

The Honorable Mike Coffman  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Coffman.

I am here with you today to testify about the unacceptable, vicious and ongoing retaliation against Dr. Sheila Meuse and myself for our whistleblower activity at the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System (CAVHCS), where the Director, James Talton, became the first SES (Senior Executive Service) member in history fired for neglect of duty. The Chief of Staff, also under investigation, was on paid leave for six months, and quietly retired in December 2014.

With disingenuous claims of improvements, there remains an atmosphere of exclusion and retaliation, against those who did not support Talton, or subsequently, the dangerously inexperienced leadership, and ineffectual management of Robin Jackson, the Deputy Network Director over Talton during his tenure, and who was immediately planted as interim director by Charles Sepich, the VISN 7 Director.

Dr. Meuse and I were two seasoned and experienced, yet idealistic newcomers to the leadership team of CAVHCS in March 2014. Although we both identified scheduling manipulations, illegal hiring practices, continued use of paper wait lists, severely delayed consults, critical levels of understaffing, fraud, and a complete breakdown of HR (Human Resources Management), directly to Talton, we quickly concluded he would not support our efforts to hold staff accountable.

In June 2014 we were forwarded an e-mail message sent to Talton in April of 2013, alerting him to critical scheduling manipulations from a staff physician. Since Talton was publicly claiming no prior knowledge of any scheduling manipulations, we became seriously concerned about his integrity, and on June 11, raised those concerns directly to Robin Jackson and Charles Sepich. We also informed them that we had been contacted by Representative Martha Roby on June 10, regarding her face to face meeting with Talton.

Immediately after our June 11 confidential disclosures to Sepich and Jackson, the severe retaliations from Talton escalated exponentially. We later learned it was because Sepich and Jackson had communicated every word of our confidential conversation about Talton, directly to Talton that very same day.

On June 24 I sent an emergent e-mail plea to Sepich, informing him of continued violent outbursts and mismanagement by Talton. The very next morning I was forced off the Montgomery VA campus by order of Robin Jackson. I was devastated to realize that I had been betrayed.

I was constructively removed from my leadership responsibilities, and prevented from

acting in any leadership capacity by Talton and subsequently, by Jackson in humiliating all-employee e-mails.

Although Sepich had promised me that he would immediately begin a Fact Finding to help, in fact, four days earlier he had already chartered a fact-finding to investigate fabricated allegations by Talton and Jackson against us. That FF was chaired by a subordinate of Sepich. As a result, Sepich, and Jackson requested an AIB (Administrative Investigative Board) from VACO on us without any specific charges.

The AIB was conducted by the OAR (VA's Office of Accountability Review) the week of October 27, 2014, with results due on January 19, 2015. Instead, the AIB requested additional, on-site testimony, citing a new allegation put forward by a union president who was not selected for a promotion, thus extending the investigation, and it's scope.

One of the AIB members, a sitting director, was a former subordinate, and friend of Charles Sepich.

Incredulously, during my first year at CAVHCS, I had been under the weight of investigations for 305 out of 365 days without a single charge, and beginning within my first 45 work days.

It is difficult to describe the level of disrespect, harassment, and retaliation we endured from Talton, Sepich, and Jackson as he removed hospital services from my authority, initiated major reorganizations and realignments adversely impacting my position, and without my input. My direct reports bypassed me, reporting to him at his request. I was excluded from key informational resources, blocked from critical administrative reports of major program assessments, and important site reviews.

In fact, when I asked for the complete administrative assessment done by Jackson himself, a month before I arrived, he told me, "If you want to see it, request the information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)".

In an amazing failure of leadership, Sepich and Jackson actually detailed Dr. Meuse out of the state for 90 days, in the middle of our crisis!

I speak with you today, with a heavy heart. Disgusted by continued cover-ups, a discrediting campaign through open-ended investigations, and the attempted destruction of my career, by the very VA I have always loved being part of.

So many VA employees are closely monitoring this issue, and hoping VA leadership at all levels will demonstrate a commitment to true excellence and transparency, by creating an environment free from Whistle Blower Reprisal and Retaliation.

If the retaliatory actions from CAVHCS and VISN 7 against a dedicated veteran executive and brilliant career woman executive, both who have committed their lives to serving our Veterans, is tolerated in the least, it will most certainly have a chilling effect on any others considering stepping forward to protect the organization we all love serving Veterans through.

I have feared the loss of my job and career, and we both fear a further loss of our personal and professional reputations, but Dr. Meuse and I sat in disbelief a year ago, and agreed at that moment in time, we didn't have a choice, because it was more important to protect our Veterans, than protecting either one of our own careers.

We respectfully request that you immediately address the overt Whistle Blower Retaliation that has become rampant in our VA.

We thank you for your commitment to our Veterans.

Sincerely,

Richard J. Tremaine, MBA  
Associate Director CAVHCS

With Acknowledgement and support,  
Dr. Sheila Meuse  
Assistant Director, (retired 3.31.15)