

Trump Signs Veterans Affairs Accountability Measure

By MAGGIE HABERMAN
and NICHOLAS FANDOS

WASHINGTON — President Trump signed a bill into law Friday that will make it easier for the Department of Veterans Affairs to remove bad employees and promote whistle-blowing.

It's the first step toward fulfilling a campaign pledge by Mr. Trump to make sweeping changes at the beleaguered agency.

The long-sought legislation, called the Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, passed Congress by wide margins earlier this month with strong support from both parties. David Shulkin, a hospital management expert and secretary of veteran affairs, has said the law will make it easier for him to purge problematic workers and restore public trust at an agency still plagued by a 2014 scandal over manipulating patient wait times.

"We must fulfill our duty to the nation's veterans," Mr. Trump said at an East Room bill-signing ceremony, flanked by Sgt. Michael Verardo, who before retiring from the Army lost his left arm and left leg to an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan in 2010. He faced three and a half years of waiting for the department to properly equip his home.

Mr. Trump and Dr. Shulkin both

described the legislation in sweeping terms as representing major change for the agency. In reality, it is the first step of many reforms that the men hope will better serve the nation's more than 20 million veterans.

Mr. Trump has made reforming Veterans Affairs, the federal government's second largest department, one of his top priorities. Friday's signing provided him a modest victory during a time when he has struggled to come up with them.

During the ceremony, the president praised Mr. Verardo and thanked him for his service. Mr. Verardo rose out of his seat, prompting the president to say, "He gets up better than I do!"

Mr. Trump lavished attention on Dr. Shulkin, who he said is doing "a job" trying to right the ship at the department.

"Right, David? It better be, David," Mr. Trump said of implementing improvements there, before making a joke using the tagline from "The Apprentice," the reality show he helped create.

"We will never use those words on you," the president said, using his fingers as a pretend gun and firing a fake shot.

The administration is now expected to turn its attention to addressing the backlog of veterans

appealing benefits decisions. It must eventually get to an increasingly contentious effort to expand the department's Choice program, which makes it easier for veterans to see private doctors at the government's expense.

Under the law signed Friday, Dr. Shulkin will have greater authority to expedite the demotion, suspension or removal of depart-

A law that aims to restore public trust in a department.

ment employees based on bad performance or wrongdoing. Senior department executives will no longer be allowed to appeal actions to the independent Merit Systems Protection Board, and rank-and-file employees will have a constrained window of 180 days to do so after removal. They will no longer be able to stay on the payroll during the appeals process.

It also empowers the secretary to take other punitive actions, like revoking bonuses or reducing pensions for executives who have been disciplined. Dr. Shulkin will

also gain new authority in making executive hiring decisions, particularly the appointment of medical center directors.

At the same time, the law aims to better protect whistle-blowers by establishing a new office within the department to handle reports of wrongdoing and train employees on whistle-blower rights. It is also supposed to block the secretary from taking retaliatory action against whistle-blowers.

The bill met opposition among federal workers' unions, which argue that it does little to counter the organization's real structural challenges while eroding worker protections. Some fear the new procedures could serve as a model for other federal departments.

After the bill signing on Friday, Dr. Shulkin spoke briefly to reporters and said the most significant aspect of this bill amounts to a culture change.

"The purpose of this is not to do firings," he said. "The purpose of this is to set the culture and the standards at the V.A. That happened about 20 minutes ago. The V.A. has already started to prepare the changes that we need in our own internal policies and regulations to make sure that we're compliant with this law and on Tuesday I will sign those internal documents."