



April 11, 2025
The Honorable Douglas A. Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Subject: Concerns Regarding Recent Workforce Reductions Affecting Social Workers in the VA

Dear Secretary Collins:

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the more than 18,000 social workers who are employed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)¹, I am writing to express our deep concern regarding the recent workforce reductions within the VA, particularly those impacting social workers. Social workers have been integral to the VA's mission since 1926, providing essential services such as mental health care, crisis intervention, and support for veterans and their families. The recent dismissals threaten to disrupt the continuity and quality of care that our veterans rely upon.

The United States is home to more than 18 million veterans and veteran households constitute approximately 11 percent of our nation's households, underscoring VA services' extensive reach and necessity. The VA operates nearly 200 post-traumatic stress disorder treatment centers, offering individual, family, and group therapy, as well as resources for homeless veterans. The longstanding partnership between the VA and social workers has been pivotal in delivering comprehensive, person-centered care to our nation's veterans.

Recent reports indicate that the VA plans to reduce its workforce by approximately 10,000 full-time positions in 2025, representing about two percent of the total VA employee count. Notably, most of these reductions are expected to occur at medical care sites.² Additionally, the VA announced the dismissal of more than 1,000 employees on February 13, 2025, and more than 1,400 probationary employees on February 24, 2025, with the intent to redirect at least \$181 million annually to health care, benefits, and services for VA beneficiaries.³ While we understand the need for fiscal responsibility and efficiency, it is imperative to consider the potential impact of these workforce reductions on the delivery of critical services to veterans.

NASW is also gravely concerned by the VA's recent return-to-office mandate, which abruptly rescinded all telework agreements. This sudden policy shift poses an immediate threat to the protection of sensitive health information and jeopardizes the quality of care delivered to our nation's veterans.

Under the current directive, social workers are being placed in shared office spaces that lack the necessary privacy to conduct therapeutic sessions. Even with the use of headphones, providers may inadvertently overhear confidential conversations or be exposed to screens displaying protected health information, placing them at serious risk of violating HIPAA regulations and other federal privacy laws. These conditions create profound ethical concerns and could endanger the professional licensure of VA social workers.

¹ VA News, The diverse, far-reaching VA social worker profession

² Shane III, L. VA plans to trim 10,000 jobs this year, mostly from medical sites

³ VA News, VA dismisses more than 1,000 employees

NASW has received numerous reports from social workers indicating that these environments are not only inappropriate for clinical practice but may also compromise the safety, dignity, and mental well-being of the veterans they serve.

NASW has a long-standing partnership with the VA, including our commitment to the White Ribbon VA Initiative, which aims to end domestic violence and promote a culture of safety and respect within the veteran community. Our partnership has taken serious steps to eliminate domestic violence across the country, recognizing that the well-being of veterans extends beyond traditional health care. Social workers are at the heart of this effort, working alongside the VA to address intimate partner violence, provide trauma-informed care, and support survivors. Deepening our partnership with the VA will not only strengthen our ability to combat domestic violence but also expand our collective efforts to address the mental health crisis among veterans.

Any person who has served our country should never have to fear whether they will receive quality and fair treatment when it comes to their mental health. Social workers are uniquely trained to provide the specialized care that veterans need, from suicide prevention and PTSD treatment to housing support and reintegration services. Reducing social work positions within the VA system threatens to widen gaps in care at a time when demand for mental health services continues to rise. We cannot afford to let that happen.

We respectfully urge the Department of Veterans Affairs to carefully evaluate the implications of these workforce reductions on service delivery, particularly concerning social work services. We recommend:

1. **Suspend Implementation of the Return-to-Office Order** – Temporarily pause the return-to-office mandate for social workers providing telehealth services until a comprehensive assessment is conducted at VA facilities. This assessment should evaluate office space availability, privacy considerations, and other critical factors to ensure compliance with professional and legal standards.
2. **Protect Confidentiality in Office Accommodations** – Ensure that in-office work environments maintain the confidentiality of veteran care by providing suitable private spaces. If sufficient accommodation cannot be met, allow social workers providing telehealth services to continue remote work to ensure the integrity of care and compliance with privacy regulations. Any future workforce directives must prioritize the protection of patient confidentiality, uphold the highest ethical standards of care, and ensure that social workers are able to serve veterans in safe, private, and clinically appropriate settings.
3. **Maintain Staffing Levels for Essential Veteran Care** – Ensure that positions critical to veteran care, particularly in mental health and social work, are adequately staffed to meet the growing needs of veterans and maintain high-quality service delivery.
4. **Engage in Strategic Collaboration** – Partner with professional organizations, such as NASW, to develop strategies that uphold service quality, enhance operational efficiency, and support the well-being of both providers and veterans.

NASW remains dedicated to supporting the VA in its mission to deliver exceptional care to veterans. We stand ready to collaborate, share our expertise, and help navigate these challenges together. Our organizations have valued our longstanding partnership, and we urge your team to carefully consider the issues that could further weaken the mental health workforce serving America's veterans. For any questions or to continue this discussion, please contact Barbara Bedney, Ph.D., M.S.W., NASW's Chief of Programs, at Bbedney.nasw@socialworkers.org.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response and to working together to uphold the highest standards of care for our veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anthony Estreet', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Anthony Estreet, PhD, MBA, LCSW-C
Chief Executive Officer
National Association of Social Workers