does not protect or save lives, they often threaten and take them?"

Mr. BROWN. I do not agree.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Harms recruiting?

Mr. BROWN. Can you repeat the question?

Mr. ROSENDALE. Do you think that someone saying law enforcement does not protect or save lives, they often threaten and take them. Do you think that that statement harms recruiting?

Mr. BROWN. It does.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. Do you think saying policing in our country is inherently and intentionally racist, harms recruiting efforts?

Mr. BROWN. Absolutely.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Do you think district attorneys deciding not to prosecute armed robberies and allowing violent criminals to remain on the street harms recruiting?

Mr. BROWN. Absolutely.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Okay. I really appreciate that. Would you also agree that it is reprehensible that these are all quotes and actions that have been taken by prominent Democrat politicians in the past few years?

Mr. BROWN. I would agree with politicians.

Mr. ROSENDALE. We should be praising law enforcement, not tearing them down. Mr. Brown, I have heard several complaints that when VA Medical Centers spend tens of thousands of dollars to send new officers to Law Enforcement Training Center in Arkansas, if they do return to the same Medical Center, the VA Medical Center, at all, they are often dejected and looking for another op-

portunity. Do you think that law enforcement training center is somewhat responsible for VA's abysmal retention stats?

Mr. BROWN. I would like to respond. Thank you for the question. We have recently looked at the Law Enforcement Training Center, partnering with them as our educational institution, modify the training institution, in Fiscal Year 2025, we will have them expand their territory from Little Rock to other parts of the country where training is needed. When that team goes out to those areas, we have reduced the amount of expense or cost to the course.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Sure. Do you think that rather than just going out and building a new mousetrap, if you will, that if there is adequate or equal training can be undertaken in other parts of the country that is easier for officers to attend and less costly for the VA Medical Centers to send them to? Should not that be able to be utilized?

Mr. BROWN. Yes, sir. We are on our second pilot as we stand today. In Orlando, the second group of police officers in this pilot would graduate June the 5th.

Mr. ROSENDALE. Good deal. Thank you very much for your answers. Again, thank the committee very much for the panel for coming in today. I yield back, Madam Chair.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, Mr. Rosendale, and thank you so much again to our first panel of witnesses for coming today. I appreciate the candor and your testimony and your willingness to participate. I, just again, a very happy National Police Week to all of you. Thank you so much for your service, not only in the military, but to our veterans. We really appreciate you all being here and taking the time to travel.

I call the committee to a 2-minute recess, and we will prepare for our second panel.

[Recess.]

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you again for our panel for being here today, testifying before us. On our second panel, we have Mr. Kapua Conley, the Regional President of Sentara Healthcare, based out of Hampton, Virginia. Mr. Chuck Dowd, the Vice President of the Public Safety Broadband Technology Association, and Mr. John Retzer, the Assistant National Legislative Director for Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

Will the witnesses please stand and raise their right hand?

[Witnesses sworn.]

Ms. KIGGANS. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to provide is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Thank you. You may be seated. Let the record reflect that the witnesses answered the affirmative.

Mr. Conley, I appreciate you coming here from Hampton Roads. You are now recognized for 5 minutes to provide your testimony.

STATEMENT OF KAPUA CONLEY

Mr. CONLEY. Thank you, Chairwoman Kiggans. Members of the committee, thank you for the privilege of addressing you today on one of Sentara Health's top priorities, the safety of our employees, patients, and all the visitors who walk into our facilities.

My name is Kapua Conley, Regional President for Sentara Health. Sentara is an integrated delivery network with 12 hos-

pitals in the mid Atlantic, a health plan, and more than 30,000 employees. Our largest hospital is a level one trauma center, just miles from Naval Station Norfolk, and we serve many active duty, veterans, and their families.

Keeping our employees, patients and visitors safe is a responsibility we take very seriously. As you will hear from my comments today. From my perspective, security is both a feeling and a reality, and they are not the same. Making our employees and patients feel safe is just as important as keeping them safe. The statistics around workplace safety and healthcare in the healthcare environment are staggering. We know that healthcare workers are 5 times more likely to experience violence compared to those in any other private profession.

Outside of law enforcement, the emergency department (ED) is the second most dangerous workplace. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics found that healthcare workers account for 73 percent of injuries from workplace violence. The threat to nurses, physicians, and other healthcare workers has been on the rise since 2011. Those statistics are a reality on the front lines of healthcare. 64 handguns, 1,204 knives, 158 box cutters, 84 tasers and two machetes. This is an inventory of weapons intercepted at the doors of emergency departments in just two Sentara hospitals within the past year. In total, security personnel have prevented nearly 2,484 weapons from entering Sentara Norfolk General and Sentara Virginia Beach General hospitals during that time. Our security team seeks to first, prevent and deter violence within our facilities. Second, we seek to prevent—we seek to protect our employees, patients and visitors from harm or injury should a violent incident occur.

To prevent and deter violence, Sentara has implemented sophisticated, state-of-the-art concealed weapon detection systems. Over the next 2 years, every hospital will have the system in place. When our Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Dennis Mathis sat down with some of our frontline employees to discuss this initiative, he was concerned about pushback as hospitals are havens of healing. One nurse reminded Dennis that our children walk through metal detectors every day going to school. This is now our new norm.

In addition, Sentara has implemented a visitor management system. This allows us to know who is entering our facility and whether they are authorized to do so, reducing criminal acts and workplace violence. Also, in addition to the thousands of cameras located throughout our hospitals, we have personal duress alarms, and a new emergency notification system to better communicate with our teams and take proactive action. All frontline employees are trained on de-escalation and Sentara's implemented cutting edge active shooter training, including full scale active shooter drill involving all our emergency services community partners.

To ensure the highest level of safety, Sentara recognizes the need to be proactive and not reactive. Each and every member of our team is critical to the safety of all. This responsibility to keep each other safe is ingrained in our culture and built into our daily protocols, training, and technology. Every nurse has a capability and responsibility to flag patient medical records for individuals who exhibit threatening behavior. Our support staff follow the buddy sys-

tem when serving these patients. Security patrols keep a close watch on units with potentially violent patients, and they make sure the flags on our electronic medical records (EMRs) match signage on the units. Patient flags are evaluated every 12 hours and removed if a patient is no longer a threat.

Multidisciplinary core threat assessment teams in each division review all workplace violent incidences, ensure use of protocol—ensure use of flags, analyze trends and root causes, and recommend additional training and protocols to maximize safety. These teams rally on short notice when there is an urgent need for a coordinated and decisive response to potential threats. Our in house security professionals are essential to our strategic approach to safety. Sentara is training an elite team of security office to receive certification by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, and who are implementing video magistrate rooms that permit police and staff to directly link with the magistrate to provide evidence and swear out arrest warrants in real time for a criminal event that has or may occur.

In conclusion, a year-over-year review has showed that we have dramatically decreased workplace violence by 19 percent. This proves that a comprehensive strategic approach toward safety can positively impact the well-being of our employees and our patients that we serve. Again, security is both a feeling and a reality, and they are not the same. This needs to be taken into consideration when we are looking at our own veterans' medical facilities. Sentara stands ready to collaborate and to partner with the VA system on how to best assess, support, and implement best practices in safety and security in these facilities. We have made an investment in safety which has returns beyond a dollar amount. I hope the VA system will do the same.

I am happy to take any questions at the appropriate time.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF KAPUA CONLEY APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you. Mr. Conley, Mr. Dowd, you are now recognized for 5 minutes to provide your testimony.

STATEMENT OF CHUCK DOWD

Mr. DOWD. Thank you, madam chair, ranking member. I am Chuck Dowd. I am a retired assistant chief from the New York City Police Department. I did 34 and a half years there, the last 12 and a half years as I ran the New York City 911 system in all things communications. I am now a part of the Public Safety Broadband Technology Association, which is comprised of the Nation's leading public safety executives and associations, of all professional backgrounds of our leaders. All include extensive experience with the knowledge of technology related to public safety. Our diverse group of executives understand public safety needs and requirements, and most importantly, in the context of this hearing, those related to public safety communications.

In 2012, Congress passed legislation to create a nationwide public safety broadband network that is known as FirstNet, and it exists today. It is run and managed by U.S. Department of Commerce and the—the FirstNet authority, which exists inside Commerce. It has been a tremendous success, in my view. They have close to 6

million members of public safety utilizing the network today, and 26,000 public safety organizations.

Modern technology for communications today, one of the difficulties that we were experiencing during September 11th and those kinds of events was the simple fact that we could not communicate with each other. Interoperability was always problematic. We operated kind of in geographic bubbles where we could interoperate. Ultimately, you know, when—when you went beyond that bubble, there was no capability of communications. It is been well documented the difficulties during September 11th between the police department and the fire department unable to communicate with each other. FirstNet, in my view, solves that problem.

The Public Safety Broadband association exists to help support all public safety organizations in utilizing the technology that is been developed that can be run through that FirstNet network. That is a nationwide network. When it comes to the VA, I understand, they are using FirstNet, but I also believe that it is—it is a capability that can be further used because there are so many capabilities, so many applications that can be used on FirstNet that could be used toward making communications for the VA far more successful than they even are today.

I know that in our experience in New York City, a very complex communications environment for public safety. Dozens of public safety agencies, either State, Federal, or local, functioning inside the city of New York or operating inside New York, we were of the—we were of the position and always allowed for those agencies to operate on all frequencies as long as they followed a few simple guidelines. You know, that is something that could be replicated every place else. If the VA police are struggling with communications with other—with their public safety partners locally, that is something that the Public Safety Broadband Technology Association can help with.

One of the things that needs to happen in order for that to be successful and critical, and this was missing on September 11th, is incident management protocols. You can have all the technology you want, but if public safety organizations are not working together, not setting up protocols, not drilling together, not doing tabletop exercises together when there is an emergency, you cannot start that there. That has to happen before. That was one of the lessons learned out of the September 11th attacks. Again, the Public Safety Broadband Technology Association can help with that.

One of the things that we could do, for example, is we could introduce the VA police and other Federal police agencies into the International association chief of police committees. There are a number of committees that they could work with, and so, that would—like the Technology and communications committee inside them where they could be on that committee and share and understand the common problems that affect public safety communications on a much more broad scale.

I am going to stop there. Happy to answer any questions you have, and again, I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHUCK DOWD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you very much, Mr. Dowd, for your testimony and technology you advocate for our police officers nationwide, including in my district. Mr. Retzer, you are recognized now for 5 minutes to provide your testimony.

STATEMENT OF JON RETZER

Mr. RETZER. Thank you Chairwoman Kiggins, Ranking member Mryan, and members of the subcommittee. DAV is pleased to offer our perspectives on the VA police force and security issues.

First, DAV would like to express our deep gratitude to the VA police and security support teams for their unwavering dedication in serving and protecting our veteran community. VA police officers are responsible for deterring, stopping, and investigating crimes and maintaining order within Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and National Cemetery Administration (NCA). With a total workforce of over 471,000 employees who provide services and care to millions of veterans a year.

The VA healthcare system is encompassed of 172 VA medical centers and 1,138 community-based outpatient sites of care. Unfortunately, a community this large comes with security and safety issues. The VA 2023 annual performance plan reported the number of violent crimes committed on VA properties steadily increased year-after-year, with 3,131 incidences in 2018 and 6,538 in 2021.

In February 2023, the VA Office of Inspector General assessed 70 VA medical facilities to determine if they met VA security requirements. The OIG noted VA generally complied with security training requirements and demonstrated general emergency response planning and preparedness. However, it identified multiple security vulnerabilities and deficiencies at the 70 facilities, to include unlocked doors in sensitive areas, insufficient police officers, and increased vacancies and interoperable security cameras. Staffing challenges were considered a significant factor to security issues identified, particularly the lack of visible and active police presence. Having police and security personnel presence at facility entrances acts as determined to crime and comports with overall security of facility.

Addressing the increase of violent crimes on VA properties will require oversight, identifying the unique challenges and security weaknesses that exist. It involves emphasizing training and implementing processes and procedures and protocols to address the privacy and safety of all veterans, with a special emphasis on our women veterans who use VA for services. It is important that we prioritize equipping VA police with quality and functional equipment to mitigate potential needs and threats.

Madam Chair, Congress should pass legislation to ensure that VA police force has adequate staffing, resources and training to meet the special needs of each VA facility and its respective locations. Security and safety should be standardized, tailored, and measured. VA needs to prioritize facilities or areas with higher incidents or violence or security breaches.

Madam Chair, DAV is pleased to support H.R. 3504, the VA Medical Security Report Act. This legislation would require VA to conduct an annual survey on security at each VA medical facilities.

This bill would also require the secretary to provide an action plan describing how the department would address any identified security weaknesses.

Another security bill referred to the subcommittee for consideration is H.R. 7765, the VA Security Screening Pilot Program Act. This legislation aims to implement a pilot program for a weapon screening technology at VA medical centers. We understand that VA is currently piloting a similar program at a few facilities. We certainly appreciate the intent of this legislation and the goal to continue safeguarding veterans, employees, visitors, and VA's properties.

Finally, security challenges at VA facilities should be done in a manner that avoids creating unnecessary barriers to care for veterans, especially aging and service-disabled veterans who are more likely to have medical devices, prosthetics, assisted equipment, and even service dogs. As such, it is critically important to mandate robust consultation with veterans and veterans service organizations before finalizing any changes to security protocols at VA healthcare facilities. Veterans understand the importance of security from our times in the armed forces in conducting and sustaining operations for this Nation. It is only fitting that our Nation, in return, provides the injured and ill veterans secure sanctuary for internal and external threats when seeking healthcare at VA facilities.

In closing, we appreciate the subcommittee's attention to the issue of security and urge continued oversight to address identified areas needing improvement. Chairwoman Kiggans, this concludes my testimony. I am pleased to answer questions you and members of the committee may have.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JON RETZER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you very much, Mr. Retzer. I now yield as much time as I may consume for my questions. Let us see.

Mr. Conley, we will start with you. Thank you so much again for making the trip from Hampton Roads. I know that the drive is long. I appreciate you being here, and thank you for serving patients, including veterans, from Virginia's second district. My district chief of staff recently had twins at one of your Sentara facilities, and he certainly appreciated the great care and support he received.

I know that Sentara makes a great effort to keep its patients and staff safe. I know that we have championed legislation especially to look out for our healthcare workers. We know that not just nurses, and as a nurse practitioner, it is a privilege to advocate for them. All of our healthcare professionals and staff we know are at risk, and we are well aware of some of those statistics. Thank you for reminding us that they put their lives on the line too, just being in that environment of the emergency room, dealing with patients in crisis. I appreciate all the work you do to keep them safe. We will continue to do our part as well.

Can you talk a little bit about what some of the advantages are to having your own in house security team as opposed to a contracted service like other facilities have?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes, I think for us, it is the command and control and developing strategies that are unique to your specific facilities

without having layers upon layers and contracts upon contracts. I think for us, it makes complete sense to be able to have those resources in house, to be able to pipeline develop them without the barriers of going through a third party, right.

I think one, from a strategic perspective, being able to group your own employees to protect the staff and the communities that you serve. I think also it is just—and just from an economic standpoint, it is more economic.

Ms. KIGGANS. Are you fully staffed? As far as workforce challenges, do you have the security staff that you need?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes, I think, you know, obviously that kind of waxes and wanes in a little bit. I think our average vacancy is a little less than 10 percent, but that is a marked improvement. We have seen over the last 24 months intentional recruitment effort to bring in more security staff. I think part of it was us making sure that we were offering a fair market pay grade, pay scale, but then also allowing individual professional growth within those individual job codes. I think we have done a yeoman's job in trying to reach out to the community, better understand what their needs are, and we have seen a remarkable improvement with our vacancy rates.

Ms. KIGGANS. Does your security team do any training with our local law enforcement or use any of those facilities? We just had some Federal money go to Creed's training facility.

Mr. CONLEY. Yes. I will tell you one thing that is—and I appreciate with all the security agencies within Hampton Roads, and I think it is fairly consistent across—across the country. At times, healthcare can be somewhat competitive. At the end of the day, the security folks are really good at cross pollinating best practices across different healthcare systems and across different Federal agencies. I think it is very relationship driven. There is a lot of cross discussion, a cross communication and planning together to make sure that there is coordination within the regions that they serve.

Ms. KIGGANS. Then, as the security team, the people that you call when you have a person who is having a mental health crisis? We frequently have talked in our spaces just about the utilization of law enforcement officers to wait with these patients while they are waiting for placement. We know that wait time can be significant, sometimes even a day, up to 24 hours or more—

Mr. CONLEY. Yes.

Ms. KIGGANS [continuing]. and that we are utilizing, a lot of times law enforcement officers, then taking them out of their role where there might be needed for security. Who is providing that type of security for those patients in the clinic?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes, I think, depending on the response, the initial response might be security individuals. As that assessment comes down to maybe that individual's having a health crisis, we will transition that over to a clinician or someone that is trained to sit with that individual so we do not occupy security forces 24/7 on one individual.

Ms. KIGGANS. Is it your in house security team that provides, if you did have a patient that was transferred from a jail facility to be inpatient, then they would—that would might require armed

guard. Would that be your security chamber or would that be an outside police?

Mr. CONLEY. Outside agencies.

Ms. KIGGANS. Okay, great.

Mr. CONLEY. Now we might—we might supplement as needed to ensure the right security level protocols, but typically that is the outside agency bringing in their security team.

Ms. KIGGANS. Great. Then how long is your onboarding process for new security personnel?

Mr. CONLEY. Typically, they will probably go through a 6-week orientation. It is on the job. They will do the traditional compliance onboarding, and then they are typically buddied with a preceptor for a 6 week timeframe and then reevaluated and assess whether they are able to go off on their own or they need some more additional training to be functional.

Ms. KIGGANS. Otherwise very integrated into the culture of your hospital. They go through the same orientation?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes, 100 percent integrated culture. Going back to your initial question, that is also the value in keeping our security staff our own. It is really about the culture of Sentara and making sure—sure they can reflect our core mission and values.

Ms. KIGGANS. Can you speak briefly just to some examples of technology solutions that have enhanced security at your facility?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes. You know, during my statement, I talked about our weapon detection system. That is something we implemented about a year ago. It is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) based technology, so it is not your typical metal detector. It is actually scanning individuals, walking, free flow. We are—but we do—we did implement that about a year ago, and it is been a resounding success not only from keeping weapons coming in, but the feeling of safety for our employees. You know, they see that, they feel safe.

We have implemented—we have implemented a visitor badging system, so anyone coming in must have an ID, and we are able to track that individual as they move through the facility. The eventual evolution of that technology is it will integrate into our EMR so if a nurse wants to fly flag someone on the floor, it will come down to the entrance and that person may not be allowed to come in. That is an example of technology.

We are also right now going through the process of evaluating mobile parking lot cameras with some AI functionality and integrating that into local law enforcement as well.

Ms. KIGGANS. Very good. Thank you. Let us see, Mr. Dowd, I understand FirstNet Technology is currently being used in Virginia second district. Could you tell me exactly where it is in use? Do you know? Is it at the VA facility or—

Mr. DOWD. It is my understanding it is being used fairly broadly by the VA police.

Ms. KIGGANS. At the Hampton medical office?

Mr. DOWD. I could not tell you which specific locations, no.

Ms. KIGGANS. Gotcha. Okay, and let us see. We often hear from VA police officers that they are having difficulty communicating with local law enforcement during emergencies. Can you describe how FirstNet would be used by VA police to solve and resolve this issue?

Mr. DOWD. It is a ubiquitous technology, it is the same technology that we all use on our cell phones every day. It is completely operable. It is really not so much about the technology, it is about the protocols that are established between, you know, State, local, and the VA police to cooperate together.

I mentioned earlier, you know, the problem of September 11th so much was not a communications technology issue as it was an incident management issue. You know, there were no real meaningful protocols in place for police, fire, EMS to interoperate on a major incident. That has changed dramatically around the country. Those types of protocols are available for the VA police. FirstNet can facilitate that. You still need to have the outreach, and I would suggest from the VA to state and local authorities. You want to do things like participate in, you know, if there are, you know, emergency exercise drills, like mass casualty drills, the VA should be there. By the way, that would go beyond the VA to other Federal agencies as well.

Without—without those protocols, without those familiarities, without regularly—have regular contact with your state and local folks, the technology facilitates and makes your situation easier, but without those touch points, you do not want to wait for the emergency to get familiar with your counterparts in state and local and vice versa.

Ms. KIGGANS. Is that one of the services that FirstNet offers is helping to establish those protocols and making—

Mr. DOWD. No, but again, my organization helps with that. That is something we do. Again, there are organizations like the International Association of Chiefs of Police, Major Cities Chiefs Association, they all can afford opportunities for that type of outreach and assistance.

Again, I mentioned just from a communications perspective, the IACP, International association chiefs of Police has a technology and committee, technology, and communications committee, and it is existed for over 40 years. I know in the past there have been members on that committee from Federal entities, and there is no reason why the VA police should not and could not have a representative on that.

Ms. KIGGANS. I agree. Let us see. Then, Mr. Retzer, one question for you. What sort of things does your staff hear from veterans about security at the facilities they visit? Good and bad.

Mr. RETZER. Thank you. Thank you for that question. Our membership, being that they really rely on the VA healthcare, we have in overall, they are very satisfied with the VA healthcare and also the safety components that are there. As you know, we as veterans, we are accustomed to the world of security. We understand the requirements there. Our officers in uniform, we look at them as peer to peer, so they bring that comfort because we know many of them are veterans themselves. That peer to peer connection is building that bond, building that culture. We know that they understand our culture, so there is definitely a sense of security that is there. They feel physically and, you know, emotionally safe.

However, we do have a group of our population that are still challenged with that. That is our women veterans, that is our minorities, and LGBTQ+, obviously, that there is a cultural com-

petency that needs to be educated and trained on and how to address those issues, along with putting it together with the unfortunateness of individuals now dealing with their mental health, of military sexual trauma, being trauma victims, or even post traumatic stress disorder issues that they are dealing with. We really rely on our officers—and they are doing a great job out there.

I can tell you, like in Minneapolis VA Medical center, when I go there, they actually are talking to our veterans, and they are actually, if they are Marines, they are uh [sic], each other. They are doing that thing. It is really good to see that partnership. They are out there being visible, and that is very important for us.

Ms. KIGGANS. That is great. Good. Thank you so much. Now I yield as much time as he may consume to Ranking Member Mrvan.

Mr. MRVAN. Thank you, Chairwoman. Mr. Retzer, as you know from too many heartbreaking stories, veterans often visit VA facilities when they are in physical and emotional distress. As we heard from Mr. Hunt in the first panel, VA police officers are often asked to perform a wide range of duties, many of which may be untraditional for police officers. From your view, what role do VA police play in veterans receiving care?

Mr. RETZER. Like I was sharing with Madam chair, it was said they are our peer to peer. They are there to cover our six, and it is really good to know because they are veterans. When I say cover our six, we really feel that way because of the fact is we no longer have to do what we were in military, suck it up and drive on. It gives us a chance to go and take care of ourselves while we know we have those who are trained well to take care of us.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. Why is it so important for the perspective of veterans and veterans service organizations to be central in any proposed changes in security at the VA facilities?

Mr. RETZER. Well, I think one of the most important things is veterans and veteran service organizations. We are extremely proud of the work that the Department of veterans affairs does. We rely on them for a multitude of things from benefit services and healthcare services. What we see is that we appreciate the veterans affairs. Being transparent is so important that they can be transparent with us so we can share the concerns of our health issues that may have impact with screening measures or personal measures.

One of the things is when our population is going to VA care, we have hundreds of thousands every day going to get care. When they are going through the screening process, that is not a concern for them, but it is the way it is done. We want to make sure that they are not creating barriers, because many of our veterans with their injuries and illnesses have barriers with different types of prosthetics, medical devices that come with them, even pacemakers, certain devices are not good for them to go through. The screening process will create, you know, lengthy wait times to get into the building, and it can also raise anxieties for those who already have mental health issues.

That is a perspective that we would like to be able to share, and veterans should be able to share that, to talk about what that feels like if these processes and procedures were put into place. For ex-

ample, you know, our metal detection machines, scooters, and wheelchairs typically are not equipped properly for them to be able to go through the detection without them having some type of complication. There is not always an ability for someone who has a loss or loss of use of their lower extremity to get out of that vehicle that they are using to get in. There has to be very thoughtful processes on how to mitigate and to help that system through.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. As we have heard today, VA has begun piloting weapons detection technology at the VAMC's across the country. Have you heard anything from your membership regarding this pilot?

Mr. RETZER. No, we have not heard anything directly with that.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. Following up, veteran suicide is top priority for the committee and I know an issue that DAV also takes very seriously. My colleagues have brought up the recent report between 2023 and March 2024, only 1,297 out of the 4,505 armed VA police officers took to the annual suicide Prevention Training that is required in the Compact Act. This is less than one third of the VA police. Obviously, that is extremely concerning. Why is it so important to have VA police adequately trained on suicide prevention and de escalation?

Mr. RETZER. It is so important because they are the first responders in many cases, and then they have also the ability within the VA facility, externally and internally, to be roving around, seeing what is going on. They have real time eyes on the situation, and many times that they are out there, they are the ones that will be able to provide that service to diffuse the situation. Maybe there is some concerns that are happening out in the park lot where we have, you know, abilities to get in. They can be that point of contact to navigate coming in.

Then if there are situations, maybe they are getting the training, we hope they continue with their training, to involve recognizing individuals with maybe opioid issues, then they could be there to facilitate, if someone was overdosing with Narcan, those measurable things that could save a life. At the same time, if there is a crisis going on, they identify through training someone who may be suicidal, that they can grab them, escort them, do that warm hand-off to the clinical mental health providers that can take that next step.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. Are there any other tools, training, otherwise, that could help, in your view, help sustain better outcomes for veterans when they enter a VA facility in the need of assistance?

Mr. RETZER. We believe that, you know, the tools and resources that they can do, as long as they do not create any barriers. When there is that human touch there, to provide not only the security and safety, but the guidance for them to go in and navigate the system. That is a huge component of what they are looking for, the veterans experience, they want it to be seamless. Any which way that we can to make the process seamless for them and very timely for them is what we are looking for.

Mr. MRVAN. Mr. Conley, thank you for being here to speak to the subcommittee and provide best practices from your hospital. As a former healthcare executive, I recognize your commitment to ensuring the safety of your patients and providers. I understand that

across your healthcare system, you have implemented an AI driven weapons detection technology. How did your hospital administrators and security chiefs decide to implement these tools? Were these steps initiated by your patients, providers, or something else?

Mr. CONLEY. I think it—I think it was a combination of watching our workplace violence incidents increase across the system, and then getting direct feedback from our staff and their feeling of safety within the walls of the hospital. Those two factors led to the decision to pilot the programs at Norfolk General and at Virginia Beach General hospitals, and with the successful pilot, the decision to implement this system wide.

Mr. MRVAN. Just the vision of the device.

Mr. CONLEY. Yes.

Mr. MRVAN. When you go to a baseball game, you walk through. When someone comes to the hospital, is it the same system?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay.

Mr. CONLEY. It is not a queued up system like a metal detector system. It is a free flowing back and forth system.

Mr. MRVAN. Do you have to have—where those devices are located, do you have to have security at that device? With your facility, the number of security that you have, does that put a strain on the ability of the police because you have to have someone stationed at that facility and not patrolling or doing other tasks? How have you managed that? Can you answer that question?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes. When we did our concealed weapon detection system assessment, we realized that there is going to have to be additional staff. We did not want to take from our current staff that are rounding in the hospital and stationed in the ED. This would be an incremental expense for staffing the equipment 24/7.

Mr. MRVAN. Your facility actually added security in order to facilitate the technology for weapons detection?

Mr. CONLEY. Yes, sir.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. Do you know at what percentage of increase that cost or over budget or overhead for that?

Mr. CONLEY. For every system, for every system, it is a 24 hours system, it is about 4.8 FTEs. So 12—

Mr. MRVAN. FTEs stand for?

Mr. CONLEY. Employees. Full-time employees.

Mr. MRVAN. Employees.

Mr. CONLEY. Yes, I am sorry. You got to figure it is a roughly about 5 employees per system. If we are going to locate them within 12 EDs, 5 additional employees per system. Roughly, you know, about 60 employees.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. Then from my own personal knowledge, because I have never heard of it, you talked about the parking lot cameras—

Mr. CONLEY. Yes.

Mr. MRVAN [continuing]. and their AI functionality.

Mr. CONLEY. Yes.

Mr. MRVAN. Examples of cameras with AI functionality.

Mr. CONLEY. That is that—so the functionality—and we have not fully—we have not fully implemented it, but it allows not only to put eyes on the—on the parking lot, but also scan plates. Has the

ability to do facial recognition. You know, we, right now, using it really as a visual deterrent, but the capabilities to—

Mr. MRVAN. Sure.

Mr. CONLEY [continuing]. the capabilities to connect into local law enforcement does allow them to kind of extend their reach into the communities that may not be patrolling at that time.

Mr. MRVAN. Mr. Dowd, if I can ask a quick question. You talked about the capabilities that your associations offer up when it comes to broadband and trying to get—

Mr. DOWD. Again, the technologies that have been developed over the last 5 or 6 years in response to the development of the nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network, there are now hundreds of devices in all kinds of functions. Whether it is radiation detection, whether it is identifying suspicious packages.

Mr. MRVAN. I just wanted to kind of focus on communications.

Mr. DOWD. Okay.

Mr. MRVAN. My question would be, through your expertise.

Mr. DOWD. Right.

Mr. MRVAN. You had mentioned the advantage of processes and procedures in place when it comes to the VA and the Federal agency and local law enforcement and state level.

Mr. DOWD. Right.

Mr. MRVAN. Do you have statistics of VAs that participate and VAs that do not participate?

Mr. DOWD. I do not have those statistics, no.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. I guess in your expertise, other than tabletop exercises and encouraging that, what are ways that you think you can draw in those agencies to make sure that they are participating in those and tearing down the silos in order to be able to communicate?

Mr. DOWD. Again, you know, through the associations that exist in law enforcement, like the International Association of Police, in outreach or from either side, from the Federal side or from the State and local side, you can create those relationships without those relationships. Again, it is a struggle when there is an incident. While the technology is there and all these different technology capabilities exist without that outreach and without that first step to interact or to work together in incident management protocols, it is going to be difficult when something happens.

Mr. MRVAN. Okay. With that, Chairwoman, I yield back. Thank you.

Ms. KIGGANS. Thank you, Ranking Member Mrvan. Do you have any closing remarks? You got them. You got them all out. Thank you. I just wanted to thank our panelists again for making the trip and for taking time—from both the first panel and the second panel—for being with us today and during National Police Week. I know that the rest—speaking for the rest of the subcommittee, we are definitely committed to improving security at the VA and working with all of you. Thank you so much, again, for being here today.

I ask unanimous consent that all members should have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks and include any extraneous material. Hearing no objections, so ordered. This hearing is now adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:41 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS OF WITNESSES

Prepared Statement of Alfred Montoya

Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to discuss VA's law enforcement and how Congress can best support VA personnel in their efforts to serve and protect Veterans, employees, and visitors on VA property. Your past support has been imperative in ensuring we accomplish our mission, and we look forward to continuing that close collaboration as we implement the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 President's Budget. I am joined today by Chiefs Troy Brown, VA's Senior Security Officer; Brandy Soto, of Little Rock, Arkansas; and George Chester, of Detroit, Michigan. Also, wanted to recognize VA Police Chief Troy Covington, of Martinsburg, West Virginia; and Major Mark Moran, a physical security specialist who are sitting in the audience.

Police Staffing

VA's police force plays a significant role in ensuring the security of VA facilities by providing specialized law enforcement. However, in Fiscal Year 2022, the Department faced significant retention challenges. In direct response, VA published a Shortage Occupation Blueprint for Police the following year, outlining strategies for recruitment and retention, to include maximizing incentives, marketing the total rewards of a VA police officer career, and implementing employee referral awards programs. VA also modernized and standardized VA Police position descriptions, pay grades, and required staffing levels. However, each facility Director remains responsible for developing a comprehensive staffing plan suited for their facility's specific requirements. During their preparations, the facility leadership incorporates core Department requirements and applies evidence-based staffing methodology, considering factors like Vulnerability Assessment Risk Scores, the number of serious incidents, crime levels, real-time threats, population density, and community needs.

Recruiting qualified candidates for law enforcement positions can be challenging, especially with competition from other industries. Additionally, negative media coverage and public sentiment toward law enforcement can deter individuals from pursuing careers in policing. In response, VA has a dedicated team for recruiting and marketing VA police as an employer of choice, using local initiatives and groups, virtual career fairs and open houses, email marketing campaigns, and more. The team also created a targeted marketing campaign and timeline for communications related specifically to law enforcement for 2024. After the downturn in Fiscal Year 2022, VA successfully reversed the trend, with a 7.4 percent net increase (+278) in police officers in Fiscal Year 2023, the highest growth rate in recent years. This growth has continued in Fiscal Year 2024, with a 5.1 percent growth rate through April 30, 2024, adding 206 officers and bringing the total to 4,255 officers currently onboard. Efforts to retain officers in Fiscal Year 2024 are showing promising results, with losses at the midpoint of the year running 20 percent less than Fiscal Year 2023 and 25 percent less than Fiscal Year 2022.

Chain of Command

While individual police officers report directly to their corresponding medical centers, VA centralized its national police operations within VHA, under the Office of the Assistant USH for Operations. Eighteen Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) security officers are responsible for daily law enforcement and security operational oversight for their respective VISNs. The senior and deputy security officers within the Directorate of Law Enforcement serve as the principal security and law enforcement advisors, providing operational guidance to the VISNs and overseeing law enforcement and security operational oversight across all VA medical centers (VAMC), including adherence to corresponding policy and program requirements.

Accountability and oversight mechanisms are essential for any law enforcement agency to uphold transparency, integrity, and trust within the community. While the operational oversight of a VA police service rests with the VAMC Director, the Office of Security and Law Enforcement (OS&LE) measures the effectiveness of VA

Police programs through police program inspections. OS&LE leads the policy and oversight for the police program, including the police service units managed at each VA facility/property. OS&LE and other oversight and accountability mechanisms involve internal and external bodies tasked with monitoring the conduct of law enforcement officers, investigating complaints of misconduct or abuse, and ensuring compliance with legal and ethical standards. Recommendations may include policy reforms, training improvements, disciplinary actions, or other measures aimed at enhancing accountability and promoting public confidence.

Other law enforcement agencies (such as Federal, State, and local police) fall outside the VA police force's chain of command, though continued coordination with those agencies is crucial for efficient and effective enforcement of laws and public safety. This coordination involves sharing information, resources, and expertise to address complex issues that may transcend jurisdictional boundaries. It also facilitates collaboration on joint operations, task forces, and initiatives aimed at combating various forms of crime.

Training Initiatives

The Law Enforcement Training Center (LETC), responsible for all VA law enforcement education, is accredited by the Federal Law Enforcement Accreditation, fostering consistency in Federal law enforcement training and ensuring compliance with accreditation to instill public confidence in VA's law enforcement. LETC hosts an extensive catalog of courses that support and develop students and staff. Examples of initial training include Introduction to Supervision, Police Program Inspection, Evidence Custodian, Firearms, Ground Defense and Recovery, and Managing Police Services for Executives. Beyond internal mechanisms, VA built alliances by partnering with and providing training to law enforcement agencies within the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Commerce, the Department of the Army (civilian), the Department of the Navy (civilian), the Department of the Navy (Active Duty Master at Arms), the Department of the Air Force Security Forces (Active Duty), and the Bureau of Prisons.

Fitness for Duty

Law enforcement agencies typically have specific physical and psychological fitness standards that candidates must successfully complete before receiving a formal job offer. VA police officers must be capable of arduous physical exertion, including emergency evacuations, assisting victims, and intervening in disturbances. Applicants must demonstrate upper and lower body strength, good distant vision, unaided hearing, and have complete and functional limbs and emotional and mental stability. VA policy also includes criteria for annual physical and psychological examinations for VA police officers to determine their continued physical and psychological suitability to perform the functional requirements of the position. All VA police officers, criminal investigators, supervisors, and chiefs undergo annual examinations to assess their ability to perform essential job functions. These examinations must be completed within 12 months of the previous examination. VA requires examinations by an agency physician to determine if an officer or applicant meets those standards.

In response to immediate concerns that prompt a physical or psychiatric examination or results from a routine annual examination, officers' credentials are reviewed to determine if temporary action, such as suspending arrest or firearm authority, or identifying alternate assignments, are necessary pending an outcome. When an employee fails a physical or psychiatric examination, reasonable accommodation procedures apply, including provisions for alternate job searches. If reasonable accommodation is unsuccessful after a failed physical or psychiatric examination, the employee may be removed from Federal service due to medical inability to perform.

In addition to providing access to support services such as counseling, peer support programs, and employee assistance programs to address both physical and mental health concerns, VA police recently established a health and wellness office. It offers a personalized, proactive, and employee-centered approach to well-being. The Whole Health approach focuses on what matters most to the officers: personalized health planning, coaching, well-being programs, and complementary and integrative health options. In March 2024, VA initiated targeted pilots at four sites to establish a collaborative culture of well-being and resilience. These pilots aim to integrate Whole Health into officers' daily practices and empower them to take charge of their health and live their lives to the fullest.

Compensation

Like other Federal law enforcement agencies, VA's police force follows the General Schedule (GS) classification and pay system, which has 15 grade levels. Each police

officer position is assigned a grade based on the level of difficulty, responsibility, and qualifications required. Entry-level police officers typically start at the GS-5 or GS-6 grade, while more experienced officers or those in supervisory roles may be placed at higher grades, such as GS-7 or GS-9. Each GS grade has a base salary range with ten step rates. As officers gain more experience through years of service and acceptable performance, they progress through the steps within their assigned grade, earning higher salaries. Locality payments authorized under title 5, United States Code, are added to GS base salaries as a geographic-based percentage rate to reduce the pay disparity between GS workers and non-Federal workers in each locality pay area to the extent the President authorizes each year by Executive order. By law, the pay disparity for each locality pay area is calculated using non-Federal salary data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics salary surveys, and the extent to which pay disparities are reduced each year may be limited by the President or Congress. An employee's locality pay rate is based on the geographic location of the employee's official worksite. Special salary rates (SSRs) are higher rates of pay that VA may establish (with OPM concurrence) to obtain or retain the services of police officers under a special VA authority in title 38, United States Code. Medical Center directors have the discretion to use SSRs for police officers to help attract and retain qualified personnel in areas where the standard GS rates may not be competitive with other local, State, and Federal law enforcement agencies.

One common challenge is ensuring that compensation is competitive enough to attract and retain qualified personnel. Additionally, there may be discrepancies between Federal agencies or regions, leading to retention issues in certain areas. Over the past year, VHA implemented an enterprise-wide approach for addressing compensation challenges for police officers under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act of 2022 by directing mandatory reviews of special rates and implementation of a 15 percent Critical Skills Incentive. The Drug Enforcement Administration faces similar challenges and may also offer specialized pay incentives for certain roles. The Federal Bureau of Investigation typically offers competitive pay scales, and the nature of their work and prestige can attract top talent. Like these agencies, VA seeks to attract and retain qualified personnel.

Another key consideration is maintaining pay parity and equity across different roles and levels within an organization. This involves conducting regular market analyses and salary surveys to ensure compensation aligns with industry standards and internal pay scales are consistent. Failure to do so can lead to pay compression, where the difference in pay between entry-level and experienced employees becomes too small, potentially causing dissatisfaction and high turnover among tenured staff. Moreover, considering the total compensation package, including base salary, benefits, bonuses, and other retention and critical skills incentives, is crucial. These additional components can attract and retain top talent, particularly in competitive job markets or specialized fields. Striking the right balance between fiscal responsibility and competitive compensation is an ongoing challenge but essential for maintaining a skilled and motivated workforce. Organizations must continually evaluate and adjust their compensation strategies to adapt to changing market conditions, labor trends, and organizational needs.

Retirement Benefits

VA police personnel are part of the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), a retirement plan that provides benefits from three different sources: a Basic Benefit Plan, Social Security, and the Thrift Savings Plan. Eligibility for retirement is determined by age and the number of years of creditable service. In some cases, employees must have reached the Minimum Retirement Age (MRA), ranging from 55 to 57 years old, depending on their year of birth, to receive retirement benefits. Through the plan, if employees retire at MRA with at least 10 but less than 30 years of service, their benefit will be reduced by 5 percent for each year they are under the age of 62, unless they have 20 years of service, and their benefit starts when they reach age 60 or later.

There are four variations of accessing retirement benefits available through FERS, detailed below:

- An **immediate retirement** benefit starts within 30 days from the date the employee stops working.
- The **early retirement** benefit is available in certain involuntary separation cases and voluntary separations during a major reorganization or reduction in force.

- The **deferred retirement** benefit is available if an employee leaves Federal service before they meet the age and service requirements for an immediate retirement benefit and have completed at least 5 years of creditable civilian service. Deferred retirement benefits may be paid earlier if the employee completed at least 10 years of service.
- The **disability retirement** benefit is available to an employee who becomes disabled while employed for at least 18 months due to a disease or injury, and the disability is expected to last at least 1 year. The agency must certify that it cannot accommodate the employee due to their medical condition and that it considered them for reassignment within the same agency, at the same grade level, and within the same commuting area.

There are no proposed changes or enhancements to FERS.

Federal security forces whose primary duties involve the investigation, apprehension, and detention of persons who are suspected or convicted of certain criminal offenses, are classified as Law Enforcement Officers (LEO). The personnel that meet the statutory requirement for LEOs received enhanced retirement benefits as compensation for having a mandatory retirement age of 57. This mandatory retirement age is critical to maintain a "young and vigorous" corps of officers but may result in experienced LEOs retiring at an early age when it may be in the interest of the Government to retain these employees.

VHA police do not meet the statutory requirements of LEO as the principal duties of VHA police are to protect property and prevent criminal offenses from occurring. There are no proposed changes to the statutory definition of LEO.

Building Security

The guiding philosophy for security in VA calls for an open campus environment with layered security. VA facilities are to be open and inviting for Veterans and their families, providing safe and secure environments of care and service. However, sensitive and high-risk areas, such as pharmacies, warehouses, certain research or clinical laboratories, and other areas as determined by local risk assessment, must have increased physical security and perimeter control. Determining necessary protection levels for Federal activities is complicated, considering campus visitors' access needs, current and future threats, specific policy requirements, and construction design standards. VA facility Directors are the deciding officials for accepting risk. VA has established policies and procedures to assist facility Directors in making these determinations for a successful physical security program.

Effective physical security requires planning for protection of persons, resources, and property; preventing criminal loss or theft of vulnerable supplies, equipment, and property; and the practical and economical application of technical security aids to augment optimal use of police officers (such as Security Surveillance TV and screening stations). For detecting concealed weapons, VA facilities may establish walk-through metal detection screening stations (magnetometers) and the use of hand-held metal detectors. Establishing a metal detector screening station requires a threat evaluation indicating the community is experiencing a marked degree of street violence, that a sizable number of patients and employees habitually bear concealed weapons, an assessment of employee concerns for safety and security in the workplace, and the dedication of no less than two fully armed VA police officers to operate this fixed post at all times.

Conclusion

Madam Chair and Ranking Member Mrvan, thank you again for the invitation to join you for this important discussion. VA's police force remains committed to upholding our mission of deterring and stopping crime, maintaining order, and investigating crimes that may have occurred. We appreciate your continued support and collaboration through appropriate authorities and budget authorizations. My team and I look forward to your questions.

Prepared Statement of Bryan Hunt

Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) to participate in today's Subcommittee Hearing on "Ensuring VA's Security: How Can Congress Best Support VA's Law Enforcement?" My name is Bryan Hunt,

and I serve as the President of AFGE Local 2384 at the Clarksburg, WV VA Medical Center. I am a U.S. Army Combat Veteran who proudly served our country during Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Global War on Terrorism, and am a service-connected veteran who both works and receives my healthcare at the VA. Additionally, for 12 of my 17 years at the VA, I served as a VA Police officer, including being named the VA Police Officer of the Year in 2012.

On behalf of AFGE and its National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC), representing over 750,000 Federal and District of Columbia government employees, 304,000 of whom are proud, dedicated Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees it is privilege to testify today. Specifically, I plan to focus my testimony on the approximately 2,500 VA Police Officers AFGE represents, 90 percent of whom are veterans themselves, serving in facilities throughout the Nation. As the Subcommittee continues to evaluate the best ways to support the VA Police Force, AFGE has several recommendations that can help the VA with law enforcement recruitment and retention, and help it better serve veterans particularly related to pensions, staffing, training, and physical security.

VA Law Enforcement Pensions

The single most important and most effective action that Congress can take to help with the recruitment and retention to the VA Police Force is to extend Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) status to VA Police Officers. Under 5 U.S.C 8336(c), any LEO who either serves 25 years or is age 50 or older and serves 20 years may retire without penalty for early retirement. Currently, the definition of LEO relied upon in the code (5 U.S.C. 8401(17)) does not include VA Police Officers, and in turn they do not receive retirement benefits on par with Federal law enforcement officers at other Federal agencies. AFGE strongly supports H.R. 1322, the “Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) Equity Act,” introduced by Representatives Bill Pascrell, Jr. (D-NJ), Andrew Garbarino (R-NY), Gerry Connolly (D-VA), and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), which would grant what are sometimes referred to as 6(c) benefits to VA Police Officers. The bill also recognizes police at other agencies who are not currently recognized as LEOs under the law, including those at the Department of Defense (DoD), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the Federal Protective Service (FPS). This bi-partisan bill currently has 83 co-sponsors, including Chairman Mike Bost (R-IL), Ranking Member Mark Takano (D-CA), Ranking Member Frank Mrvan (D-IN), Representative Chris Pappas (D-NH), and five other members of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee.

Providing full LEO status to VA Police Officers would significantly help the VA Police Force with recruitment and retention. Currently, the VA hires many new recruits, sends them to the Law Enforcement Training Center (LETC) for training similar to other Federal LEOs, and then sees these officers depart the force for other opportunities within the Federal Government that do have 6(c) benefits, or to other state and local police departments. Granting full LEO status to VA Police Officers will diminish this turnover, and help the VA maintain a stronger and better trained police department with higher morale. Additionally, it is important to note that at a joint hearing before the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee and Health Subcommittee on May 17, 2023, Tracy Therit, the VA’s Chief Human Capital Officer, stated: “The last thing that I’ll mention is we very much support the ‘Law Enforcement Officer Equity Act.’ We look forward to being able to provide our police officers with those enhanced benefits as well to make us more attractive and to fill those positions.”

While the “Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) Equity Act,” is not in the jurisdiction of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, AFGE urges that members of this Subcommittee, as well as the full committee, join their colleagues to become co-sponsors of H.R. 1322 and support its passage in the House.

Staffing

The VA needs to improve the staffing levels of VA Police. In August 2023, the VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) released a report entitled “OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2023.”¹ The report noted 73 facilities had a severe shortage of VA Police in the 0083 series, with more common shortages found for only seven positions.² The report goes on to underscore how long the problem has persisted, with the report noting that in a “[c]omparison of the most frequently reported severe occupational staffing shortages from FYs 2018 through 2023 highlighted five occupations

¹“OIG Determination of Veterans Health Administration’s Severe Occupational Staffing Shortages Fiscal Year 2023,” August 22, 2023. VA OIG 23-00659-186.

²*Id* at 8.

that have remained in the top five clinical and top five nonclinical most frequently reported severe shortages. These occupations included Police, Psychiatry, Practical Nurse, Psychology, and Medical Technologist.”³ Additionally, in a Fiscal Year 2022 VA Shortage Occupation Report, VA wrote:

0083 Police ranked third among the [staffing shortages of] nonclinical occupations in VHA, selected by 71 out of 139 health care systems (51.1 percent). There were 3,878 onboard and 1,577 vacant FTE (28.9 percent) as of December 2021. The 3-year average growth rate for this occupation was 2.0 percent, with a turnover rate of 10.1 percent in Fiscal Year 2021. Recruitment challenges were identified as the primary cause for risk of shortage by 56 out of 71 health care systems (78.9 percent). Limited Supply of Candidates was selected as the primary driver of the shortage by 42 out of 71 health care systems (59.2 percent). Superior Qualifications, Special Rates, or Special Needs Pay (48/71, 67.6 percent) and Recruitment and/or Relocation Incentives (36/71, 50.7 percent) were the flexibilities selected most for addressing [the] shortage.⁴

As for the VA’s administrative actions to address staffing, the last time AFGE testified on VA Police issues, AFGE was supportive of certain parts of the VA’s Modernization Plan summarized in the “FY 2020-FY 2021 VA Human Capital Operating Plan (HCOP)”⁵ and would like an update on its status. Specifically, “Strategy 5” focuses on the “efforts related to enhanced recruitment, hiring and development of VA’s police force.”⁶ This includes the VA’s plan to “create and communicate new staffing standards for police performance” and that “[a]dditional training and resources will complement the effort. The new standards will provide key inputs into the creation of career roadmaps for the police cadre.”⁷ AFGE also believes that the VA’s “standardized position descriptions will support efficient and effective recruitment and hiring efforts while a workforce assessment will be completed to evaluate and improve pay, entitlements, and retirement benefits for police officers.”⁸ AFGE urges the VA to implement the training and staffing portions of this plan as quickly as possible and ensure that vacancies are filled so the VA Police Force has the staff that it needs to serve.

On the ground, AFGE has seen some of this plan in action, particularly with the creation of the new GS-7 Senior Police Officer position, which is a clear promotional opportunity from the standard GS-6 VA Police Officer. To further improve retention and promotional opportunity, AFGE urges both an increase in the number of GS-8 Senior Police Officer positions to increase promotion potential and allowing Police Officers to advance from GS-07 positions to GS-09 positions without a year in GS-08, as is currently required of VA Police. This prevents a number of officers, particularly in facilities where a GS-08 posting is rare, to advance to GS-09.

Furthermore, not all changes to position descriptions have been positive. AFGE remains concerned that the VA Detective position, which has been converted to a Criminal Investigator position, is no longer in AFGE’s bargaining unit in certain locations. AFGE believes this is an unnecessary removal of union rights from VA Police Officer units, and that these positions should be universally returned to the bargaining unit immediately. Additionally, AFGE would like to note that these new Criminal Investigator positions were given 6(c) benefits administratively. While AFGE supports granting 6(c) benefits to all Federal LEOs, it is surprising that this group of officers would be extended the benefit while officers working on the front lines protecting veterans and staff at VA facilities are not. It would be a serious concern if the VA were conferring benefits in return for removing union rights.

Additionally, AFGE is concerned about the wide discretion local facility management has in determining what position descriptions and organizational charts to use for staffing the facilities’ police departments. While AFGE supports permitting facilities to hire additional staff if they demonstrate the need, AFGE has heard reports that leaders in certain facilities are intentionally characterizing their facilities in ways that justify having a smaller police force than what is required. We urge the Secretary and this Subcommittee to ensure that staffing models are accurate and enforced consistently across the VA. Furthermore, AFGE wants to highlight that police officers are funded from the same budgets as other medical center personnel. This practice forces each medical center director to choose between hiring

³ *Id.* at 12.

⁴ Fiscal Year 2022 SHORTAGE OCCUPATION REPORT

⁵ FY 2020-FY 2021 VA Human Capital Operating Plan (HCOP) (June 2020)

⁶ *Id.* at 20.

⁷ *Id.* at 22.

⁸ *Id.*

between hiring a medical professional or a police officer, with priority often going to the healthcare provider. AFGE believes the Committee and VA should consider a dedicated funding source for VA Police to ensure that veterans and employees are protected.

Training

One of the key strengths of the VA Police force is the level of training officers must undergo to serve the veteran population. A key example of this is the crisis intervention training that was passed in the 116th Congress as part of Chairman Takano's VA COMPACT Act that was enacted as part of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020. Because of this law, VA Police Officers who serve at VA Medical Centers, Community Based Outpatient Clinics, or Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA) Regional Offices (RO) are now trained to prevent a veteran in a crisis situation from harming himself or herself or others.

This training is an extremely important and specialized investment that is intended to save lives. However, the high attrition rates of VA Police Officers who undergo this training puts an added strain on VA resources when considering the cost of training. This is exemplified by the Law Enforcement Training Center (LETC) already charging \$14,620 for a VA Police Officer Standard Training Course, which does not include the crisis intervention training required by the VA COMPACT Act.

When analyzing this figure in relation to the regular attrition of VA Police, the VA is spending a significant amount on training each year. AFGE urges the committee to ask the VA how much it expends on training, as well as a breakdown of costs for officers who leave shortly after receiving training and calculate how it can save money and improve retention with 6(c) benefits and improved use of special salary rates and retention bonuses. AFGE believes that SVAC Ranking Member Moran is correct to point out in a recent letter to Secretary McDonough, that at least in part as a result of excessive turnover, "[Between] January 2023 to March 2024, only 1,297 out of 4,505 armed VA Police Officers were in compliance with the annual training requirement of the COMPACT Act representing a compliance rate of only 28 percent." Improving retention would strongly contribute to improving the percentage of active officers who receive this statutorily required training.

Physical Security

The VA Police's first obligation is to fulfill its Mission Statement "To Protect Those Who Served." To achieve this goal, AFGE appreciates that security needs to be tailored to each facility to best protect its veterans.

AFGE supports programs including those proposed in H.R. 7765, the "VA Security Screening Pilot Program Act." This bill is a strong proposal designed to prevent violence at Veterans Medical Centers. However, as the VA continues to evaluate its physical security AFGE urges the VA to take several considerations into account.

First, AFGE urges that the VA provides its police with training on any new security technologies installed at VA facilities and that only VA Police Officers, who have undergone crisis intervention training required by statute and are best equipped to respond to an emergency at a VA facility, are allowed to operate such technology, and not third-party contractors.

Second, AFGE urges the VA to make sure that facilities using or piloting screening technology account for the extra demand on staff and hire more officers accordingly. Some facility police forces do not have the capacity to operate screening technology and perform their other duties. New screening technologies will require more police staff.

Third, the VA should not limit the use of new screening technologies to Medical Centers. As the VA utilizes larger Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), it is worth including them as well as VBA regional offices which are under the jurisdiction of other Federal agencies police forces. This will provide a broad cross section of data on the effectiveness of the technologies.

Fourth, AFGE strongly encourages that in sites wherever screening technology is being piloted, there be either separate screening lines or reserved entrances for staff to prevent delays in patient care.

AFGE looks forward to working with the Subcommittee and the VA to improve the recruitment and retention of the VA Police Force and ensure that it is fully staffed. Thank you.

Prepared Statement of Kapua Conley

Chairwomen Kiggans, members of the committee, thank you for the privilege of addressing you today on one of Sentara Health's top priorities – the safety of our employees, patients and all visitors who walk into our facilities.

I am Kapua Conley, Regional President for Sentara Health.

Sentara is an integrated delivery network with 12 hospitals in the Mid-Atlantic, a health plan and more than 30,000 employees. Our largest hospital, a Level 1 Trauma Center is just miles from Naval Station Norfolk, and we serve many active duty, veterans and their families.

Keeping our employees, patients and visitors safe is a responsibility we take very seriously, as you will hear from my comments today. From my perspective "Security is both a feeling and a reality. And they are not the same." Making our employees and patients feel safe is just as important as keeping them safe.

The statistics around workplace safety in a healthcare environment are staggering.

We know that healthcare workers are **5X more likely** to experience violence compared to those in any other private profession. Outside of law enforcement, an emergency department is the second most dangerous workplace.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that healthcare workers account for 73 percent of injuries from workplace violence. The threat to nurses, physicians and other healthcare workers has been on the rise since 2011.

Those statistics are our reality on the front lines of healthcare.

Sixty-four handguns, 1,204 knives, 158 box cutters, 84 tasers and two machetes – this is an inventory of weapons intercepted at the doors of emergency departments in just two Sentara hospitals in a little over a year.

In total, security personnel have prevented nearly 2,484 weapons from entering Sentara Norfolk General and Sentara Virginia Beach General hospitals during that time.

Our Security Team seeks to first prevent and deter violence within our facilities.

Second, we seek to protect our employees, patients and visitors from harm or injury should a violent incident occur.

Prevent and Deter Workplace Violence

To prevent and deter violence, Sentara has implemented sophisticated, state-of-the-art, AI-driven Concealed Weapon Detection Systems. Over the next 2 years, every hospital will have this system in place.

When our CEO, Dennis Matheis, sat down with some of our front-line employees to discuss this initiative, he was concerned about push back, as hospitals are havens of healing. One nurse reminded Dennis that our children walk through metal detectors every day going to school. This is now the new normal.

In addition, Sentara has implemented a Visitor Management System that allows us to know who is entering any of our facilities and whether they are authorized to do so, reducing criminal acts and workplace violence.

Also, in addition to thousands of CCTV cameras located throughout our hospitals, we have personal duress alarms and a new Emergency Notification System to better communicate with our teams and take proactive action.

All front-line employees are trained on de-escalation, and Sentara has implemented cutting edge Active Shooter Training, including a full-scale active shooter drill involving our emergency services community partners.

Protect Our Employees, Patients and Visitors

To ensure the highest level of safety, Sentara recognizes the need to be proactive, not reactive. Each and every member of our team is critical to the safety of all. This responsibility to keep each other safe is engrained in our culture and built into our daily protocols, training, and technology.

Every nurse has the capability and responsibility to flag patient medical records for individuals who exhibit threatening behaviors. Our support staff follow the buddy system when serving these patients. Security patrols keep a close watch on units with potentially violent patients, and they make sure that flags in our electronic medical records match signage in the units. Patient flags are evaluated every 12 hours and removed if a patient is no longer a threat.

Multi-disciplinary Core Threat Assessment Teams in each division review all workplace violence incidents, ensure appropriate use of flags, analyze trends and root causes, and recommend additional training and protocols to maximize safety. These teams rally on short notice when there is an urgent need for a coordinated and decisive response to potential threats.

Our in-house security professionals are essential to our strategic approach to safety. Sentara is training an elite team of Security officers to receive certification by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. And we are implementing Video Magistrate rooms that permit police and staff to directly link with a magistrate to provide evidence and swear out an arrest warrant in real time for a criminal event that has or may occur.

Conclusion

Again, "Security is both a feeling and a reality. And they are not the same."

This needs to be taken into consideration when looking at our own veterans medical facilities. Sentara stands ready to collaborate and partner with the VA system on how best to assess, support and implement best practices in safety and security at these facilities.

We have made an investment in safety which has returns beyond a dollar amount. I hope that the VA system will do the same.

I am happy to take any questions at the appropriate time.

Prepared Statement of Chuck Dowd



STATEMENT OF RETIRED ASSISTANT CHIEF CHARLES F. DOWD, FORMER COMMANDING OFFICER, COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION-NYC 911, NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT AND NOW VICE PRESIDENT, PUBLIC SAFETY BROADBAND TECHNOLOGY ASSOCIATION BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS.

"Ensuring VA's Security: How Can Congress Best Support VA's Law Enforcement?"

MAY 16, 2024

Good morning, Chair Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan, and members of the Subcommittee. I am retired Assistant Chief Charles Dowd, former Commanding Officer of the New York City Police Department's Communications Division and the NYC-911 system, and now Vice President of the Public Safety Broadband Technology Association (PSBTA). On behalf of our membership, I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the opportunities Public Safety has today to support and improve service delivery by using broadband technology.

The PSBTA is comprised of the nation's leading Public Safety executives and associations. The professional backgrounds of our leaders all include extensive experience with, and knowledge of technology related to Public Safety communications. Our diverse group of executives understand Public Safety needs and requirements, and most importantly in the context of this hearing, those related to Public Safety communications. Communications that began with call boxes, then analog radio systems, to modern Public Safety radio networks, and now advanced broadband communications and the supporting technology, with applications and solutions harnessing broadband. We are dedicated to advancing Public Safety communications through *Advocacy, Outreach, Education, and Leadership*. Our focus is on advancing America's Public Safety Broadband Network, the congressionally created Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN).

The goal the PSBTA works toward for all of our communities is effective and dedicated communications for first responders. This is paramount, so that Public Safety can best keep our communities safe and quickly intervene during emergencies to reduce the negative impact on life and property. Many of our communities have disparate communications systems that support limited or non-existent interoperability between the agencies and jurisdictions utilizing varying technologies. Not only does this create safety and response issues within the community, but also puts Public Safety professionals at risk. Today's current broadband solution being discussed solves those communications problems. It improves interoperability,

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situational awareness, coordination of effort in response to critical incidents, and allows innovation to rapidly advance new applications for Public Safety.

In 2012, Congress, at the request of the nationwide public safety community, established the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority) as an independent authority within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) under the Middle-Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012. The FirstNet Authority is tasked with ensuring and overseeing the deployment of the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network, also known as FirstNet. FirstNet is designed to provide reliable, uninterrupted communications for every first responder in the country, regardless of level (federal, state, local, tribal) and location (urban, suburban, rural, tribal). It is the only dedicated, nationwide, wireless broadband network built with and for public safety.

Today, modern technologies have created a breakthrough of innovation for Public Safety communications. This is not limited to just voice communications, but also exchange of data and other information. These emerging technologies enhance situational awareness, improve the safety for our Public Safety professionals, and facilitate better communication of voice and/or data, and coordination between agencies. Some examples of these technologies are:

- Voice/Data interoperable communications networks: Interoperable communications are seamless and timely between multiple jurisdictions. Each responding jurisdiction may have a different type of response to an incident, but still have the same overall goal to end and resolve the incident safely for all involved.
- Land Mobile Radio (LMR): Land mobile radios are the traditional equipment the public is accustomed to seeing law enforcement officers and fire personnel use during an emergency. The term encompasses the use of voice & data signaling over narrowband radio channels. You can now bridge disparate networks over the NPSBN allowing the users of these system to communicate with each other
- PTT over broadband: To define this easily, "Push-to-Talk (PTT)", is a means of instantaneous communication on a smart device, such as your iPhone, use an application to replicate at PTT network. Benefits of this application developed for Public Safety include not having to build expensive LMR radios system nor purchase expensive dedicated radios for that system. It provides for the ability to communicate across the nation not just within your local footprint. There are significant other benefits to include real-time situational awareness. video exchange, security, and other enhanced features
- Body cameras: The ability of this technology to operate reliably in the field to upload data for evidentiary and/or investigative purposes, as well as aid in officer safety.
- Telemedicine: Improved detailed medical information can be shared in real time from the field to hospitals and vice versa. This equates to more lives saved.



- Geolocation services, also known as situational awareness: Improved location and management of the locations of incidents and the people who are affected translates into more effective Public Safety responses. This has the ability to share key information with local partners to improve response time and capability.
- NextGen911: Immediate and more detailed information coming into and being shared by your 911 Communications Centers. Additionally, allowing more innovative technologies to be implemented in these centers creates efficiencies around staffing, community support, crime trends, and much more.
- Artificial Intelligence: This is a new evolution and will be exciting to see how Public Safety utilizes this technology to enhance our effectiveness within our communities. This can only occur with a robust, secure, and dedicated public safety broadband network.

As an organization, the PSBTA always recommends the best technological decisions to be implemented for each agency and their communication needs combined with the ability to communicate with your local and national partners. Though, some of the above technology examples to be discussed have a common thread: These technologies benefit from the dedicated Public Safety Band 14 spectrum that Congress reserved for emergency response personnel and priority access and preemption on the single, dedicated nationwide Public Safety broadband network, FirstNet.

New York Experience: Like other jurisdictions around the country, New York City has had the same experience over the years in the need to be able to coordinate between the multitude of Public Safety agencies that coexist in the New York City metropolitan area. By using, modern broadband technology, incident management training and tabletop exercises we have been able to coordinate between multiple law enforcement and other public safety agencies in order to be able to handle large scale incidents such as September 11th, the Northeast blackout and hurricane Sandy.

DC Metro Area: The DC Metro Area, where you live and work, is comprised of multiple jurisdictions and includes multiple Public Safety disciplines from police, fire, and emergency medical services (EMS). One of the breakthrough innovations is how fire emergency transport vehicles are implementing a whole blood transfusion program in the field. Previously, this could only be done in a physical health care setting, like a hospital. Now, with a dedicated, secure, and reliable FirstNet connection, first responders are able to track in real time their whole blood supply in the field, saving lives. Emergency Medical professionals need to track temperature, location, supply, etc. all the time. This is believed to be the beginning of how EMS will evolve throughout the United States. Also, there are numerous agencies that support national events in this area, including incidents on the vast waterways. All of these agencies' daily communications are connected through FirstNet.



Please understand the DC experience has the common thread of using FirstNet for all local and multi-organization communications. But FirstNet does not have to wholly replace your LMR systems or other technology platforms. It can enhance and complement existing systems, and allow for the convergence of many solutions, serving as a common platform to breakdown longstanding communications silos and allowing your traditional LMR systems to communicate with other disparate LMR systems on FirstNet.

As we understand, the VA appears to have a critical need for interoperable communications both locally and nationally that will allow them to talk directly to their partners and to share critical information such as situational awareness. I recommend their communications solution should be looked at from a holistic national purview that not only provides a communications solution for the VA's law enforcement but may include additional elements of technology for other divisions of the VA and the local, state, and federal mutual aid partners. This is recommended so there is a nationwide, sustainable, common solution, and we would encourage the VA to harness advanced broadband solutions that can integrate with the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network. There should no longer be a need to encourage disparate systems for one organization because of geography anymore.

If asked, we would be happy to discuss, with VA Executives and decision makers, some of our high-level recommendations such as:

- Establish a Joint Task Force: This task force should consist of representatives from the VA Police and surrounding city police departments and to include partners such as fire, EMS, and emergency management. Its aim would be to foster better understanding, streamline communication, and coordinate responses more effectively.
- Policy & Procedures: Assess if these are current for the VA. Then look at how these fit in with or need to evolve to work with other agencies to improve communications.
- Cross-Training Initiatives: By creating opportunities for shared training exercises, they can enhance the skills of all involved parties and build a stronger, more united front in public safety. While creating new jurisdiction relationships across agencies and building on that momentum of trust and commonality.
- Funding: Every great solution still needs to be funded. Funding for training, equipment, and the proper technological solution for communications is next on the list for others to decide.

The Veterans' Administration has more than 1,300 health care facilities, providing care to nine million enrolled Veterans each year. The VA has dedicated uniformed federal law enforcement resources. They are responsible for the protection of VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) and other facilities, such as Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), Health Care Centers (HCCs), annexes and other facilities operated by VA. In addition to Law Enforcement, other important Public Safety functions are managed by the VA Office of Emergency Management (OEM).



Communications is critical to coordination and effective response for Law Enforcement, fire, EMS, 911 Services and Emergency Management. The VA is already harnessing advanced broadband capabilities to support care delivery for Veterans and equip its Public Safety and Emergency Response personnel with essential tools and resources, but opportunities to improve remain untapped. In recognizing the importance of emergency communication systems, we took notice of the introduction of the Advancing VA's Emergency Response to (AVERT) Crises Act of 2023. We applaud Congress for working to bolster the VA's emergency preparedness posture through investments in communications systems at VA medical facilities; however, we would caution against limiting its scope to legacy radio technology. Public safety communications has undergone a transformation in recent years, as a result of the NPSBN and broadband-enabled push-to-talk solutions, which can integrate into traditional radio systems or operate as a standalone. The integration of broadband-enabled push-to-talk into traditional radio systems expands the coverage reach of traditional radio systems, while also increasing the system's functionality and improving redundancy and reliability. This bill has bipartisan support and was introduced in the U.S. Senate last year. A companion bill does not appear to have been introduced in the U.S. House as of yet. Maximizing the benefits of broadband-enabled push-to-talk on the NPSBN would increase cost-effectiveness, spur speed to nationwide system availability, and enhance the tools and capabilities available to the VA's Public Safety and Emergency Management personnel.

We understand the VA has already made great strides to implement FirstNet technology and integrate their radio systems with FirstNet push-to-talk. We applaud the VA's Public Safety and Emergency Management personnel for their technology leadership and recommend for Congress to build upon this progress.

Thank you for convening today's hearing. We hope our testimony will help inform the committee's review of the needs facing the VA's Law Enforcement and broader Emergency Response personnel. Technology offers real and live-saving capabilities to Public Safety, and we urge Congress to adopt policies and make the necessary investments to fully equip Public Safety with the advanced broadband tools to enhance safety and help them accomplish their important mission.

Prepared Statement of Jon Retzer

Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to testify at today's hearing of the Subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs Oversight and Investigations—"Ensuring VA's Security: How Can Congress Best Support VA's Law Enforcement?"

DAV, a congressionally chartered non-profit veterans service organization (VSO), is comprised of over one million wartime service-disabled veterans. Its single purpose is to empower veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. DAV is pleased to provide our perspectives on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) police force and security issues being discussed today by the Subcommittee.

The VA operates one of the largest health care systems in the Nation, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and offers training for a majority of America's medical, nursing, and allied health professionals. The VA health care system includes 172 VA Medical Centers (VAMC) and 1,138 community-based outpatient sites of care. With more than 371,000 employees, these health care facilities ensure comprehensive care for over 7 million veterans every year.

With utmost appreciation, DAV would like to extend thanks to the law enforcement men and women who make up the VA's police and security support teams for their dedication and commitment to serving and protecting our veteran community.

To protect VA's physical infrastructure, the Office of Emergency Management collaborates with relevant VA departments and external agencies to safeguard veterans, employees, visitors, and property at VA facilities. The Office of Security and Law Enforcement (OS&LE) offers guidance, consultation, and direct operational support to all elements of VA.

The VA Police Service is one of the three main sections that the office is organized into, responsible for conducting police program oversight, policy development and strategic planning, physical security standards and practices, protection of VA Central Office buildings, and executive protection of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary. The Security and Investigations Center (SIC) oversees the management of the VA's personnel suitability and security investigation programs. To meet the needs of all VA entities nationwide, quality, and timely background investigations and adjudications are ensured for VA employees and contractors in sensitive positions. The SIC oversees both the processing of fingerprints and the design and production of identification badges and access cards for Central Office employees.

The VA Law Enforcement Training Center fulfills its crucial role through the provision of professional training and development for VA police officers across the system. The VA maintains a well-trained police force to enforce the law and protect patients, visitors, employees, and property at VA facilities. Approximately 2,700 trained VA police officers are shouldering these duties at all major VA medical facilities and many VA outpatient clinics. They also serve VA's National Cemetery Administration and Veterans Benefits Administrations, including locations in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.

The primary role of the VA police is to deter and stop crime, keep order, and investigate crimes that may have happened within the authority of the VA. Individuals wanting to become VA police officers must possess specialized law enforcement experience and undergo a variety of background checks and meet basic medical standards related to performing law enforcement duties, as set by the Office of Personnel Management. These standards require experience with basic laws and regulations, as well as law enforcement operations, practices, and techniques.

The VA Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Annual Performance Plan and Fiscal Year 2021 report noted that the VA Office of Human Resources and Administration/Office of Operations and Administration tracks and reports the number of violent crimes committed on VA property. Violent crimes are defined as assault, aggravated assault, sexual assault, attempted murder, homicide (murder), kidnapping, manslaughter, robbery, terroristic threats to US officials, and workplace violence. The total number of violent crimes reported on VA property for Fiscal Year 2021 was 6,538—steadily increasing, from the previous years of 2020 at 5,002; 2019 at 4,420; and 2018 at 3,131.

In February 2023, the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) released its report (22-03770-49) and assessment of 70 VA medical facilities to determine if they had established minimum security plans that met VA's security requirements. The OIG evaluated security of doors, staffing levels, the use of security cameras and if there was an active security presence at VA medical facilities. The OIG noted VA generally complied with security training requirements and demonstrated general emergency response planning and preparedness; however, it identified multiple security vulnerabilities and deficiencies at the 70 facilities assessed to include: un-

locked doors in sensitive areas, significant police officer vacancies and inoperable security cameras. Staffing challenges were considered a significant factor to security issues identified—particularly, “...the lack of a visible and active police presence.” It was noted that having a police and security personnel presence at facility entrances acts as a deterrent to crime and comports with overall security of a facility. Yet due to staffing challenges, “OIG teams identified that 93 percent of the facilities [monitored] had at least one public access door without the required security presence.” We were pleased to see that 69 of the 70 facilities assessed had required contingency plans in place for serious security issues to include active shooters, bomb threats and hostage situations.

Additionally, despite VA issued guidance in May 2022 requiring facilities to have an active security presence in emergency departments at all times by May 2023, 58 percent of facilities did not meet this mandate. Finally, the OIG found that surveillance cameras were not consistently operable or monitored and recommended more oversight to ensure these surveillance systems are regularly tested, maintained and managed as another counterpoint for deterrence to potential bad actors. The OIG also suggested VA set a national standard for monitoring, periodic review and storage of surveillance camera footage.

To address the increase of violent crime on VA property will require oversight and identifying the unique challenges and security weaknesses that exist at each VA facility. We need to ensure VA police have quality and functional equipment to mitigate risks from possible threats, with an emphasis on training and adoption of appropriate processes and protocols to address violent crimes as well as the privacy and safety of all veterans with a special focus on the safety of women veterans using VA services. Congress should consider legislation to ensure the VA Police force and its officers have the proper staffing, resources and training they need to ensure all medical facilities are safe and secure for veterans, staff and visitors.

Security and safety measures should be standardized but also tailored and measured to meet the specific needs of each VA facility and its respective location and risk level. There may be a need to prioritize facilities or areas with higher crime or incidents of violence or security breaches. When making and implementing new policies and procedures, it is also important to have the ease of access to VA facilities for our disabled veterans at the forefront.

Veterans understand the importance of security from their time in the armed forces in conducting and sustaining operations for this Nation. It is only fitting that this Nation, in return, provides ill and injured veterans secure sanctuary from internal and external threats when seeking health care at VA facilities.

For these reasons, DAV is pleased to support H.R. 3504, the VA Medical Security Report Act, legislation that would require VA, in coordination with the Office of Security and Law Enforcement, to conduct an annual survey to collect information about security at each VA medical care center. Types of information to be collected include: frequency and type of criminal activity; number of vacant positions for police officers; availability and adequacy of required security equipment; and availability and adequacy of training—including training for responding to serious threats. The bill would also require the Secretary to provide an action plan describing how the Department would address any identified security weaknesses.

Another security bill referred to the Subcommittee is H.R. 7765, the VA Security Screening Pilot Program Act, legislation that would direct the VA to carry out a pilot program to use weapon screening technology at VA medical centers. While we don’t have a resolution from our members regarding security screening, we certainly appreciate the intent of this legislation and the goal to safeguard veterans, employees and VA property. As with any changes to security at VA facilities, this would have to be done in a manner that avoids creating unnecessary barriers to care for veterans – especially aging and service-disabled veterans – who are more likely to have medical devices, prosthetics, assistive equipment, and service animals. As such, it is critically important to mandate robust consultation with veterans and veterans service organizations before finalizing any changes to security protocols at VA health care facilities.

In closing, we appreciate the Subcommittees attention to the issue of security and urge continued oversight to address identified areas needing improvement. Our veterans and the VA staff dedicated to caring for them deserve a safe, harassment free environment that is well ordered and free of crime. We must ensure the VA police have the staff, resources and tools to address the security challenges of today and that they have the support to make necessary changes to prevent crime and safeguard these essential facilities and veterans using them.

This concludes my testimony on behalf of DAV. I am pleased to answer questions you or members of the Subcommittee may have.

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

Prepared Statement of Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association



Representative Members from

[illegible]

FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

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May 15, 2024

The Honorable Jen Kiggins
Chair, Subcommittee on Oversight
& Investigations
Committee on Veterans Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Frank Mrvan
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Oversight & Investigations
Committee on Veterans Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair Kiggins & Ranking Member Mrvan:

I am writing on behalf of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association (FLEOA) to provide our views in advance of Thursday's Subcommittee hearing on "Ensuring VA's Security: How Can Congress Best Support VA's Law Enforcement?". FLEOA is the nation's largest non-partisan, nonprofit professional association representing more than 32,000 federal law enforcement officers and agents across 65 federal agencies, including those from the VA Police and the Department's Office of Inspector General.

One of the primary measures by which Congress can best support VA's law enforcement officers is to advance legislation that helps to recruit and retain the skill workforce necessary to carry out the agency's critical mission. These brave men and women are responsible for protecting and serving a very important constituency in this country: Our nation's veterans who have faithfully placed themselves in harm's way and the medical personnel who provide their care. Like their counterparts at other federal agencies, VA Police Officers also place themselves in harm's way every day to protect federal facilities, personnel, and the public. Yet despite taking the same risks and showing the same dedication to duty, VA Police Officers do not qualify as "law enforcement officers" under either the Civil Service Retirement System or the Federal Employees Retirement System. That is due to an anachronistic statutory definition and years of erroneous interpretations by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) that refuses to recognize the hazards associated with modern day policing work and the realities of policing in this post-9/11 environment. This has led to a disparity between the federal law enforcement officers who receive pension and retirement benefits that is unfair and untenable. In our view, a "law enforcement officer" in the federal service is a law enforcement officer no matter which agency they work for. And the sooner Congress and OPM recognize this fact for the VA Police, the sooner the agency will be able to compete with state and local agencies and improve its recruitment and retention efforts.

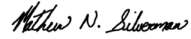
In addition, FLEOA also recommends Congress consider legislation removing the VA Police from the Chain of Command of local Healthcare Center or Medical Center Directors. We have heard from our members that the current situation creates an appearance of impropriety, and directors are provided access to law enforcement sensitive information they truly should not have a need to know. By policy, a director can also order a United States District Court Violation Notice (USDCVN) dismissed. This not only interferes with lawful enforcement but again shows the potential for interference in day-to-day police operations and individual officer discretion.

And finally, FLEOA recommends implementation of a policy that allows all VA Police Officers to take their duty weapons home. Most other federal law enforcement agencies that had similarly inept policies quickly abandoned them after the 9/11 attacks, and specifically the attack on the Pentagon, because of the need to ensure that officers were fully prepared to respond to critical incidents at a moment's notice, whether on duty or off. At some VA locations today, the locker

rooms are geographically separated from the armories, and we have Police Officers who are in full uniform but unarmed as they move through their duty locations. Further, the opportunity to walk into an active threat situation is also a concern. Given the rise in recent years in targeted attacks, ambushes, and assaults of police officers regardless of the uniform or badge they wear, not providing VA Police Officers with take home weapons creates serious officer safety concerns.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our views. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide any additional information.

Sincerely,



Mathew N. Silverman
National President