

Written Testimony of Germaine Clarno
For Submission to
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
November 18, 2015

Senator Kirk, thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony to discuss the culture of continued fear and retaliation at Edward Hines, Jr Hospital.

I also want to personally thank you for your unrelenting efforts in protecting those that nobly care for our nation's veterans. The VA Patient Protection Act will include a method to protect whistleblowers while holding those who retaliate against whistleblowers accountable and as a result will provide better care for our veterans.

I am a Social Worker and Local President of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE). I have worked at Edward Hines, Jr. Hospital in Illinois for 6 years, 2 years after receiving a Masters in Social Work. Social Work is a second career, it was important to me that I work with veterans so I was elated with the opportunity to work at the VA. It has been an honor and privilege to serve our nations veterans in the capacity of a mental health provider. I have worked alongside amazing dedicated employees that share the same passion for helping our veterans heal from the invisible wounds of war.

Unfortunately, I experienced early in my career the toxic culture of fear. Asking a simple question or suggestion can result in career sabotage. I witnessed good intentioned professional employees be retaliated against for simply wanting to raise issues that interfered with quality health care for our veterans. After 3 years working in mental health, I had experienced and witnessed deplorable treatment of employees that dared to speak up against fraud, waste and abuse. My dedication to our veterans convinced me to explore means to improve the culture at Hines. The root cause was mistreatment of frontline employees that did not have a voice or an advocate. I then became a Chief Steward for Local 781 at Hines, with determination and the union contract, I optimistically marched onward with an honored mission to change the culture at Hines.

The Master Agreement (our union contract) states in our preamble "The Department and the Union agree that a constructive and cooperative working relationship between labor and management is essential to achieving the Department's mission and to ensuring a quality work environment for all employees".

This agreement is not honored by the leadership at Hines. They spend more time finding loop holes of the contract and ways not to comply with this simple agreement, which is also an

element of Secretary McDonald's "Blue Print for Excellence." He states "VA will become an organization where employees are comfortable raising issues and concerns. Only then, can we truly thrive and innovate". This plan for change was published a year ago and employees are still afraid, more than ever.

During my time as a union representative I have seen firsthand the obstacles for employees to perform at the highest level due to an environment that is not conducive to enhancing employee morale and efficiency. In the fall of 2012, after exhausting all avenues with in her chain of command, Dr. Lisa Nee came to me, as other employees have with overwhelming evidence of wrongdoing by the leadership at Hines.

The severe retaliation that Dr. Nee's experienced as the result of her disclosure is not unique. Retaliation at Hines is a systematic campaign of interpersonal destruction that jeopardizes employee's health, careers, and the jobs they once loved. These forms of retaliation is a nonphysical form of violence, but because it is violence and abusive, emotional harm often is the result.

It's been over a year since I first disclosed wrong doing at Hines in regards to waitlist, scheduling manipulation and excessive wait time for veterans requesting individual therapy for PTSD on CBS evening news. The very next day of my disclosure the Hines leadership had a meeting without my knowledge, in the chapel, with approximately 300 of my coworkers from mental health. That day 300 employees were taken away from their work areas and were not serving veterans. The purpose of the meeting was to discredit my claims and turn my coworkers against me. That same day I received emails and voicemails from my supervisor ordering me to report to the criminal division of the OIG on Hines Campus.

What was more outrageous is that leadership attempted to discredit a veteran that also was in this news story by sharing information from his medical chart. Blaming him for the delays by saying that he cancelled appointments or was a no show. Veterans aren't immune to retaliation at Hines.

I wish I could report that things have improved at Hines but the sad truth is it has not. Just in the past couple of weeks employees have been severely retaliated against. One of these employees is Jasmine Ramakrishna. Jasmine gave me permission to tell her story today. Jasmine is a Dental Hygienist at Hines, like most of our front line employees she is dedicated to serving veterans. She has reported wrongdoing on issues in the dental clinic to include unnecessary procedures (for the purpose of increasing productivity) and issues with assessments and coding procedures. As a result of her raising concerns, she is currently being retaliated against. Jasmine has always been rated outstanding on her performance appraisals but when she received her performance appraisal a few weeks ago her rating was lowered. Jasmine and I met with her supervisor to discuss her rating and he responded that she has violated the VA Code of Conduct. Jasmine has never been counseled or informed of any

wrongdoing but in this meeting he referenced a folder that contained information that he “has on her” and is refusing to share with the employee. As you can imagine this is devastating for this employee. This is example of a supervisor using his power to make false allegations and violate the law to harass and intimidate an employee. The union has filed grievances and he is refusing to respond. As a result, the union has filed two separate Unfair Labor Practices with the Federal Labor Relations Authority against the agency.

This same supervisor, the Chief of the Dental clinic is also harassing another employee, a dentist. This supervisor is asking co-workers to surveillance him. After a meeting I had with this supervisor to notify him that asking co-workers to surveillance other employees is not appropriate and is illegal, he called the police and made a false a report that I was aggressive and threatening him. This event took place just this past Monday. Ironically, one of Senator Kirk’s staff members was in my office when the police arrived and witnessed the harassment. That same day I notified Hines leadership of this disgraceful conduct and I have not received a reply. Another form of retaliation is to ignore the complaint or justify the supervisor’s behavior.

My concern is for our veterans. When employees are being intimidated and retaliated against for speaking up for quality care, the nation’s veterans pay the price. In order to retain the best and brightest healthcare providers, to service the needs of our nation’s heroes, we must rid our workplace of the toxic, retaliatory practices engaged in by management.

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