

GUEST COMMENTARY

Underpaid and understaffed, VA nurses deserve better | Commentary

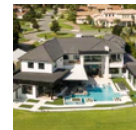
By Cynthia Boston-Thomson


Jumble Daily & Crossword
Play Now


Advertencia de congelamiento en efecto para los condados de Flori...



'The market is changing.' Orlando mega-mansions fetch millions more in 2022.



Frigid weather in Orlando

Thank you for supporting our journalism. This article is available exclusively for our subscribers, who help fund our work at the Orlando Sentinel.

Listen to this article



Veterans Affairs hospital workers are facing a crisis after staffing shortages spiked 22 percent over the past year, according to the [VA's Office of Inspector General](#). Contributing to this staffing shortage crisis is another hardship we face that the VA is reluctant to account for: VA workers are significantly underpaid compared to their private sector counterparts.

That comparatively low pay, affecting Title 38 employees including medical staff like nurses, makes it harder to attract employees to deal with the VA's staffing shortages. Because of this, VA nurses and members of my union, the American Federation of Government Employees National VA Council (AFGE NVAC),

representing over 291,000 employees, have been rallying to demand fair and equitable pay.



Cynthia Boston-Thompson is the local president of AFGE 507 in West Palm Beach.

Unfortunately, the VA has failed to conduct required regular [pay surveys](#) for many Title 38 and hybrid employees, resulting in inaccessible wage data and unclear pay policies that keep employees in the dark. This, combined with [38 USC 7422](#), prohibits VA nurses from grieving issues related to compensation and creates a system where VA nurses have significantly fewer tools to fight for fair compensation compared to other federal nurses or nurses in the private sector. In fact, many VA medical staff cannot bargain over routine issues like the calculation of overtime pay or shift schedules

because management unfairly labels them “nongrievable.”

The [VA Employee Fairness Act](#), introduced by Rep. Mark Takano last year and now boasting 218 bipartisan co-sponsors, would help fix this inequitable treatment by ensuring all clinicians in the VA would be able to bargain over workplace matters, such as the way that pay laws and policies are implemented for calculating pay for weekend shifts, or wage surveys are conducted to ensure that VA medical staff are paid competitive wages.

These pay disparities are pushing workers to private hospitals where they make more money, just as the [VA continues its push to privatize veteran care](#). The VA healthcare workforce delivers the best care possible to our nation’s veterans every

day. That is why the VA leads private hospitals in 10 out of 11 metrics measuring patient experience in a [recent study](#). It is also why a large, recent [Stanford University study](#) found older veterans are 46% less likely to die when treated at VA emergency rooms compared to private hospitals.

If the VA wants to address the staffing crisis, it should seriously consider ways to increase retention, starting with following the laws Congress passed to ensure the VA has enough healthcare staff, complying with its own policies on compensation and making long payments of pay raises and retention incentives. In a signal that workers' concerns about fair pay are well-founded, nurses in Las Vegas recently planned a rally to call attention to the issue, and management agreed to meet with the local union representatives and nurse practitioners, which resulted in a [12% raise](#) for Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs).

Meanwhile, my coworkers and I show up every day to care for our nation's heroes, but low pay results in low morale and it pushes our nurses into private care. We don't want to choose between caring for veterans and keeping food on the table for our families.

VA hospitals nationwide will soon see an influx of many new patients as a result of the recent passage of the [PACT Act](#), a law expanding VA health care for veterans for millions of veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances. While the law is a significant and deserved win for veterans, increased demand for health care will further strain our understaffed hospitals.

The answer to this issue is two-fold: The VA should invest more in its staff to ensure medical staff wages match those in the private sector and Title 38 employees should be granted the same bargaining rights as other clinicians by Congress passing the VA Employee Fairness Act. We also hope the VA will finally comply with its own policies for ensuring competitive compensation.

VA workers, many of who are veterans themselves, love caring for our nation's veterans, but for veterans to continue to receive the care they deserve, changes at

the VA are necessary, and VA workers will continue to rally and voice our concerns until we see it.

Cynthia Boston-Thompson is the local president of AFGE 507 in West Palm Beach. She is vice president for AFGE, which represents Orlando and other Central Florida communities, on the Florida AFL-CIO Executive Board.



A New SUV For Seniors Is Cheaper Than You Might Imagine

Senior Offers | Search Ads | Sponsored

2 Cards Charging 0% Interest Until 2024

CompareCredit.com | Sponsored

The most popular giant dog breeds in America

To identify the most popular big dogs in the United States, 24/7 Tempo used the[a href="https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/dog-breeds/the-most-popular-dog-breeds-of-...](https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/dog-breeds/the-most-popular-dog-breeds-of-...)

Orlando Sentinel

The New Hyundai Palisade Is Nearly Unrecognizable

Hyundai Palisade SUV Sales | Sponsored