



**NATIONAL VETERANS  
AFFAIRS COUNCIL**  
American Federation of Government Employees  
AFFILIATED WITH THE AFL-CIO

**ALMA L. LEE**  
**President**

August 6, 2020

Robert L. Wilkie, Jr.  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave N.W. Room 1000  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

When you were nominated to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), there were questions raised about your [well-documented](#) affiliation with pro-Confederate groups and praise for Confederate leaders like Jefferson Davis. Yet members of the U.S. Senate and many members of the union I have the honor of leading - the American Federation of Government Employees' National VA Council (AFGE NVAC), which represents over 270,000 VA workers - remained hopeful that this misguided sympathy for those who fought to defend the institution of slavery was behind you and that it would not impact your leadership of the nation's largest public health care system.

However, since your appointment, it has become abundantly clear that not only are there persistent issues of systemic racism and incidents of racial bias taking place at VA facilities around the country, but that your leadership has cultivated a culture of permissibility in which these issues and incidents go unaddressed. On your watch, those who have [reported incidents](#) of racial bias and tried to bring attention to these issues have been harassed and retaliated against, while those perpetrating and perpetuating racism act with impunity. The VA has even brought forward a proposal for the new collective bargaining agreement with the union that would deny representation to staff who file Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaints, which is flagrantly illegal.

In a recent survey of AFGE NVAC members, over 1,100 VA employees said they had faced racism on the job and nearly 1,000 said racism has made their job at the VA more difficult. Nearly 800 VA workers reported in the survey that they had also witnessed racial discrimination against veterans while working at the VA. These results are a clear indication of the extent to which racial discrimination is a problem at the VA and they are an indictment of your leadership.

This survey comes at a tipping point in our society where Black, brown and people of color across the world - and now across the VA - are speaking out against racial injustice and violence. Members have

been scared to come forward due to fear of retaliation, but with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black men and women, employees of color are now [increasingly speaking out](#) about the racial discrimination they have witnessed and experienced firsthand at the VA.

In order to better protect VA workers and the veterans they serve from racial discrimination, AFGE NVAC members demand that the VA take immediate action to:

1. Acknowledge that racism and discrimination is widespread at VA facilities nationwide.
2. Withdraw the contract proposal to ban staff representation in EEO interviews.
3. Affirm that all VA workplaces must be free from bigotry, harassment, and retaliation, and take the appropriate steps to ensure that these basic rights are upheld.
4. Meet with AFGE leadership to discuss best practices and next steps in combating racism at the VA.

In addition to these common-sense steps, members of our union call on you to further recognize the dignity and sacrifices of VA workers by coming to the negotiating table in good faith so that we can reach a new collective bargaining agreement that benefits VA workers and the veterans they serve. Our members, many of whom are veterans and [40 percent](#) of whom are Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), simply want a contract that provides safe working conditions and adequate staffing levels, the space and equipment they need to ensure veterans receive the best care possible, and mechanisms to protect workers from the whims of management.

This year, to commemorate Juneteenth, the day in June celebrating the end of slavery following the defeat of Jefferson Davis and his Confederacy, you wrote a message with the following words: “The national stain of slavery, Jim Crow, and their lingering vestiges, requires our ongoing vigilance and dedication to ending this scourge.” Today, we are asking you to live up to those words and take action to end the scourge of racism inside the VA and do right by those who have dedicated themselves to serving our nation’s veterans regardless of the color of their skin.

Respectfully,



Alma L. Lee  
President  
National Veterans Affairs Council, #53  
American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO