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## Mental Health Specialist Coronavirus Talking Points

**COVID-19 Impact:** In addition to the impacting physical health, this virus is having a major impact on the mental health of the American people.

**Providing critical services:** Mental health professionals within the federal government provide critical services to our nation's armed forces and veterans. Currently, millions are unemployed due to COVID-19 which can lead to major mental health struggles and potentially unsafe coping mechanisms.

**Department of Veterans Affairs:** According to the VA's website, their Mental Health Department has a staff of more than 20,000, including approximately 5,000 licensed psychologists. AFGE represents thousands of mental health specialists at the VA, including psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers.

**Department of Defense:** According to a November 2019 [report to Congress](#), the Defense department struggles to recruit and retain mental health providers due to low pay, slow hiring process, fewer advancement opportunities and excessive workload. DOD must make the necessary adjustments in order to recruit and retain top mental health professionals who provide critical services to our armed forces.

**Employee health is at risk:** Several facilities are still requiring mental health specialists to report in-person. Although most locations are practicing telehealth – treating patients over the phone/video chat – employees are still risking their health each time they enter the facility, with no PPE. If employees can treat veterans via phone/video chat, they should be allowed to protect themselves by providing these services from home.

**Lack of personal protective equipment:** If this Administration is going to require telework eligible mental health specialists to report to work, they must ensure there is enough PPE. During this pandemic it is imperative that the specialists who provide crucial services to our armed forces and our veterans have adequate supplies necessary to protect their health and the health of their families.

**Varying telework policies:** The telework policies for mental health employees varies by Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) and individual VA Medical Center. The VA must issue one standard telework policy and ensure that each VISN and medical facility adheres to that policy.





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**Technology shortcomings:** While the VA has relaxed national policies to allow mental health staff to use 3rd party software to deliver care to veterans, including Skype, Facetime, and Zoom, they have failed to update their computer system which has made it increasingly difficult for employees to complete work due to slow speed. VA must update their computer system to support the increase in traffic due to a large portion of staff teleworking.

