

May 12, 2026

Douglas A. Collins
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20420
Doug.Collins@va.gov

Re: Employees investigated for speaking to journalists

Dear Mr. Collins:

We, the Society of Professional Journalists, write on behalf of the undersigned press freedom and free speech organizations to urge you to discontinue any investigations into Department of Veterans Affairs employees for speaking to the press in their personal capacities and to reevaluate any policies or practices prohibiting this.

According to a report from [CNN](#), the VA initiated investigations into employees who attended vigils earlier this year for Alex Pretti, a VA employee who was killed by immigration officers during protests in Minneapolis. Becky Halioua, a VA employee from Augusta, Georgia, told CNN that her supervisor informed her she was under disciplinary investigation after attending the vigil and speaking to a reporter at the event. Halioua is not the only VA employee facing potential discipline for her speech; CNN reported that the VA is investigating three other employees for speaking to the press, including one who also spoke about Alex Pretti.

Investigating Halioua and other employees for speaking with the media is an affront not only to the VA's obligation to respect its employees' First Amendment rights but also to the public's right to know. Government employees have the right to speak in their private capacity on matters of public concern – including speech about their work. By scaring employees into silence with the threat of discipline, the VA hurts the press, the public and the veterans it serves, depriving citizens of valuable information about the services funded by their tax dollars.

Silencing employees will not change their opinions or the truth. It is the VA's duty as an arm of the federal government to promote transparency and to respect its employees' constitutional rights. This includes their right to share insights and opinions on the workplace, even when this speech does not further the VA's desired narrative.

The decision to subject employees like Halioua to disciplinary measures for their speech as private citizens on matters of public concern is clearly unconstitutional. We imagine it is not in the VA's best interest to continue these practices and expose itself to the risk of litigation on this

issue, where courts have repeatedly favored the expressive rights of public employees.¹ We ask that you immediately drop the investigations of Halioua and other employees for exercising their constitutional rights and speaking to the press. SPJ would welcome the opportunity to discuss your media policies and practices and to provide guidance on balancing department interests with the rights of its employees.

Signed,

Society of Professional Journalists
Associated Collegiate Press
Association of Health Care Journalists
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
Council for the Advancement of Science Writing
Freedom of the Press Foundation
Inter American Press Association (IAPA)
International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors
iSolon.org
Journalism & Women Symposium (JAWS)
National Association of Science Writers
National Press Photographers Association
National Scholastic Press Association
The NewsGuild-CWA
The NewsGuild of New York
Online News Association
PEN America
Project Censored
Quill and Scroll
Radio Television Digital News Association
Society of Environmental Journalists
Student Press Law Center

¹ See, e.g., Joshua Ceballos, *Village of Key Biscayne settles First Amendment lawsuit with nonprofit news outlet*, WLRN, (March 11, 2026), <https://www.wlrn.org/government-politics/2026-03-11/village-of-key-biscayne-to-settle-first-amendment-lawsuit-with-nonprofit-news-outlet>; Jeffrey A. Roberts, *Federal appeals court revives whistleblower retaliation complaint against special district*, CFOIC (Nov. 5, 2025), <https://coloradofoic.org/federal-appeals-court-revives-whistleblower-retaliation-complaint-against-special-district/>; *MFIA Clinic Lawsuit Succeeds in Lifting Gag Rules at Pittsburgh Jail*, Yale Law School (April 24, 2025), <https://law.yale.edu/yls-today/news/mfia-clinic-lawsuit-succeeds-lifting-gag-rules-pittsburgh-jail>.