

## [Rhode Island news](#)

### **Privatizing veterans meals decried**

01:00 AM EDT on Saturday, May 5, 2007

By Alex Kuffner

Journal Staff Writer



Fred Alger testifies for Veterans Home residents yesterday.

BRISTOL — JoAnn Teixeira took a job as a cook's helper at the Rhode Island Veterans Home to be closer to her father.

A World War II veteran, he'd been in the Alzheimer's unit a year when Teixeira closed her newspaper shop in downtown Bristol in 2002 and went to work in the kitchen of the state-run home across town.

When her father died in February 2006, she stayed on because, she said, the dining staff at the home treats the residents like "family."

"We sauté, we purée, we make homemade soups, we make our own coffee cake," she said. "You name it, we do it."

Under a plan put forward by Governor Carcieri to cut costs, dining services at the home would be privatized, and Teixeira along with 37 other workers in the home's kitchen would lose their jobs.

Many of them testified yesterday afternoon at a hearing before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs that was held at the home. It was the first time the committee had held a hearing there, according to its members. Eighty-two people were in the audience.

The ostensible subjects of the hearing were three pieces of legislation that would affect veterans services. Two bills related to tax exemptions were dealt with quickly and with

little discussion. But a third bill that would create an independent Department of Veterans' Affairs drew a stream of people to the microphone.

The legislation aims to break the Division of Veterans' Affairs out of its current place within the Department of Human Services. It's something that has been done at the federal level and in 45 other states.

Supporters of the plan say that creating a Cabinet-level agency would ensure better financing and improve services for the state's veterans, especially those living at the Veterans Home.

"The home comes in second place or third place, because it doesn't have the status," Rep. Raymond E. Gallison, vice chairman of the committee and a cosponsor of the legislation, said. "This would make sure it's not a stepchild in this state."

The 16 people who testified spoke in support of the legislation. Each and every one of them used the opportunity to criticize Carcieri's plan to privatize dining services. They said such a proposal wouldn't be countenanced if a Department of Veterans' Affairs were established.

"The concerns of the veterans are getting lost in the immensely huge budget of DHS," Jim Cenerini, spokesman for Council 94, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents the dining services workers, said before the hearing. "If there is a department dedicated to veterans' affairs, maybe hare-brained schemes like privatizing dietary services would not be entertained."

The governor's budget estimates savings of \$800,000 in the next fiscal year through privatization. The savings assumes that privatization will bring the per-meal cost down from \$9.52 to the industry benchmark of \$5.23 for the 285,000 meals the home serves each year.

Dean Faiola, a senior cook at the home, said the only way a private company could reduce costs would be to serve pre-made meals. All food served at the home now is fresh and natural, he told the committee.

"We've been trying to get away from those heat-and-serve meals," he said, before leaving the room to prepare last night's dinner of clam chowder, grilled cheese and tossed salad.

Teixeira said the current dining staff knows the 250 residents of the home well and takes care to give them what they want. That's how her father was treated.

"The food was just as good as my Italian mother made at home," Teixeira said. "He enjoyed good quality food. That's what we gave him up until the day he died."

The eight members of the committee in attendance voted unanimously in favor of creating a Department of Veterans' Affairs. The legislation will now go to the House Finance Committee.

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## Union files grievance over staffing contract

01:00 AM EDT on Tuesday, May 8, 2007

By Katherine Gregg

Journal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE — The controversy over the Carcieri administration's heavy reliance on private employment firms to staff state government — at premiums cresting at an extraordinary 145.99 percent in one state agency's case — spilled into the legal arena yesterday amid allegations by two state-employee unions that the administration was violating state law and contract.

A grievance filed yesterday by an arm of the National Education Association that represents Department of Health employees centers on the approaching June 30 expiration of the no-bid, emergency contract the Carcieri administration gave Smart Staffing Service last September to provide the state with hundreds of "temporary" workers across state government.

Most recently, the company, owned by Craig Provost of Lincoln, was paid \$451,190 over a two-week pay period — including in its case, a 22.5-percent premium — to supply 293 state workers; among them, the chief financial officer at the state Department of Transportation.

The grievance filed by the NEA's Professional Staff Association alleges the Carcieri administration violated a long-standing contract requirement by failing to provide the union with 60 days advance notice before it awards a new contract for the employees' services or extends the current one.

"The missed deadline is another example of the state playing fast and loose with the rules," the NEA's deputy executive director, Patrick Crowley, said yesterday.

Carcieri spokesman Jeff Neal's response: the 60-day notice is only required if the state is about to displace unionized workers, which isn't true here because "this work is already being performed by a subcontractor."

Meanwhile, the largest state employees union — Council 94 of the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees — served notice that it intends to go to court to press its so far unsuccessful effort to compel the Carcieri administration to comply with a

new law requiring state agencies to attach “addendums” to their annual budget requests, detailing the extent to which they used private employees to do state work.

Last year, the General Assembly overrode the latest in a series of vetoes, by Carcieri, of a union-backed bill titled: the “Government Oversight And Fiscal Accountability Review Act.” Among its requirements: that state agencies disclose the anticipated cost last year, this year and next of “all privatization contracts,” the duration of the contract, the nature of services provided and a listing by job title and hourly wage of each such employee.

On Feb. 20, Council 94 executive director Dennis Grilli wrote the governor directly, asking him to please produce the required budget addendums for public inspection.

In response, he got a March 6 letter from the governor’s legal counsel Andrew M. Hodgkin that said: “Please be advised that the executive department... does not maintain in its possession the public records you request... Such records may be available at the Budget Office within the Department of Administration or by contacting state agencies directly.” So a day later, he tried again.

On March 7, he wrote a letter asking Department of Administration director Beverly Najarian for the information. On March 26, DOA lawyer Peter Dennehy wrote back: “Please be advised that the department does not have any of the documents set forth in your request.”

Grilli’s question yesterday: if not, why not? “The governor’s office is saying ‘go to the Department of Administration for the information’ and the Department of Administration is saying they don’t have it... It appears they are playing a shell game here and we are just tired of it,” Grilli said. As the governors’ lawyers read the new law, Neal said, it is “prospective,” meaning in this case that it only applies to contracts entered into between July, when it took effect, and August, when “budget instructions” went out to each agency. In that time frame, he said, no new contracts were entered into.

But as Neal acknowledged the new law “does not specifically say that,” and Council 94 lobbyist James Cenerini guffawed. “I do not believe the attorneys read the legislation in question and if they did, I respectfully say they are wrong,” Cenerini said. “They are trying to create an excuse out of thin air.”

In a related development, the Department of Transportation produced a chunk of information Department of Administration director Beverly Najarian said recently her department could not produce.

On Friday, The Journal sought and received from the DOT a packet of invoices listing the names, job titles, hourly pay rates and monthly earnings, going back to June, of the two to three dozen state-paid Vanasse Hangen Brustlin employees staffing DOT’s Transportation Management Center.

Hired under an \$8.4-million, four-year contract first awarded in January 2004, these are the people staffing the technology center that oversees the 85 traffic-monitoring cameras along major roads and produces the traffic accident and construction reports on the radio.

Asked how much the state was paying, for example, for the services of 40-hour-a-week office assistant Karenlee Bernardo, spokeswoman Dana Nolfé initially said: At \$18.35 an hour, the administrative aide makes the equivalent of \$38,168.

But, the contractor is guaranteed 145.99 percent on top of that — in this case, an additional \$55,339 — for “overhead.”

“Add \$38,168 to \$55,339 and you get \$93,507,” she explained. Then, “add 10 percent profit to the \$93,507 number... and you get \$102,858,” Nolfé said.

“If you figure that she took two weeks vacation and one week of sick time the number would drop to \$97,320,” she clarified.

Asked why the DOA did not supply this information earlier in response to a March 8 Providence Journal request for such information, Neal said: “It is my understanding that the Department of Administration does not possess that information.” When asked, however, Nolfé confirmed the invoices are forwarded for payment to the controller’s office, within the Department of Administration. She also verified the hefty 145.99 percent markup, and said “things are expected to change” when the current contract expires because new DOT director, Jerome Williams, “doesn’t agree with it.”

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