



Dr. Everett B. Kelley
National Secretary-Treasurer

J. David Cox, Sr.
National President

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January 15, 2019

Honorable Robert Wilkie, Jr.
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Office of the Secretary, United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Room 1000
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

This is in response to your absurd letter dated January 14 attacking the integrity of a man who is a 100% disabled veteran, union leader, and a federal corrections officer for the Bureau of Prisons. It appears that he became a target of your ire because he spoke the truth about the horrific impact of this shutdown on veterans who are federal employees. You and your colleagues in this administration seem always ready to attack, abuse, and intimidate in an effort to silence the voices of federal employees who speak the truth.

How dare you attack Edward Canales. Mr. Canales is a combat veteran with 100% service-connected disabilities who spoke the truth that some veterans who work for the government and are now without pay may be so stressed that they may attempt suicide. He is right and within his rights to raise such important concerns. It is unconscionable that the President expressed pride in having shut down the United States government so that federal employees are either locked out of their jobs or not paid for their work. President Trump proudly declared this was his shutdown!

As a result of his military service, Mr. Canales has been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and is fortunate to receive care for this condition from highly trained and dedicated VA professionals, not the for-profit amateurs you and your Koch-connected patrons would force him to see. Unlike you, Mr. Canales speaks from first-hand experience about the pressures under which veterans live. Mr. Canales exemplifies the veteran as lifelong provider of service to his country. In addition to his work as a federal corrections officer and local union president, Mr. Canales also serves as the military liaison for other veterans who are members of AFGE's Council of Prison Locals; these are all military veterans who have continued their service to America by working as corrections officers in federal penitentiaries and Mr. Canales is their chosen representative.

How dare you suggest that Mr. Canales was out of line when he pointed to this administration's cruel and cavalier attitude toward the financial hardship being imposed on federal employees who are forced to work without pay during this shutdown? Who are you to try to take the mantle of veteran advocate when it is you who would dismantle and privatize veterans' healthcare, it is you who would downgrade and underpay disabled veterans who do some of the most important but most poorly compensated work in a VA medical center?

Who are you to deny that financial pressures and unemployment are well known to be among the most devastating life events for any person and are the factors most cited by veterans and others who make



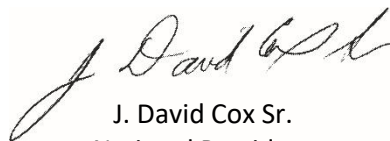
suicide attempts? There are an estimated 300,000 veterans and their families affected by this shutdown who are experiencing tremendous financial hardship and you apparently couldn't care less. I can assure you that each one is under unnecessary stress; if they suffer from PTSD, as many do, introducing additional stressors only exacerbates their condition.

You have no standing to lecture me or anyone else about the factors that have created an epidemic of veteran suicide in this country. I practiced as a VA Psychiatric Registered Nurse for many years. Your attempt to turn the tables on Veteran Edward Canales is contemptible. I have some advice for you. Try learning a little something about the causes of veteran suicide attempts. Start here: https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Office-of-Mental-Health-and-Suicide-Prevention-National-Strategy-for-Preventing-Veterans-Suicide.pdf. You will learn that prior mental health conditions (such as PTSD) and stressful life events including financial pressures and unemployment are well-known risk factors for suicide.

Try using that knowledge for something positive like showing respect for federal employees who are veterans, most important those who work at the Department of Veterans Affairs and make up 30% of its workforce. Start treating them with the honor they deserve. Start by filling the 40,000 unfilled medical positions in the Veterans' healthcare system that are absolutely necessary for the delivery of the timely, high-quality care veterans have earned.

Start by showing respect for the ongoing service of true American heroes like Edward Canales who is trying to make sure the people who have elected him as their leader get a paid for the work that they do on behalf of the American people.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. David Cox Sr.", written in a cursive style.

J. David Cox Sr.
National President