

From: Benjamin Krause benkrause@disabledveterans.org
Subject: 1st Amendment - Merri Busch prohibited from using Facebook?
Date: April 20, 2015 at 8:51 PM
To: Hickey, Allison, VBAVACO allison.hickey@va.gov

BK

Dear Under Secretary,

Six weeks ago, I asked if you via email if you would appoint Merri Busch as my group's VR&E person to include her help on social media within her official tasks for VA Vocational Rehabilitation by email in the below excerpt:

"As you may know, I am creator of a Facebook group called Disabled Veterans - Chapter 31 Voc Rehab. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/VocRehab/> We have 5,454 members as of today, and the group has been extremely helpful and relatively positive in helping veterans access their disability and retraining benefits. Would you be willing to assign one of your employees to the group for questions from veterans to ensure accuracy of advice people are giving?"

"Right now, Merri Busch has been kind enough to chime in from time to time when veterans are asking questions. She is a VA employee and Voc Rehab Counselor in Michigan. She is kind and responsive even when veterans are not, and I think she is a great addition to our community there. It would be helpful if her presence was on a more regular basis. My group members really connect with her. Is there any way we could have Merri assigned to our group as part of her work duties so she could contribute more often?"

Three weeks ago, your Robin Cooper signed up for the group from your Public Relations department. I let it slide at first, but I was concerned that she was there to merely spy on the group since she made zero contributions. Late last week, Merri's boss also tried to sign up.

Yesterday, I was informed your VRE staff issued a blanket prohibition against Merri speaking with veterans on Facebook at all. Now, both Robin and Merri's boss are no longer in the group, so it seems clear these individuals were likely conspiring to spy on Merri's activities. Please note, she only posted on her time off. But now, her boss told her she may never post at all.... AT ALL.

The blanket prohibition is unconstitutional. Merri obviously spoke out against this oppression, and this incident likely elevates her to "whistleblower" status since I am a member of the press. I hope this is the result of an error of judgment from your lower experienced employees being overzealous. Nonetheless, I intend to post about this matter unless I get a correction from you tomorrow indicating your staff made a mistake and reinstating Merri's right to free speech.

Please forward me to your press liaison to provide any official comment.

Sincerely,

Ben



Merri Busch

9 hrs · Edited

<<In accordance with M28R, Part VI, Section A, Chapter 5, VA has established a substantial online presence utilizing the most current social media. The main goal of VA social media is to interact with the "millions of Veterans and their family members" who already use social media each day; however, due to VR&E's responsibility to protect the Veteran's privacy and the Veteran's assumption of the confidentiality of VA communications, it is not appropriate for VR&E staff to communicate directly with Veterans, Service members, and/or their families using social media sites. In addition, VR&E staff will not respond as a VR&E employee to any posting on social media sites unless officially designated to do so by a senior management official.>>

Due to the above policy, which according to my supervisor, restricts even my off duty good-will-to-veteran activities, I will no longer be posting on this Facebook Page and will be asking Ben to remove me as an admin.

The VA has a Facebook presence at www.facebook.com/VeteransBenefits that you can use to seek the answers to your questions. You will get VA approved responses

approved responses.

It was fun while it lasted. Thank you for your service!



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Benjamin Krause