

## VA WORKERS DENOUNCE JOB RECLASSIFICATIONS, VETERAN DESERVE BETTER



Thousands of hard-working, conscientious Veterans Health Administration (VHA) workers, many of whom are war veterans, are helplessly seeing their job classifications, randomly downgraded over the last couple of years. What has further irked and saddened them is that the arbitrary decisions are taken, at times, without even talking to or informing the affected employees. Impacted employees include disabled veterans, women and minorities. Most of the workers are in low paying jobs and they include patient support assistants, medical record clerks, transportation assistants and others providing vital support services within the agency. AFGE National VA Council President Alma Lee says: "VA employees have a target on their back. The agency has spent the past two years devastating the lives of modest wage earners who play a crucial role in supporting medical center functions within the VA." Marlon Askew is a proud veteran. A former Army sergeant he served in the Desert Storm. Proud of his past, he continues to wear a black with "Veteran" emblazoned upon it. Following 14 years in the army, he went to work for the Department of Veteran Affairs as a telephone operator. Instead of being disgruntled and upset at the treatment being meted out to him and his colleagues, he said, "If I won the lottery tomorrow," he said, "I would still choose to work at the VA and continue to serve those who have served our country." Downgrading of workers job is given under the rather pompous name "Job Classification Modernization Initiative." Moreover, upon finding out what exactly was the duty of the initiative, a long garrulous, long-winded statement followed from the agency, it said that the agency working with the Office of Personnel Management, has begun "an effort to modernize, standardize and balance our job classification processes. This effort will result in new standardized position descriptions that better reflect the duties they perform." Not understanding the legalese and verbosity of the statement the workers are simply calling it the "Rip-off." Two years of waiting for things to improve, finally took its toll and on Wednesday, demonstrated in front of the VA's Central Office, across from the White House, to denounce the agency's reclassification program. Asked told the crowd, "The VA recently downgraded me from a GS-5 to a GS-4. The VA did not even have the decency to meet with me in person before downgrading me. After 16 years of service, I heard through a memo that this was happening to me." "VA employees take care of the troops coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan and from other parts of the world where they are deployed, and they do a tremendous job supporting them," said Dwight Bowman, AFGE's District 14 National Vice President. "But in order for them to be able to do the job, they have to have decent pay just like everybody else because they have families to support. They are just an integral part of everything that goes on." Whatever reasons the VA may have had for the "Job Classification Modernization Initiative," but surely it is basic courtesy and civility to inform the worker beforehand that his classification is being downgraded. It is showing the person respect. Asked says that more than the downgrading, he finds the agency's neglect hard to take and says that he feels "incredibly disappointed" at the way the agency has treated him. VA spokeswoman Jo Schuda said the agency "held public meetings at VA medical centers to address employee questions and concerns." The spokeswoman should understand that an employee of more than 16 years certainly deserves to hear personally about losing a job or degrading of it. The VA spokesperson assured the workers that, The VA "will continue to make every effort to minimize the number of individuals affected by these actions. VA will continue to provide grade and pay retention to any impacted employees so they can maintain their current salaries." Although the downgrading will not mean that Askew's pay will become less immediately, but it will limit their chances for raises and reduce retirement income. The union wants a halt on the reclassifications. According to an AFGE statement, "the agency has been unable to demonstrate that the lowest paid segment of the VA workforce should be the sole target of classification reviews and has yet to produce any evidence that the downgrades of VA support personnel will improve the functioning of the agency or its ability to serve veterans," according to an AFGE statement. "I am angry. I feel betrayed," said Richard Fleming, another Army vet who has been with the VA for 20 years. "Every single night, I keep asking myself the same questions over and over and over," he said. "Why are they doing this? What have I done? What have my co-workers done to deserve this?" "We want to make the community aware, make the country aware, and certainly get the attention of the Veterans Administration in that we're not going to stand by and let them cut the bottom of the pay scale," said Colleen Stewart, a VA nurse from Salisbury, N.C.