

March 27, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We, the undersigned unions, represent nearly 350,000 employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) who serve veterans on the front lines of hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, and other critical VA units. We are writing with great urgency to ask you to work with us during the COVID-19 crisis for the well-being of veterans and the dedicated workforce that cares for them.

We have a long history of working together that has a widely recognized, successful track record of carrying out the Department's mission of caring for those who have served, and supporting the Department's fourth mission in times of national emergencies such as Hurricanes Katrina and Maria and the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak. Yet, now, when the benefits of labor-management working together are especially needed, the VA is refusing to include our union leaders, our health and safety experts and the front-line health care workers we represent in the Department's response to COVID-19. Every day, we hear new reports from Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) workforces about very serious problems with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), leave policies for exposed employees and staffing assignments for patient screening, among other troubling issues.

There are many benefits of labor management working together, particularly during a health care crisis. The large size and complexity of the Department has always presented challenges when implementing new policies. The VA unions have a unique capacity to disseminate urgent information broadly and quickly and increase the efficiency of efforts to adapt and expand the delivery of services. Our involvement also helps calm the angst of the nearly 350,000 employees, including thousands of service-connected disabled veterans, who are facing unprecedented challenges in the workplace. Management simply cannot carry out its current, most urgent mission without the help of its labor unions.

We urge you to take three actions to engage your labor partners. First, weekly check-in meetings with union leadership and health and safety officers should be established immediately at the national, VISN and facility local levels to exchange updates and information involving staff COVID-19 response efforts. Second, labor representatives need to be participants of national, VISN and facility level COVID-19 taskforces so we can provide feedback on proposed responses to new issues that arise every day and share our own recommendations with management and other stakeholders. Third, a shared portal will allow labor and management to exchange information efficiently and in timely manner; the inconsistent and incomplete information that the workforce is currently receiving is only causing more confusion and chaos in an already highly stressed environment.

We have attached our joint statement issued on March 16th that provides recommendations for making the Veterans Health Administration the model it has always been and should continue to be during this pandemic. These include joint protocols, increased workforce training and communication, enhanced PPE, surge plans and new investigation requirements following exposure.

This is truly the time when we must come together if we are going to do a better job of caring for and protecting veterans and the VA workforce. We have tremendous dedication and health and safety expertise to bring to the table. We urge you to take immediate steps to reestablish the critical labor-management dialogue that will save the lives of veterans and health care workers during these most challenging times.

Sincerely,

American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO, American Federation of Government Employees National VA Council

National Federation of Federal Employees

National Association of Government Employees

National Nurses United

Service Employees International Union

Attachment: March 16, 2020 VA Union Statement