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Veterans Health Administration Unions Send Letter to VA Leadership Citing Agency Pandemic Plan Shortcomings; Calling to Work Together

Unions to VA Leadership: Work with us. Employees are dying!

WASHINGTON – The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), National Association of Government Employees (NAGE), National Federation of Federal Employees, National Nurses United (NNU), and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) – collectively representing 350,000 Veterans Health Administration (VHA) employees – sent a letter to Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert Wilkie and VHA Executive in Charge Dr. Richard Stone, requesting that VHA leadership collaborate with the unions to create an effective response and recovery plan to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“VA providers and support personnel have bravely risen to combat the COVID-19 pandemic,” the letter stated. “However, the Department of Veterans Affairs has failed to adequately provide resources or implement policies that protect VHA employees and, as a result, America’s veterans.”

The letter from the unions detailed shortcomings in the VA’s response to the coronavirus, most alarmingly how VA employee health is at risk and how the Department itself is doing little to protect them. The letter also demanded VHA work with the unions and the VHA at the national and local level.

“Unions are the voice for the employees, and the employees are scared. For too long the VA has only done the bare minimum to protect these brave front-line heroes,” said Everett Kelley, AFGE National President. “It’s not enough. Employees are dying. It is time VA management come to the table so that together we can create policies and procedures that keep employees’

and veterans' safety at the forefront. The VA must work with us in order to guarantee the safety of our members and their families.”

The VA is required by law to provide a safe work environment for all employees – including providing personnel with the personal protective equipment (PPE) necessary to protect themselves while caring for veterans and others. While VA leadership claims that all employees have adequate PPE and staffing levels are safe, reports from across the country articulate to the contrary.

“Due to a dereliction of duty at the highest levels of the VA and the federal government, registered nurses are now forced to literally put their lives, their families' lives and their patients' lives at risk as they work without adequate and appropriate personal protective equipment such as gowns, N95 respirators, and gloves,” said Corey Lanham, NNU VA Collective Bargaining Director. “Furthermore, this pandemic has exposed to the public the devastating consequences of the privatization efforts that have left the VHA with more than 43,000 vacancies. The enormous number of vacancies has contributed to a short-staffing crisis so severe that at some facilities intensive care unit RNs are having to care for as many as five ventilated patients. It is past time that this administration invoke the Defense Protection Act to ensure that nurses have the PPE they need to keep themselves and their patients safe and to appropriately staff the VHA so RNs can provide the highest quality of care to their patients during this devastating pandemic.”

Currently, VHA is not testing the vast majority of employees exposed to COVID-19 and isn't allowing employees to self-quarantine, including those who are in prolonged contact with COVID-19 patients while not wearing sufficient PPE. This directly defies CDC guidance and further exposes veterans, employees, and their families to the virus. In the rare instances where employees can self-quarantine, they must use their own leave.

“The VA is knowingly putting the lives of veterans and VA workers at risk by refusing to grant leave in accordance with the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, to quarantine employees who have come into direct contact with someone with COVID-19. Instead, the VA has taken a position that employees should continue to work and treat patients until they start exhibiting symptoms or test positive while knowing that asymptomatic individuals can be contagious,” said David Holway, NAGE National President. “In those rare instances when employees are able to get tested or start exhibiting symptoms, employees are forced to exhaust their personal leave, be placed in a leave without pay status, and are even being charged AWOL instead of paid leave under the leave granting flexibilities available to the VA. The VA's practices are leading to the spread of the virus and death of veterans and VA workers. The VA needs to do their part to stop the spread of the COVID-19.”

Instead of using the month of February to prepare facilities for COVID-19, VA leadership focused on implementing three anti-labor executive orders issued by President Trump, which evicted labor unions from the workplace, ended labor-management committees, and prohibited labor unions from using government email systems for agency business.

“The three May 2018 Executive Orders (EOs) are nothing more than cunning political tools designed with the sole purpose of destroying the legitimate representation of workers while also threatening the revenue streams of the federal unions to which they belong. Because there is no legitimate government benefit or business purpose for these EOs, their implementation brought about devastating and far-reaching consequences. The EOs have damaged historically productive labor-management relationships that were intact for decades, and now the public is starting to see the extent of the damage done – especially in the VA, where workers lost their voice for pandemic preparedness and response. As a result, countless employees and veterans are being unnecessarily exposed. For its obliviousness, the Trump administration has blood on its hands and these EOs are a big part of that agony.” Randy Erwin, President of the National Federation of Federal Employees.

Across the country, many VA facility directors have refused to meet with the unions, citing the executive orders. This has resulted in anxious workers and unsafe work environments. For many years, the National Unions at the VA have worked together with VA management to ensure America’s veterans receive the highest quality of service they deserve. The VA must continue to work with the National Unions in order to protect veterans and the employees who care for them.

“VHA’s dedicated workforce is proud of the significant role it has played in making it possible for our highly regarded healthcare system to rise to the occasion in many past national emergencies. VHA employees were on the frontlines of care in New York City following the 9-11 attacks, as well as during Hurricanes Katrina and Maria,” the unions continued. “A newfound crisis is upon this nation. The undersigned unions’ demand VA leadership works with the National Unions to ensure that VHA once again serves as the model for how all medical providers effectively respond.”

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