



(December 15, 2011)

In order to further improve the lines of communication and to respond to the concerns between the National VA Council and you our members, I have established a National VA Council Briefing. This NVAC Briefing will bring you the latest news and developments within DVA and provide you with the current status of issues this Council is currently addressing. I believe that this NVAC Briefing will greatly enhance the way in which we communicate and the way in which we share new information, keeping you better informed.

Alma L. Lee

National VA Council, President

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In This Briefing: Unions slam VA plan to track employees electronically

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Unions slam VA plan to track employees electronically

BY [BOB BREWIN](#) 12/14/2011

Unions representing Veterans Affairs Department employees blasted VA plans to include hospital staff tracking functions in draft [procurement documents](#) issued earlier this week for its \$550 million Real-Time Location System. VA earlier this month said it had [no plans](#) to use the system to track staff.

In the [statement of work](#) included in the documents, the department said the system will provide the "ability to track equipment, staff and patients at VA facilities (and the interactions thereof), with the objective of monitoring business and clinical activities . . . The goal is to improve workflow through analysis of the data provided by the RTLS."

Josephine Schuda, a VA spokeswoman, told *Nextgov* on Dec. 5 that as of that date there was no official plan for staff tagging with RTLS. She said the new contract will "buy technology that will allow a wide range of capabilities for use over five years."

VA plans to use Wi-Fi networks installed in its 152 hospitals augmented by ultrasound and infrared technology to track people and objects equipped with wireless tags with an accuracy of 1 meter. Department officials have said before they roll out the system it will have the support of unions representing the 250,000 employees in the Veterans Health Administration.

But Elaine Gerace, vice president of the Service Employees International local for the VA hospital in Syracuse, N.Y., and a member of the Veterans Affairs National Partnership Council, said none of the department's five unions supports the use of RTLS for employee tracking.

Gerace said, "it would be more prudent to expect managers and supervisors to be responsible for knowing where their staff is rather than spending money that would be better used on veteran programs or hiring front line staff in order to better serve the veterans."

Mary-Jean Burke, first executive vice president of the America Federation of Government Employees National Veterans Affairs Council, said she had no idea how VA came to the conclusion that it would have union support for electronic tracking of employees and the employee tracking language in the draft RTLS request for proposals conveyed "the exact opposite" of discussions the unions had with the department at the national level.

Burke also questioned the true value and the utility of RTLS. "From my limited experience with radio frequency devices, they are often nonfunctional in reality . . . It seems so much stuff runs interference with the system, such as walkie-talkies, other radio frequency equipment and wireless computers and phones."

Irma Westmoreland, chairwoman of 8,000-member National Nurses United-VA union, called RTLS, which is already used in private hospitals, dehumanizing technology designed to turn hands-on nursing care into "robotic care." Nurses "need to decide how long they need to stay with a patient to listen to their concerns or hold the hand of a dying patient or grieving family member, rather than worrying someone is tracking how long I am in this room and [wondering if] I will have to justify why I did not get to the call bell of Mr. X fast enough," Westmoreland said.

Susan Anderson, president of National Association of Government Employees local at the Martinsburg, W. Va., Veterans Affairs hospital and a member of the National Partnership Council, equated RTLS tracking functions to systems used to monitor criminals who wear electronic ankle bracelets while under house arrest. VA "wants to do the same thing to federal employees," she said.

The department plans to issue the final request for proposals on or before Dec. 30.

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