Helman Defends Decision to Pull VA Sponsorship of Veterans Day Parade

Sharon Helman, Phoenix VA Director, defended her decision to cancel VA sponsorship of the annual Phoenix Veterans Day Parade in a 4/10/13 email to VA employees. Helman said that VA sponsorship was cancelled because of "…priorities in the organization (specifically access), and heightened awareness over liability concerns which VA Legal Counsel brought forward". She concluded her letter by warning "… that all media inquiries should be forwarded to Paul Coupaud, Acting Public Affairs Officer".

VA officials initially said fear of litigation prompted the review of VA support. Last year, a float carrying wounded Veterans in a Midland, Texas, parade collided with a freight train, killing four and injuring 17. Crash victims and their families filed lawsuits in Texas against Union Pacific Railroad and the float owner. The VA was not a defendant, and the VA has not issued any national directives on liability as a result of the tragedy.

In past years, the VA did not contribute cash for the parade. Instead, it served as lead sponsor by providing staging areas at its medical center and allowing Paula Pedene, the former Director of Public Relations at the Phoenix VA, to serve as coordinator. It also provided other support and hosted award events, an essay contest and banquets. Pedene was demoted in the wake of her testimony to the VA Office of Inspector General against former VA administrators. Pedene testified that the Phoenix VA suffered from leadership run amok. She said that agency bosses intimidated employees and created a hostile workplace.

Phoenix VA employees had provided volunteer support on their own time for the Phoenix Veterans Day Parade. No mention has been made of clinical VA employees who participated in parade activities during regular working hours instead of providing care. It is difficult to understand how cancelling sponsorship of the Phoenix Veterans Day Parade will provide increased access to healthcare for Veterans. However, wasting clinical staff time with lengthy and extraneous emails such as the one sent out 4/10/13 or Ms. Helman's equally lengthy and extraneous weekly e-mails to employees will compromise access. As Helman said in her letter the VA must focus on "bringing additional staff on board" to care for the 81,000 Veterans enrolled at the Phoenix VA. If true, the alleged pattern of abuse, discrimination and retaliation at the Phoenix VA will jeopardize the hiring and retention of the necessary clinical staff to provide Phoenix Veterans access to quality healthcare.

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