



Dr. Everett B. Kelley
National President

Jeremy A. Lannan
NVP for Women & Fair Practices

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Veterans Affairs Coronavirus Talking Points

Failure to lead: A lack of direction from the VA’s top leaders, combined with their deliberate refusal to engage with employee representatives, has left VA workers, veterans, and their families more vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus.

COVID-19 cases climbing: As of Friday, March 20, the VA has reported two confirmed patient deaths as a result of the virus: March 14 in Portland, Ore., and March 19 in White River Junction, Vermont. There were at least 130 confirmed cases of COVID-19 at VA hospitals nationwide as of Friday, March 20 – which is up 43 cases from just the previous day.

No testing for health-care workers: Doctors, nurses, and other health-care staff are not being tested for possible exposure to the coronavirus – not even those employees who have come in contact with known COVID-19 patients. Lack of testing increases the risk that more veterans and employees will become ill.

Lack of supplies: Hospitals are reporting shortages of masks, gowns, hand sanitizer and other personal protective equipment. Some staff have been told to bypass wearing protective equipment they would typically wear when interacting with infectious patients so it can be saved for use with COVID-19 patients.

Network issues: VA employees are reporting issues accessing the department’s computer networks to upload radiological images, treat patients remotely using video streams, and process veterans’ claims. Employees in Las Vegas were called back to the office, despite the risk of spreading the virus, after a surge in remote work strained the network.





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Fourth mission vulnerabilities: In the event of a pandemic or other national emergency, the VA can be called into service to help overloaded hospitals treat the public. Despite VA Secretary Wilkie’s recent assertion that the VA is prepared serve as the ‘surge force,’ in reality the administration has refused to fill nearly 50,000 vacant positions across the department – mostly doctors, nurses, and other front-line health care providers.

Union busting: Instead of preparing for a global pandemic, VA leaders spent the month of February implementing three anti-labor executive orders issued by President Trump. They evicted labor unions from the workplace, disbanded labor-management committees, and kicked us off government email systems. By impeding the flow of information from front-line employees to the department’s leaders, the VA has jeopardized the health of veterans and employees alike with a haphazard approach.

What needs to happen: VA management needs to stop implementing the administration’s executive orders at once and agree to sit down with AFGE and other VA unions so together we can make the right decisions and take the right actions to protect our veterans and our communities. AFGE and other employee unions at the VA have a long history of partnering together to help the VA provide world-class service to our nation’s veterans, yet Secretary Wilkie has rejected our help. These anti-worker orders have created artificial barriers that are preventing labor and management from working together in a time of crisis – when everyone needs to be moving in the same direction to protect the American public.

