



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

**PROVIDED TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

**HEARING ON
Federal Coronavirus Response
March 11, 2020**

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE), which represents more than 700,000 federal and District of Columbia employees who serve the American people in 70 different agencies, including approximately 100,000 employees at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), thank you for holding this hearing entitled “Federal Coronavirus Response.” AFGE has serious concerns involving the administration’s efforts to prevent, detect and treat Coronavirus, or COVID-19, as it relates to the federal workforce and the American public. In addition to employees at DHS, our union represents thousands of workers who are health care professionals at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Bureau of Prisons (BoP) and the many federal workers whose jobs require regular contact with the public. Their health and safety as they continue to provide services to the public is essential to our homeland security.

Health care providers and emergency responders such as workers at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are among those federal employees who have been or are likely to be called upon to provide services to populations infected with COVID-19 or populations at risk of infection. Workers who provide patient care and emergency responders should be accorded the highest priority for disease prevention measures. Additionally, Transportation Security Officers (TSOs), employees at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are in positions that require interaction with the public and should be considered as at-risk for contracting the virus.

AFGE is concerned that safety protocols have not been sufficiently communicated to the frontline workforce, and adequate personal protective equipment such as gloves, effective masks and hand cleaner have not been deployed to an adequate extent. Agencies are not communicating

with their workforces to a degree that will allow them to protect themselves or the public adequately in order to contain the spread of this virus. In most cases, employees have only been given a link to the Centers for Disease Control website, told to monitor the news and stay home if they do not feel well. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has likewise provided only vague instructions in three successive efforts to communicate the administration's plans for the federal workforce.

For many DHS employees, remote workstations or telework are not options. However, we urge the Committee to insist that the Acting Secretary move immediately to allow all employees who are capable of performing their duties via telework to begin doing so immediately. For those who are not currently telework-ready, but whose jobs can be performed in that capacity, this must include provision of necessary equipment and remote work training to maximize employees' ability to continue to perform their duties. Many of these employees provide crucial support functions to the frontline workforce and are essential to ensuring the continuity of homeland security and emergency operations. The White House Coronavirus Task Force (Task Force) directed OPM to include telework in its guidance to agencies, requiring them to incorporate telework in their continuity of operations plans. We urge the Committee to insist that the Task Force provide regular communications to agency leadership and the workforce regarding its progress toward achieving this directive.

For those on the frontlines such as first responders, law enforcement officers, TSOs, and all those with substantial work related contact with the general public where telework is not practicable, we urge the Committee to insist that the Acting Director adopt a policy, like the long-established precedent at the VA with Agent Orange, that if they are exposed, there is a presumption that the virus was contracted at work. As such, a frontline worker will have access through the Federal

Employees Compensation Act (FECA) to full coverage of related medical treatment and for wage loss or disability related to that condition or associated complications from the illness.

Further, all federal employees who are in positions where they may be exposed to COVID-19 should have rapid access to screening at no cost. DHS should also direct TSA to immediately retract its recent reductions of Federal Employee Health Benefit Program (FEHBP) coverage for its large part-time workforce and provide for a temporary open season to return to better health plans. These workers' share of premiums doubled, and with their low pay, many changed to less expensive policies with higher deductibles and less generous coverage. We cannot afford to have such artificial barriers to employees seeking the best possible medical treatment.

Workers who provide direct patient care and emergency services to individuals who have contracted COVID-19 do not have clear, specific guidance and effective preventive equipment and gear to protect themselves from contracting the virus. In other cases where workers are exposed to unusual hazards, current law provides for a pay differential, or hazardous duty pay. Because these workers are in immediate danger of exposure, and current protocols have no guarantees of protection, employees required to work and interface with individuals who have been quarantined or diagnosed with COVID-19 should qualify for hazardous duty pay.

AFGE recognizes that COVID-19 is spreading rapidly and that requirements of agencies and especially of the frontline workforce may change. As it does, we thank the Committee for its ongoing and diligent oversight as you work to protect the federal workforce and the American public.

Thank you for your consideration.