



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

August 11, 2020

Ms. Alma L. Lee
President
National Veterans Affairs Council, #53
American Federation of Government Employees
3441 Brandon Avenue, SW
Roanoke, VA 24018

Dear Ms. Lee:

Thank you for your August 6, 2020, letter. I welcome the opportunity to respond, and I note in your letter you highlight American Federation of Government Employees' (AFGE) commitment to end racism, bigotry and harassment in the workplace. This is a welcome change in direction for your organization, since many of your own members are currently suing National President Everett Kelley and other union leaders for ["fostering a culture that turned a blind eye to allegations of harassment."](#)

The actions alleged in the suit are unconscionable and include the frequent use of racial slurs and harassment by the former AFGE National President. Unfortunately, AFGE failed to hold this individual accountable in any meaningful way for these alleged misdeeds, allowing him to resign after nearly 4 months of paid leave.

Given AFGE's troubling history on this issue, it is apparent that your organization needs to look within itself first and is in no position to lecture others on such important topics. VA does not tolerate harassment or discrimination in any form, and we do not wait for lawsuits to start caring about our employees' well-being. We encourage any employee encountering discrimination or harassment to contact their Equal Employment Opportunity manager and other internal resources to ensure that their complaint is addressed.

Our commitment to both Veterans and our employees has helped turn this Department around. In fact, over the last 2 years, VA has boosted its rating from 17th to 6th among large Federal agencies in the Partnership for Public Service's annual Best Places to Work in the Federal Government survey of Federal employees.

VA has seen more positive changes over the last 2 years than most departments see in a decade or more, and Veterans' trust in VA has reached an all-time high. It is a *renaissance* taking place inside the second largest Federal department, but it's one in which AFGE played no role because your organization has chosen politics over developing a productive relationship.

Page 2.

Ms. Alma L. Lee

As I read your August 6 letter, it occurred to me that VA has had no support, and in fact, outright opposition from AFGE leadership as we have worked to implement a host of important reforms. This is underscored by AFGE's opposition to the MISSION Act, the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017 and the Department's commonsense ban on smoking at VA health care facilities. You also aggressively opposed our demand that hundreds of nurses and doctors treat Veteran patients rather than spend an inordinate amount of their official time performing union work.

Rather than participate productively in improving the Department, AFGE leadership has fought for the status quo at every turn and made clear it only wants to stir up political battles. It is also telling that your organization was silent when deficiencies in the last Administration endangered Veterans' lives.

I challenge AFGE leaders to aim higher. During the COVID-19 pandemic, VA showed that caring for Veterans goes hand in hand with caring for VA employees, and I believe we can start building a productive working relationship when AFGE leaders finally realize this fundamental truth.

Sincerely,



Robert L. Wilkie