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## Veterans Affairs Coronavirus Talking Points

**Failure to lead:** A lack of direction from the VA's top leaders, combined with their deliberate refusal to engage with employee representatives, has left VA workers, veterans, and their families more vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus.

**COVID-19 cases climbing:** As of Tuesday, May 12, [the VA has reported](#) 28 employee and 921 known patient deaths as a result of the virus and over 11,100 confirmed cases nationwide.

**More tests must be administered:** While the VA has begun testing some health-care employees who may have been exposed to COVID-19, some are still having to seek outside medical assistance to be tested for the virus. Lack of available testing for all types of employees increases the risk that more veterans and employees will become ill.

**Lack of supplies:** Hospitals are reporting shortages of masks, gowns, hand sanitizer and other personal protective equipment (PPE). Due to the supply shortages, VA facilities have implemented inconsistent policies for distribution of PPE and other necessary supplies. In some cases, one mask per employee, per week. While [FEMA is reportedly delivering PPE](#) to some facilities, others are still lacking PPE and other essential supplies such as hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes.

**Change of tone:** After initially repeatedly stating that each facility had adequate PPE, VA leaders changed their tone and [acknowledge the shortage of PPE](#) within the department – a position AFGE has maintained since the start of the pandemic. This change of tone was due to the intense pressure put on the VA through AFGE member actions outside of VA facilities; tele-townhalls with AFGE local leaders, members of congress, and the media; and through written testimonies from AFGE leaders and members across the country.

**Network issues:** VA employees are reporting issues accessing the department's computer networks to upload radiological images, treat patients remotely using video streams, and process veterans' claims. Employees in Las Vegas were called back to the office, despite the risk of spreading the virus, after a surge in remote work strained the network.

**Fourth mission vulnerabilities:** In the event of a pandemic or other national emergency, the VA can be called into service to help overloaded hospitals treat the public. Despite VA Secretary Wilkie's recent assertion that the VA is prepared serve as the 'surge force,' in reality the





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administration has refused to fill nearly 50,000 vacant positions across the department – mostly doctors, nurses, and other front-line health care providers.

**Union busting:** Instead of preparing for a global pandemic, VA leaders spent the month of February implementing three anti-labor executive orders issued by President Trump. They evicted labor unions from the workplace, disbanded labor-management committees, and kicked us off government email systems. By impeding the flow of information from front-line employees to the department’s leaders, the VA has jeopardized the health of veterans and employees alike with a haphazard approach.

**What needs to happen:** VA management needs to stop implementing the administration’s executive orders at once and agree to sit down with AFGE and other VA unions so together we can make the right decisions and take the right actions to protect our veterans and our communities. AFGE and other employee unions at the VA have a long history of partnering together to help the VA provide world-class service to our nation’s veterans, yet Secretary Wilkie has rejected our help. These anti-worker orders have created artificial barriers that are preventing labor and management from working together in a time of crisis – when everyone needs to be moving in the same direction to protect the American public.

