



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

Affiliated with the International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers, AFL-CIO

June 9, 2020

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives
B234 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

Veterans' Affairs (VA) medical professionals and support personnel have bravely risen to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and have been in the trenches, fighting COVID and supporting our veterans since day one. Too many veterans and employees, many of whom are veterans themselves, have paid the ultimate price and died during the pandemic. Our VA employee members are frontline heroes, and the Agency must work with the exclusive bargaining representatives of its employees to guarantee the safety of our members, their families, and our nation's veterans.

1. The Department stated to NFFE that "properly caring for those already infected, while at the same time taking steps necessary to protect our veteran patients, staff and the public from further spread of the disease, requires an all hands on-deck approach," but at the same time, the VA won't allow "all hands" to be "on deck" since it has excluded representation of the employees – the most important "hands" of them all. The VA is unwilling to discuss COVID pandemic issues with union representatives, who would have valuable frontline input on the safety of veterans and employees, many of whom are veterans themselves. Why aren't you willing to speak to employee representatives?
2. The enormous number of vacancies at the VA 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 at a time. How can the VA ensure that it is maintaining enough staff given VA employee exposure to COVID?
3. Adhering to CDC guidelines can help keep VA employees safe, especially given employees' exposure to COVID at work. How is the VA planning to uphold CDC guidelines when it comes to employee travel and safety protocols, both on and off the clock?
4. VA employees are on the frontlines of this pandemic, although they are being denied legally guaranteed union representation. The Department has excluded union involvement in discussing COVID response in the vast majority of VA locations. Will the VA commit to including VA unions in COVID response planning going forward?
5. Right before the pandemic escalated, the Department broke labor agreements with the VA unions and is currently is not allowing VA union officials to communicate on COVID-related labor relations matters using their government email. Further, employees cannot visit officers of their union, their voice in the workplace, and they are scared. Why is the VA making it difficult for its employees to communicate with their representation? Will the VA commit to rescinding this email policy?

6. As we understand it, VHA is not testing the vast majority of employees exposed to COVID-19 and is not allowing employees to self-quarantine, including those who are in prolonged contact with COVID-19 patients while not wearing sufficient PPE. Will the Department commit to providing testing for employees and veterans who need it?
7. The Department's COVID-19 response in terms of PPE has been disastrous. Some VA employees were told to bring their own homemade masks to use at work, and in some cases, they had to use those masks for multiple days. How will the Department ensure that it has enough PPE for all personnel in the event of a second surge of COVID cases?
8. The Department has changed employee telework status—including employees with comorbidities such as age, gender, pregnancy, and disease—without first meeting the obligation to bargain the changes in accordance to the union contract. Are there plans to change that going forward?
9. The Department must have proper HEPA filters in all facilities to minimize air particle exposure in patient rooms, general public space, offices, restrooms, employee lounges, and operating rooms. Does the Department plan to establish metrics to track and ensure that this is accomplished?
10. The VA is required by law to provide a safe work environment for all employees, yet (at least three?) VA employees have died from workplace exposure to COVID-19. The Department can and must have environmental cleaning in all treatment areas and monitor air quality. Does the Department plan to implement guidance postings of cleaning schedules for the union to review, and does the Department plan to establish metrics for environmental cleaning to ensure that it's done properly?
11. VA employees are spending extra time during their workday meticulously trying to stay as clean as possible in their unsafe work environments. Will the Department provide showers, lockers, and changing rooms for employees as needed and allow employees to clean up on duty time, to protect themselves, their families, and our nation's veterans?

Sincerely,



Randy Erwin
National President