



State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

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69th Montana Legislature

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January 22, 2026

Brigadier General Trenton Gibson, Adjutant General Montana National Guard
Department of Military Affairs
P.O. Box 4789
1956 Mt. Majo Street
Fort Harrison, MT 59636-4789
Trenton.Gibson@mt.gov

Dear General Gibson,

At its January 12, 2026, meeting, the members of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs (SAVA) Interim Committee heard public testimony from an individual named Dave Kesler, who shared concerns about an employee at the Fort Harrison VA Hospital. The documentation Mr. Kesler provided is attached to this letter. Here is a summary of the concerns raised:

- potential fiduciary waste of funds in renting an MRI unit that would be more financially responsible purchased;
- poor judgment on the use of a generator leading to the hospitalization of employees using a rented CT machine;
- multiple removals by police witnessed by VA staff;
- sexual harassment through provocative body movements;
- annual employee evaluations on roughly 25 people approaching 80 days late; and
- severe harassment causing multiples employees to quit.

The SAVA committee members and I were concerned by the testimony. We request that you make inquiries into the matter to the extent permitted by your authority, as we understand that the VA Hospital is a federal entity, and your office is a state entity. The committee would like an update on any information you are able to acquire on this matter at our next meeting, which is scheduled for Monday, March 9, 2026.

Thank you for your attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Theresa Manzella".

Senator Theresa Manzella, Presiding Officer

cc: Renea Dorvall, Deputy Director, Department of Military Affairs (sent via email)
Matt Young, Division Administrator, Montana Veteran Affairs Division (sent via email)

VA Oversight Legislative Committee

Subject; Trent Sickles

1/12/26

Let me preface with, I have a tremendous respect and admiration for the service of our veterans. Our veterans and service members as well as those who care for them, deserve the best care and treatment available and in a quick and orderly fashion. In light of their service some leniency should be afforded but truth and justice should always prevail, as our constitution intends. There is no excuse for not doing the job you're hired to do, or intimidating or harassing staff, Veteran or not.

I don't know the man I'm about to tell you about and am only relaying what I've been told by the staff under him, who are too afraid of retaliation to come forward on their own. Their fear of retaliation was tangible and obviously real. What I'm relaying is what they've told me.

It has recently come to my attention that Veterans have had problems receiving care due to defective equipment purchases, ineffective and retaliatory actions by the department head and what I consider department wide sexual harassment by the Radiology department head. In talking with multiple VA Radiology employees I was told that after multiple employee interviews the Dept head was suspended for 9 of the last 12 months and not allowed direct contact with Radiology department personnel and since his return his behavior has not changed. As of today he is 72 days late in completing performance reviews for the roughly 25 staff he supervises, costing them up to \$2000 each in performance bonuses. I'm told he wears extremely tight pants and stands in front of them both individually or in groups "hip thrusting" or "slow motion twerking", making the staff so uncomfortable I'm told 2 women have quit their jobs.

I was told that in August, the Radiology Department Manager rented an MRI machine for the next 5 years and is paying roughly the purchase price of the machine each year. So he's paying five times the cost of a new machine and in 5 years he's back to square one with no machine. I'm told he was advised strongly by his staff with experience with this model, not to rent this particular machine and to purchase another type machine better suited to what the VA MRI machine would be used for. The cost I'm hearing is roughly \$1.75 Million per year. I'm also told this machine only has one, part time, contract operator and the machine isn't working correctly so it's virtually not in use. After 5 months this is unacceptable and robbing our Veterans of needed services.

I'm told that a CT repair technician was called to service one of the two CT machines, scheduled an appointment, showed up when scheduled time only to find the Department director didn't check the machine use schedule and the technician was sent home to Great Falls without accessing the CT machine for the updates and repairs.

I've been told he ordered a portable CT machine, against staff recommendations, had it installed with a diesel generator. He oversaw the installation, staff even witnessed him "stepping off" the location to ensure it would fit. I was told that two of the CT techs had to be taken to the ER because his generator CO2 poisoned them while working.

Each year the staff at the VA receives a performance bonus of up to \$2000 or 40 hrs paid time off. It's each department head's job to complete an assessment on each of the employees under them and sign off on the bonuses by October 31. As of today it's been 72 days since these evaluations were to be completed and they're still not done, robbing the roughly 25 employees under him of their earned bonuses. The staff has emailed multiple times and gets promises back but is ultimately blown off. After his ~~90-day~~ suspension and being escorted out of the building twice by police it appears this is retaliatory infliction of hardship on the staff I assume he blames for his disciplinary actions. Please see pages 3-8 for more details on the bonuses delays.

9 months

I talked with three of the Radiology department ladies and each one told me mirroring accounts of his "hip thrusting" and that it made them extremely uncomfortable. It was described in various words that all describe him thrusting his genitalia/hips forward and back, generally toward the women he was speaking to. He was also described as regularly spreading his legs, sticking his butt out and "squatting" or "twerking in slow motion" in front of them. I'm no doctor, maybe there's a medical explanation but I cannot find an excuse to behave that way in front of any woman in any professional setting, or anywhere else for that matter.

Medical imaging is shown to provide up to 80% of patient diagnosis so this is not an area where inefficiencies, incompetence or sexual harassment can be tolerated. His reported dereliction of duty, incompetence and harassment is causing our Vets to wait up to a year sometimes, or go out the the private hospitals that are also backlogged. This is unacceptable but also correctable by replacing the derelict employee.

Thank you for helping protect our veterans and those that serve them in the facilities in MT and for your time and consideration into this matter. I believe we are all on the same page here. We want to root out fraud, waste, and abuse, streamline the process of care, and the best outcomes for everyone involved.

Dave Kesler III
Philipsburg, Mt. 59858
406-491-2650

Printed from email received from employee wishing to remain anonymous

Hey Dave,

Here are the easiest issues to highlight with Trent in Radiology.

-Paying for an MRI machine monthly that currently isn't running correctly so isn't seeing any patients. Resulting in patients having to go to Care in the Community.

-Employee performance evals have yet to be completed by Trent, were due 10/31. Resulting in employees missing out on time off/monetary awards for their hard work.

-Not abiding by and actively working against employees reasonable accommodations approved by HR and the employee's medical provider.

-Allowing numerous formal complaints about specific employees conduct to go unchecked for years. Resulting in those specific employees making Radiology a toxic environment for everyone.

-Missing deadlines on almost every task given to him, even by other departments, regardless of the importance of the task.

-Voluntarily acting as the subject matter expert on numerous contracts that he had no business heading, and in turn royally screwing them up. Resulting in a huge amount of wasted money.

-Intimidation of female employees when he doesn't get his way.

I'm sure there is more, those are just the highlights I could think of off the top of my head. There was a formal investigation done by one of his interim supervisors and the Union about a year (maybe more) ago that dealt with a lot of this. He was put on a 9 month detail then brought back to the department and nothing has changed.

EMPLOYEE EMAIL 2

Regarding the intimidation there was a formal EEO complaint that got escalated to National but took so long that it essentially "timed out". We don't have anything other than hearsay for the weird sexual stuff but there's more than one person who has the same facts about it.

The Union was actually on our side for that investigation. Trent is supervisor so he couldn't be backed by the union. His last boss who was around for that actually recommended termination but the lazy leadership above him couldn't be bothered.

When the time comes there are definitely receipts of \$ amount wasted. I just want to make sure that's all done above board- I still need my job.

From:Busscher, Darla D. <Darla.Busscher@va.gov>

Sent:Wednesday, December 10, 2025 4:45 PM

To:Chandler, Seth D. <Seth.Chandler@va.gov>; Jost, Tamara R. <Tamara.Jost@va.gov>; Combs, Alice NMI. <Alice.Combs@va.gov>

Cc:Young, Lucas A. <Lucas.Young1@va.gov>; Bradbury, Yvonne T. <Yvonne.Bradbury@va.gov>; Busscher, Darla D. <Darla.Busscher@va.gov>; Cheeseman, Eric D. <Eric.Cheeseman@va.gov>; Conley, Catherina M. <Catherina.Conley@va.gov>; Eckhart, Carmin L. <Carmin.Eckhart@va.gov>; Fleury, Nathan B. <Nathan.Fleury@va.gov>; Foley, Amber J. <Amber.Foley@va.gov>; Hansing, Jami L. <Jami.Hansing@va.gov>; Hauge, Lacey A. <Lacey.Hauge@va.gov>; Henson, Lisa M. <Lisa.Henson2@va.gov>; Hyndman, Sidney P. <Sidney.Hyndman@va.gov>; Kelly, Melissa <Melissa.Kelly10@va.gov>; Kuhlman, Hilary L. <Hilary.Kuhlman@va.gov>; Nelson, Michelle <Michelle.Nelson9@va.gov>; Osterman, Kristiana N. <Kristiana.Osterman@va.gov>; Phillips, Jason L. <Jason.Phillips@va.gov>; Raynor, Bobbi J. <Bobbi.Raynor@va.gov>; Ward, Digna <Digna.Ward@va.gov>; Zuraff, Ceara A. <Ceara.Zuraff@va.gov>

Subject:Performance Evaluations

Dear Dr. Chandler, Tamara, and Alice:

We are writing to bring to your immediate attention a serious and ongoing issue within our department concerning performance evaluations. The evaluations were due today, and once again, they have not been submitted by Trent Sickles. To our knowledge no evals have been completed for Fort Harrison radiology. We have no knowledge of the other radiology clinics within MTVA.

This delay is not an isolated incident but rather part of a persistent pattern of missed deadlines and neglected responsibilities. Such repeated oversights directly affect our eligibility for monetary or time-off awards, undermining our chances of recognition despite our hard work and dedication. Also, we were instructed to “give grace” and let past issues be “water under the bridge” and once again, it was made evident, that our efforts are not being fully valued by our supervisor.

What adds to our frustration is the fact that Trent Sickles was previously removed from the department unexpectedly without explanation. Since his return, the same problems have reoccurred, indicating no meaningful improvement or commitment to the responsibilities of his role. This continued negligence is severely impacting our morale and productivity, strengthening the belief that our efforts and contributions are undervalued by leadership. There is also growing concern among many of us that these decisions may be perceived as retaliatory in nature.

The situation is unacceptable and must be addressed asap. We request immediate action to ensure that the current evaluations are completed and submitted without further delay. Furthermore, we need a clear plan and commitment to meeting all future deadlines to prevent such issues from recurring.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this issue. We hope for a quick resolution.

Thank you,

Darla, Jami, Lisa, Luke, Eric, and Hilary

Darla Busscher, R.T.(N)(ARRT)
Nuclear Medicine Technologist
Diagnostic Imaging
Fort Harrison VA Medical Center
3687 Veterans Dr.
Fort Harrison, MT 59636-9703

406.447.7614 (O)
406.410.2177 ©

From: Sickles, Trent <Jefferson.Sickles@va.gov>

Sent: Tuesday, December 30, 2025 11:42 AM

To: Hansing, Jami L. <Jami.Hansing@va.gov>; Bradbury, Yvonne T. <Yvonne.Bradbury@va.gov>; Busscher, Darla D. <Darla.Busscher@va.gov>; Cheeseman, Eric D. <Eric.Cheeseman@va.gov>; Conley, Catherina M. <Catherina.Conley@va.gov>; Eckhart, Carmin L. <Carmin.Eckhart@va.gov>; Fleury, Nathan B. <Nathan.Fleury@va.gov>; Foley, Amber J. <Amber.Foley@va.gov>; Hauge, Lacey A. <Lacey.Hauge@va.gov>; Henson, Lisa M. <Lisa.Henson2@va.gov>; Hyndman, Sidney P. <Sidney.Hyndman@va.gov>; Kelly, Melissa <Melissa.Kelly10@va.gov>; Kuhlman, Hilary L. <Hilary.Kuhlman@va.gov>; Osterman, Kristiana N. <Kristiana.Osterman@va.gov>; Nelson, Michelle <Michelle.Nelson9@va.gov>; Phillips, Jason L. <Jason.Phillips@va.gov>; Raynor, Bobbi J. <Bobbi.Raynor@va.gov>; Visser, Patricia <Patricia.Visser@va.gov>; Young, Lucas A. <Lucas.Young1@va.gov>; Zuraff, Ceara A. <Ceara.Zuraff@va.gov>

Cc: Popwell, Richard E. <Richard.Popwell@va.gov>; Jost, Tamara R. <Tamara.Jost@va.gov>; Combs, Alice NMI. <Alice.Combs@va.gov>

Subject: RE: 2025 APPRAISAL UPDATE 11 DEC 2025

Good morning!

This was the topic of discussion with Dr. Popwell this morning during our daily huddle and my efforts have been focused on beefing up the appraisals where I can. At a minimum, I can tell you that everyone has been rated fully successful for 2025. I'm doing my best to recognize exceptional performance under the established standards, and this has proven quite challenging. This week and the next will be spent finalizing them and getting the 1:1 meetings scheduled.

V/R,

Trent Sickles, CRA

Diagnostic Imaging Administrator

Montana VA Health Care System

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Office: (406) 447-7605

Cell: (406) 422-2353

From: Hansing, Jami L. <Jami.Hansing@va.gov>

Sent: Tuesday, December 30, 2025 10:53 AM

To: Sickles, Trent <Jefferson.Sickles@va.gov>; Bradbury, Yvonne T. <Yvonne.Bradbury@va.gov>; Busscher, Darla D. <Darla.Busscher@va.gov>; Cheeseman, Eric D. <Eric.Cheeseman@va.gov>; Conley, Catherina M. <Catherina.Conley@va.gov>; Eckhart, Carmin L. <Carmin.Eckhart@va.gov>; Fleury, Nathan B. <Nathan.Fleury@va.gov>; Foley, Amber J. <Amber.Foley@va.gov>; Hauge, Lacey A. <Lacey.Hauge@va.gov>; Henson, Lisa M. <Lisa.Henson2@va.gov>; Hyndman, Sidney P. <Sidney.Hyndman@va.gov>; Kelly, Melissa <Melissa.Kelly10@va.gov>; Kuhlman, Hilary L. <Hilary.Kuhlman@va.gov>; Osterman, Kristiana N. <Kristiana.Osterman@va.gov>; Nelson, Michelle <Michelle.Nelson9@va.gov>; Phillips, Jason L. <Jason.Phillips@va.gov>; Raynor, Bobbi J. <Bobbi.Raynor@va.gov>; Visser, Patricia <Patricia.Visser@va.gov>; Young, Lucas A. <Lucas.Young1@va.gov>; Zuraff, Ceara A. <Ceara.Zuraff@va.gov>

Cc: Popwell, Richard E. <Richard.Popwell@va.gov>; Jost, Tamara R. <Tamara.Jost@va.gov>; Combs, Alice NMI. <Alice.Combs@va.gov>

Subject: RE: 2025 APPRAISAL UPDATE 11 DEC 2025

I would like to touch base regarding our past due performance evaluations. We were told that they would be done 12/15 and it is now 15 days later and we, at Fort Harrison, have not seen any evaluations. If you could give us an idea of when these will be ready, that would be greatly appreciated. There is not a lot of grace left to give as it is affecting our time off or monetary potential that could be awarded.

Jami Hansing and the rest of the Rad Crew

From:Sickles, Trent <Jefferson.Sickles@va.gov>

Sent:Thursday, December 11, 2025 4:48 PM

To:Bradbury, Yvonne T. <Yvonne.Bradbury@va.gov>; Busscher, Darla D. <Darla.Busscher@va.gov>; Cheeseman, Eric D. <Eric.Cheeseman@va.gov>; Conley, Catherina M. <Catherina.Conley@va.gov>; Eckhart, Carmin L. <Carmin.Eckhart@va.gov>; Fleury, Nathan B. <Nathan.Fleury@va.gov>; Foley, Amber J. <Amber.Foley@va.gov>; Hansing, Jami L. <Jami.Hansing@va.gov>; Hauge, Lacey A. <Lacey.Hauge@va.gov>; Henson, Lisa M. <Lisa.Henson2@va.gov>; Hyndman, Sidney P. <Sidney.Hyndman@va.gov>; Kelly, Melissa <Melissa.Kelly10@va.gov>; Kuhlman, Hilary L. <Hilary.Kuhlman@va.gov>; Osterman, Kristiana N. <Kristiana.Osterman@va.gov>; Nelson, Michelle <Michelle.Nelson9@va.gov>; Phillips, Jason L. <Jason.Phillips@va.gov>; Raynor, Bobbi J. <Bobbi.Raynor@va.gov>; Visser, Patricia <Patricia.Visser@va.gov>; Young, Lucas A. <Lucas.Young1@va.gov>; Zuraff, Ceara A. <Ceara.Zuraff@va.gov>

Cc:Popwell, Richard E. <Richard.Popwell@va.gov>; Jost, Tamara R. <Tamara.Jost@va.gov>; Combs, Alice NMI. <Alice.Combs@va.gov>

Subject:2025 APPRAISAL UPDATE 11 DEC 2025

Good afternoon, Rad Crew!

Performance appraisals have been especially challenging this year, and many are in various stages of HRD review. I continue to work on these and I am committed to completing all submissions by this coming Monday, the 15th. I will be scheduling times to meet and discuss these next week as they are finalized. Dr. Popwell has expressed an interest in joining these meetings (when his schedule allows) as an opportunity to meet in person with the FHM team members. Billings and Missoula will be completed through Teams meetings.

In response to the concern brought forward regarding monetary award or selection of comp time, I will have three days after the finalized appraisal is returned to discuss the performance rating and determine if the employee would like to receive the monetary award or the Time Off Award (when applicable). Thank you for hanging in there a little longer as I finish up this week.

V/R,

Trent Sickles, CRA

Diagnostic Imaging Administrator

Montana VA Health Care System

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Office: (406) 447-7605

Cell: (406) 422-2353

Date: December 4, 2025

From: Acting Chief Human Capital Management (106A)

Subj: Performance Award Guidance for Fiscal Year 2025 Ratings

To: Assistant Under Secretaries for Health, VHA Central Office Leaders, Veterans Integrated Service Network Directors (VISN 01-23), Medical Center Directors (00), and Chief Officers or Equivalent

1. VHA is communicating guidance for Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 employee awards pursuant to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Memorandum, *Performance Management for Federal Employees*, dated June 17, 2025 (revised July 17, 2025), OPM Memorandum, *Guidance on Awards for Federal Employees*, dated August 11, 2025, Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration/Operations, Security, and Preparedness' Memorandum, *Performance Management and Monetary Awards and Bonus Guidance for Fiscal Years 2025 and 2026*, dated September 23, 2025, and Secretary Memorandum, *Performance-Based Awards Guidance for Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 Annual Ratings*, dated December 3, 2025.

2.. To recognize and reward our employees, VHA will implement standardized performance award amounts to recognize employee contributions for the FY 2025 rating cycle. These amounts must be used by all VHA components and no deviation from these amounts is authorized.

a. Mandatory award amounts are outlined in Attachment A. For employees with overall ratings of Fully Successful (with at least one critical element or category rated as Exceptional or Outstanding), Excellent, or Outstanding, the employee will be provided a choice between the cash amount or the number of hours of time off listed in the chart. Awards must be cash or time off and cannot be a combination of both.

b. For an employee with an overall rating of Fully Successful on an 0750/Executive Career Field (ECF) appraisal to be eligible to receive a cash or time off award, they must be rated Exceptional in at least one critical element. For an employee with an overall rating of Fully Successful on a proficiency to be eligible to receive a cash or time off award, they must be rated Outstanding in at least one category.

c. Supervisory Superior Performance award amounts will only be applicable if the employee meets the definition of a supervisory position¹ and is on a Department

¹ A supervisor is defined as directing the work of at least one subordinate employee and meets the definition in 5 USC 7103 (10) or (11):
(10) "supervisor" means an individual employed by an agency having authority in the interest of the agency to hire, direct, assign, promote, reward, transfer, furlough, layoff, recall, suspend, discipline, or remove employees, to adjust their grievances, or to effectively recommend such action, if the exercise of the authority is not merely routine or clerical in nature but requires the consistent exercise of independent judgment, except that, with respect to any unit which includes

Subj: Performance Award Guidance for Fiscal Year 2025

of Veterans Affairs (VA) Form 3482e appraisal (ECF) for at least 90 calendar days before the end of the rating cycle.

3. Any employee issued a decision to reprimand, suspend, demote, or remove that was effected in FY 2025 or FY 2026, prior to the issuance of Superior Performance awards, is ineligible to receive an award.

4. Only in rare circumstances will extraordinary performance or contributions to organizational goals during a rating period result in a Quality Step Increase (QSI) being granted. QSIs do not count against the award pool but should be calculated and approved based on each organization's current GOE budget. 5% of their budget for each VISN or Central Office organization may be used to provide QSIs for their organization and must establish controls on QSIs to ensure a limited number are approved within their organization for only those with sustained high-quality performance. VA Handbook 5017 must be followed for all QSIs and any associated combination awards to include the use of a separate approval authority.

5. VA Handbook 5013 requires performance appraisal ratings and supervisor performance awards to be processed by human resources (HR) offices in the HRSmart system as soon as possible, but no later than 90 calendar days after the end of the rating cycle. Performance awards should be processed by December 30, 2025, for any ratings communicated by the November 30, 2025, deadline.

6. If you have any questions regarding this guidance or VA's performance management and awards policy, please contact your servicing HR office. Questions from servicing HR offices can be directed to Krista Jablonski (Krista.Jablonski@va.gov), John Bercik (John.Bercik@va.gov), or Anne Burnham (Anne.Burnham@va.gov).



David Perry
Acting Chief Human Capital Management

Attachments:

Attachment A
OM Award guidance

firefighters or nurses, the term "supervisor" includes only those individuals who devote a preponderance of their employment time to exercising such authority;
(11) "management official" means an individual employed by an agency in a position the duties and responsibilities of which require or authorize the individual to formulate, determine, or influence the policies of the agency;

Attachment A: Mandatory Award Amounts

Grade	Fully Successful +1 CE Exceptional		Excellent / High Satisfactory		Outstanding	
	Non-Supervisor	Supervisor	Non-Supervisor	Supervisor	Non-Supervisor	Supervisor
	Or 8 Hours TOA		Or 24 Hours TOA		Or 40 Hours TOA	
GS-8 and Below, WG-1 to WG-6, WL-1 to WL 6	\$625	\$800	\$1,000	\$1,250	\$1,600	\$2,200
GS-9 to GS-11, WG-7 to WG-9, WL-7 to WL-9, WS-1 to WS-5	\$700	\$950	\$1,100	\$1,675	\$1,850	\$3,000
GS-12, WG-10 to WG-12, WL-10 to WL-12, WS-6 to WS-10, RN 1-3, PAs 1-3, and Optometrists or Chiropractors 11-13	\$875	\$1,025	\$1,400	\$1,875	\$2,550	\$4,000
GS-13, WS-11 to WS-12, Physicians, Dentists and Podiatrists, RN 4, PAs 4-5, and Optometrists or Chiropractors 14-15	\$950	\$1,100	\$1,675	\$3,000	\$3,100	\$5,200
GS-14, WS-13 to WS-15	\$1,000	\$1,350	\$2,200	\$3,600	\$4,150	\$6,700
GS-15, Chiefs of Staff, RN V	\$1,250	\$1,600	\$2,750	\$4,750	\$5,200	\$8,800