



AP Photo/Jacqueline Larna
Rabbi Joshua Bolton of the University of Pennsylvania's Hillel center surveys damaged headstones at Mount Carmel Cemetery on Monday in Philadelphia.

Jewish centers cope with threats; graves vandalized

MICHAEL RUBINKAM
Associated Press

Jewish centers and schools across the nation coped with another wave of bomb threats Monday as officials in Philadelphia made plans to repair and restore hundreds of vandalized headstones at a Jewish cemetery.

Jewish Community Centers and day schools in at least a dozen states received threats, according to the JCC Association of North America. No bombs were found. All 21 buildings — 13 community centers and eight schools — were cleared by Monday afternoon and had resumed normal operations, the association said.

It was the fifth round of bomb threats against Jewish institutions since January, prompting outrage and exasperation among Jewish leaders as well as calls for an aggressive federal response to put a stop to it.

“The Justice Department, Homeland Security, the FBI, and the White House, alongside Congress and local officials, must speak out — and speak out forcefully — against this scourge of anti-Semitism impacting communities across the country,” said David Posner, an official with JCC Association of North America. “Members of our community must see swift and concerted

action from federal officials to identify and capture the perpetrator or perpetrators who are trying to instill anxiety and fear in our communities.”

The FBI and the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division are probing the threats. Attorney General Jeff Sessions called the vandalism and bomb threats serious, unacceptable behavior and said the department will “do what it can to assist in pushing back ... and prosecuting anybody that we can prove to be a part of it.”

“We are a nation that is a diverse constituency, and we don’t need these kind of activities,” Sessions said.

In Philadelphia, police investigated what they called an “abominable crime” after several hundred headstones were damaged during the weekend at Mount Carmel Cemetery, a Jewish cemetery dating to the late 1800s, said Steven Rosenberg, chief marketing officer of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

Police said the vandalism appeared to be targeted at the Jewish community, though they cautioned they had not confirmed the motive. Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said authorities were doing everything possible to find those “who desecrated this final resting place.”

Big surge for military, cuts elsewhere in Trump budget

By ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is proposing a huge \$54 billion surge in U.S. military spending for new aircraft, ships and fighters in his first federal budget while slashing big chunks from domestic programs and foreign aid to make the government “do more with less.”

The Trump blueprint, due in more detail next month, would fulfill the Republican president’s campaign pledge to boost Pentagon spending while targeting the budgets of other federal agencies. The “topline” figures emerged Monday, one day before Trump’s first address to a joint session of Congress, an opportunity to re-emphasize the economic issues that were a centerpiece of his White House run.

Domestic programs and foreign aid would as a whole absorb a 10 percent, \$54 billion cut from currently projected levels — cuts that would match the military increase. The cuts would be felt far more deeply by programs and agencies targeted by Trump and his fellow Republicans, like the Environmental Protection Agency as well as foreign aid. Veterans’ programs would be exempted, as would border security, additional law enforcement functions and some other areas.

“We’re going to start spending on infrastructure

big. It’s not like we have a choice — our highways, our bridges are unsafe, our tunnels,” the president told a group of governors at the White House on Monday. He added, “We’re going to do more with less and make the government lean and accountable to the people.”

However, Trump’s final version of the budget is sure to leave large deficits intact — or even add to them if he follows through on his campaign promise for a huge tax cut.

His plan faces strong opposition from Democrats, who possess the power to block it. The immediate reaction from Republicans was mixed, with prominent defense hawks like Sen. John McCain of Arizona saying it would do too little to help the Pentagon and fiscal conservatives and supporters of domestic agencies expressing caution.

The White House indicated that the foreign aid cuts would be particularly large. Asked about those plans, top Senate Republican Mitch McConnell of Kentucky would say only, “We’ll see how it works out.”

A congressional showdown is inevitable later this year, and a government shutdown a real possibility.

White House Budget Director Mick Mulvaney said the spike in Pentagon spending would bring the total defense budget to a record \$603 billion — and that’s before including tens



Donald Trump



Mick Mulvaney

VA pledges more inspections, drug tests to stem opioid theft

By HOPE YEN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs said Monday it would boost employee drug testing and inspections amid rising cases of opioid theft and missing prescriptions, acknowledging gaps that had allowed thousands of doctors, nurses and other staff to go unchecked for signs of illicit drug use.

Testifying at a House hearing, Carolyn Clancy, a deputy VA undersecretary for health, said the department was moving aggressively to stem VA drug crimes. She said the VA was adding some inspectors to help check drug inventories across a network of 160 medical centers and 1,000 clinics. Computer systems also were being fine-tuned to ensure that all employees subject to drug testing were flagged for monitoring.

In the last week, she said, the VA held a conference call with hundreds of health clinics to develop action plans of improvement. The department was also considering more internal audits to make sure hospitals are complying with VA policy.

“The use of illegal drugs by VA employees is inconsistent with the special trust placed in such employees who care for veterans,” Clancy told the House Veterans Affairs subcommittee on oversight. “We actually need to up our game.”

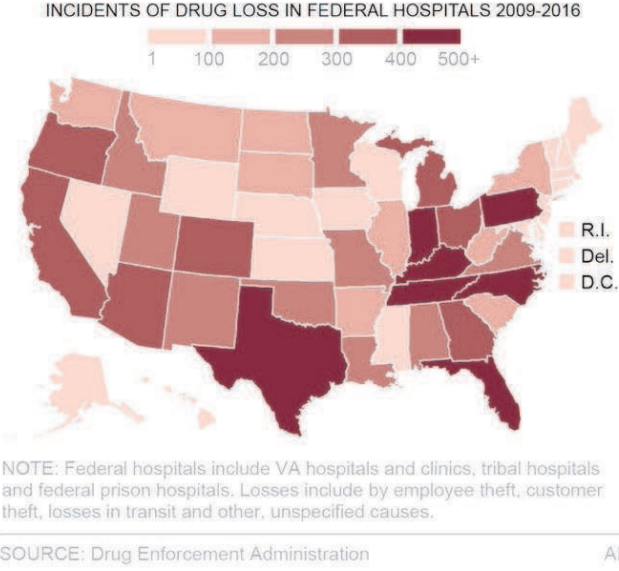
The panel held a hearing Monday aimed at the VA’s efforts to deter drug theft.

The Associated Press reported last week on government data showing a sharp increase since 2009 in opioid theft and drugs that had simply disappeared at the VA, amid rising opioid abuse in the U.S.

Reported incidents of

Drugs missing from federal hospitals

Data from federal hospitals, overwhelmingly those run by the Department of Veterans Affairs, shows more than a dozen states had reported significant losses of drugs.



drug losses or theft at federal hospitals jumped from 272 in 2009 to 2,926 in 2015, before dipping to 2,457 last year, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration. “Federal hospitals” include the VA’s facilities as well as seven correctional hospitals and roughly 20 hospitals serving Indian tribes.

Out of those cases, only a small fraction of VA doctors, nurses or pharmacy employees were disciplined.

About 372 VA employees were dismissed, suspended or reprimanded for a drug or alcohol-related issue since 2010, according to VA data obtained by AP. Roughly translated, VA employees were disciplined in 3 percent of cases.

Adding to the problem is that some VA hospitals have been lax in tracking drug supplies. Congressional auditors said spot checks found four VA hospitals skipped monthly inspections of drug stocks or missed other requirements.

Pressed to estimate what

percentage of VA’s total facilities likely had notable problems with inspections, Randall Williamson, health care director at the Government Accountability Office,

cited between 85 percent and 90 percent. He referred to “not a great track record” of accountability at the VA.

Rep. Jack Bergman, R-Mich., who chairs the House panel, said he was troubled by the reports, coming after repeated audit warnings dating back to at least 2009 of gaps in VA’s monitoring programs.

“Unfortunately, the news has recently been filled with story after story of drug diversion within VA,” Bergman said. “In case after case, what we see are examples of drugs being diverted for personal use or personal gain, yet there does not seem to be much progress being made by VA.”

“We are in the midst of an opioid epidemic, and it is time for VA to start making effective changes to avoid putting veterans and the employees who serve them at risk.”

Rep. Ann Kuster of New Hampshire, the panel’s top Democrat, said she worried

that the VA may not be receiving adequate resources to stem drug theft. She pointed to President Donald Trump’s federal hiring freeze.

“Without adequate support staff in place, VA medical facilities will struggle to comply with the procedures and programs they must follow to ensure our veterans receive safe, high quality care,” she said.

VA acknowledged it has had spotty compliance with drug inspections and employee drug testing and said most reform efforts were already underway. Among other problems, the VA inspector general’s office found the department had failed to test 70 percent — or 15,800 — prospective employees over a 12-month period who would serve in sensitive VA positions such as doctor, nurse or police officer.

At the Atlanta medical center, mandatory drug testing for new hires did not

occur at all for a period of at least 6 months between 2014 and 2015.

Clancy said the VA was now committed to “100 percent testing” of new hires in sensitive VA positions and would fix gaps that had allowed nearly 1 in 10 employees subject to random drug testing to avoid being monitored at all. She also cited strong policies, such as 72-hour inventory checks and “double lock and key access” to drugs, to keep VA drug crime in check.

Keith Berge, a Mayo Clinic anesthesiologist who chairs its Medication Diversion Prevention group, said drug theft was serious and patients could be seriously harmed if deprived of medication. Conducting drug tests before hiring at the VA was critical, he said.

“It is not good enough to merely have effective policies and procedures on the books; they must actually be rigorously followed.”

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