

Pittsburgh VA System's PR tops \$1 Million a Year

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The VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System has assembled a growing public relations operation with salaries and bonuses topping \$1 million a year.

Records obtained under the federal Freedom of Information Act show the PR staff earned nearly \$40,000 in bonuses over the past two years. Additional records obtained by the Tribune-Review show \$35,000 that the Department of Veterans Affairs declined to make public, contending disclosure of performance bonuses "would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of an individual's personal privacy."

David E. Cowgill, who heads the public affairs office, received nine bonuses totaling about \$20,000.

Keith Watson, president of American Federation of Government Employees Local 2028, said \$20,000 in bonuses to one employee is "astronomical. None of our workers comes even close to that."

Colleen Evans, president of AFGE Local 3344, said the average bonus paid to workers whom she represents is \$200 to \$350, although they rarely go as high as \$3,000.

Records reviewed by the Tribune-Review show unionized workers often share "group bonus awards" granted to those in certain job categories, ranging from \$200 to \$375 apiece.

Evans said records indicate the bonuses go primarily to nonunion workers and not "front-line workers. It's very demoralizing," she said, adding that the bonus system "is not fair and equitable."

Cowgill said the bonus program was "part of the approved and authorized performance award system used by VA and by all (federal) organizations."

The public affairs office produces newsletters and annual reports touting accomplishments of the local operation.

"I am proud to say that this issue is bursting with examples of recent successes," VA Regional Director Michael E. Moreland wrote in an introductory message to one of the glossy newsletters, titled "Vision for Excellence."

Cowgill, in a one-page statement in response to questions, said his staff performs multiple functions and the newsletters and other publications are only a "small collateral" part of their duties.

Although the staff performs some duties for the entire region, known as the Veterans Integrated Service Network, or VISN 4, its primary functions are for the Pittsburgh VA, Cowgill said. Moreland heads VISN 4, which includes Pennsylvania and parts of West Virginia, New York, Delaware and New Jersey.

VA records for the public affairs office show 17 employees, including four recent hires. Base salaries range from \$51,590 to \$114,988, the amount paid to Cowgill.

"The money would be much better spent on patient care, real patient care," Evans said.

The Pittsburgh VA is not the only regional arm of the department that publishes a newsletter. Others are posted on websites for regional hubs, including Palo Alto, Calif., and Durham, N.C.

"I don't see any problem with them trying to communicate through the newsletters," Watson said. "But with talk of government shutdowns, I'd rather see the money go somewhere else."

Cowgill said the office produces videos for departments, manages internal and external websites, conducts community relations efforts and supports programs such as the National Wheelchair Games.

He declined to provide data on annual costs.

The VA posts links to the newsletters and annual reports on its local website. Records show orders for about 17,500 copies of each newsletter from the government printing office.

The office gave contracts to produce online and printed reports. It made payments for the annual reports and newsletters to Square Peg Design of New Stanton and Karen Lew, a New York graphic designer. The payments covered redesign of the magazine, according to billing records, which Moreland ordered in order to "breathe new life into this stalled publication."

Citing privacy concerns, the VA refused to provide a mailing list for the newsletters.

You can view the above Article at,

http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/news/pittsburgh/s_715194.html

Contact: Congressman's Mike Doyle's Office at, (412) 664-4049 to let him know how you feel about this.