



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

PROVIDED TO THE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

HEARING ON

"BUILDING A MORE RESILIENT VA SUPPLY CHAIN"

JUNE 9, 2020

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Tester, and Members of the Committee, the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) and its National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC) appreciate the opportunity to submit a statement for the record on today's hearing titled "Building A More Resilient VA Supply Chain." AFGE represents more than 700,000 federal and District of Columbia government employees, 260,000 of whom are proud, dedicated Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees. In our comments on needed improvements to the VA supply chain, we discuss how VA policies and practices have impacted the health and safety of the frontline workers who provide health care and other critical services to our nation's veterans. We hope that you find our recommendations reasonable, and we stand ready to work with the members of the Committee to make necessary and constructive changes.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, AFGE has received a tremendous number of urgent reports from panicked frontline health care workers facing unprecedented risks to themselves and their families while trying to care for veterans. Contrary to the public assurances made by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Robert Wilkie, VA medical facilities still do not have adequate masks, respirators, gowns, hand sanitizers, testing, and other medical treatment essential for the safe treatment of patients and necessary to control the spread of this deadly virus. Based on reports from our members, we are also doubtful about the Secretary's assurances that testing is widely available. We are quite troubled by the Secretary's admission to the House Appropriations Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies Subcommittee on May 28th that each VA facility only has a two-week stockpile of PPE.

Amidst the widespread chaos at almost every VA medical center, the only consistency appears to be inconsistency. The VA's medical equipment supply chain has been severely weakened by the absence of coordination, transparency, national guidance, and consultation with front line workers and their labor representatives. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) acquisitions and distribution have been left largely to each medical center, without sufficient regard to guidance from the VA Central Office (VACO), recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), or the extensive expertise and experience of VA contract officers and the front line employees who experience firsthand the risks of working during this pandemic without adequate protection.

As a result, local procurement offices are forced to compete for known PPE supplies instead of working together. At the same time, the VA's outdated inventory system does not allow for the accurate tracking of PPE inventory levels. There is no system in place for facilities to exchange information about best practices and good and bad suppliers, or to ensure reasonable pricing.  Medical centers waste time, money and storage on purchases that cannot be used because of poor quality and improper decisions that cause avoidable delays in the receipt of lifesaving PPE and other essential medical equipment.

At the VA specifically, every VA employee who works at a medical facility needs adequate PPE; not just those who work in COVID units and "hot zones." Every

employee can on short notice find himself or herself in a high risk situation even if his or her official duties are not within a “hot zone” because of a reassignment to a short staffed area, or an unexpected medical emergency involving a COVID-positive patient. Entrance screeners, housekeepers cleaning COVID units, maintenance workers disposing of trash, food service and canteen workers interacting all day long with large numbers of employees and veterans are denied adequate PPE at many facilities or provided none.

While poor management decisions are a primary cause of dangerous PPE practices, the chronic shortages resulting from supply chain problems have also contributed a great deal. We question why many medical facilities continue to ration PPE despite increased inventory and we are deeply troubled by reports that some managers hoard PPE or save PPE for colleagues who are not at risk, while forcing front line employees to go without or plead for more protective PPE and replacements of worn out PPE.

PPE purchasing and distribution decisions at VA medical facilities are too often arbitrary. The shortages and uncertainty about future inventory resulting from supply chain weaknesses exacerbate the problem. The need for a well-functioning supply chain will become even greater as the technology for testing, vaccines, and pharmaceutical treatments for the virus advances.

For these reasons, AFGE supports legislation that will increase the supply and proper distribution of PPE and other medical equipment through fuller utilization of the Defense Production Act (DPA), combined with vastly increased oversight and transparency of DPA activities. The country urgently needs a comprehensive strategy for ensuring

adequate production and distribution of PPE and other medical equipment necessary to fight COVID-19 for all workers who need them.

AFGE strongly urges lawmakers to enact the PPE provisions in H.R. 6800, the “HEROES Act” that enhance DPA authority, require the President to work with a team of federal agencies to carry out DPA activities, require extensive Congressional oversight through regular executive branch reports to Congress, and ensure transparency through public reporting requirements.

AFGE also strongly supports “HEROES Act” provisions that require the President and coordinating agencies to engage stakeholders, including labor unions representing health care workers and public sector employees, in medical equipment needs assessments. Stakeholder engagement will also be enhanced by provisions in the bill that establish a stronger oversight role for the Comptroller General. Every day, VA frontline employees and the veterans they serve feel the harsh effects of the Secretary’s insistence of silencing the voices of the VA workforce and their labor representatives. From the outset of this pandemic, AFGE and other unions representing VA front line workers have been shut out of the agency’s response teams at both the national and local level. All our requests to help the VA effectively respond to COVID-19 have been rejected, despite direct pleas to the Secretary and the much-appreciated requests to the Secretary by Members of Congress. The Secretary’s unwillingness to listen to the front line employees who deliver the care, and their representatives, is a stark departure from the labor-management partnerships that allowed the VA to fulfill all its missions during hurricanes, epidemics, and other past national crises. Sadly, rather than take the

simple, cost saving and productive step of increasing dialogue, the Secretary continues to wage a war on our collective bargaining agreement by trying to force a new contract on AFGE's VA Council that eliminates longstanding contract provisions that enhance workplace safety, staffing levels and recruitment and retention of scarce medical professionals. For these reasons, stakeholder engagement in DPA activities including PPE needs assessment is even more critical.

More broadly, a strong federal supply chain is essential to ensuring that every federal and private sector worker who needs PPE and other medical equipment and services receives what he or she needs to perform their duties safely. The "HEROES Act" provisions strengthening the DPA will also enable our nation to achieve universal testing for COVID-19 that will finally allow us to fully assess the risk of transmission by knowing the extent of infection, and then take action to isolate those who have been in contact with infected individuals. Universal testing will help ensure the health and safety of VA employees and veterans as federal worksites reopen. Additionally, AFGE is pleased that provisions in S. 3627, the "Medical Supply Transparency and Delivery Act" that similarly increase the effectiveness, accountability, and transparency of the DPA, were included in the "HEROES Act."

We stand ready to work with the Committee on all the steps needed to protect veterans and the VA workforce as the nation continues to cope with COVID-19 and proceed to new stages of reopening. Thank you.