

DAV calls for VA Secretary's removal



DAV calls for VA Secretary's removal in response to VA Inspector General report on "Senior VA Officials' Response to a Veteran's Sexual Assault Allegations"

A statement from Randy Reese, Executive Director of DAV's Washington Headquarters:

After thoroughly reviewing the report issued last week by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) Office of Inspector General (OIG), DAV (Disabled American Veterans) no longer has confidence that Secretary Wilkie can effectively lead the department and calls for his immediate removal.

DAV does not take this action lightly; but it is clear, based on the troubling findings and conclusions of the recent VA OIG report, that Secretary Wilkie's personal actions in response to a reported incident of sexual assault at the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center, breached the trust of those whom he is beholden to honor and serve. Rather than swiftly investigating the sexual assault allegations and focusing on preventing future incidents, Secretary Wilkie and other senior VA leaders took actions to investigate and disparage the veteran who was assaulted.

The OIG report found that "...Secretary Wilkie made comments that questioned the veteran's credibility or were otherwise denigrating to her..." and that, "Secretary Wilkie's statements appeared to set the tone for VA officials' attempts to focus

the national media on the veteran's background and credibility."

The OIG concluded that, "Secretary Wilkie and other VA officials privately disparaged the veteran..." and that "The tone set by Secretary Wilkie was at minimum unprofessional and at worst provided the basis for senior officials to put out information to national reporters to question the credibility and background of the veteran who filed the sexual assault complaint."

Furthermore, the OIG stated that its investigation was, "... hindered by the refusal of several senior VA officials to cooperate with requests for follow-up interviews to clarify and resolve conflicts...", most prominently Secretary Wilkie.

Time and time again, our organization has stated that changing the culture at VA must begin at the highest levels of leadership—that in order for VA to foster an environment where all veterans feel welcome and safe accessing their earned care, VA's top leaders must set the example and hold accountable anyone who violates this trust.

Based on the troubling findings and conclusions of the report, it is clear that from the onset, the Secretary's and other senior officials' handling of this case was at serious odds with the department's no-tolerance policy toward sexual harassment. The Secretary's failure to meet this standard or hold others accountable undermines decades of work that advocates—including many VA staff—have done to bring an end to sexual harassment and assault throughout the department.

VA can and must do better.