

AFGE



THE GOVERNMENT STANDARD

For current and retired government workers and their families since 1933 • American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO

September/October 2017

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A photograph of a person from behind, sitting on a hospital bed. They are wearing a light blue hospital gown with a plaid pattern. They are looking out a window with white horizontal blinds. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from the window.

High Stakes Health Care

How 49,000 Vacancies Are Wreaking Havoc On The VA

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A Message from AFGE's National President *J. David Cox Sr.*

Brothers and Sisters, we are living in unprecedented times. I've never seen the attacks on federal workers that I see today.

We're faced with a choice: we can cower to the pressure, and let elected officials chip away at everything that makes this country great or we can come together and fight. This September, as Congress returns to session we face budget uncertainty. We face privatization attempts under veils of, "choice," "workforce improvement," and "efficiency". They are taking your jobs, cutting your pay, and making your hard-earned retirement a thing of the past.

We will not let them win.

Prior to the Congressional summer recess, we had a series of key legislative wins. Even in these contentious times our voices and actions can beat back these attacks. As long as we come together, we can win.

All the fights that we have won have been because we came together to join our voices into an unavoidable, deafening and unified voice of strength. To win this fight we have to drown out the naysayers. We have to remind our lawmakers that we're what keeps this country running.

In the tumultuous times we face today, we need to work harder than ever. We have to walk the halls, keep on people about making their calls to lawmakers, and visit each and every elected officials' office. It is easy to get caught up in all of the work to be done, but I know we can accomplish these tasks. The sisters and brothers of this union are the hardest working people in America. We are the voices and servants of the people of our country.

We must join together now. It's time to build up from the foundation we have fought so hard to make strong. We need to be the loudest, strongest voice we have ever been.

No conversation or action is too small. Over many months I've spoken to you about how we need to be

big enough to win. Well, here's an example: **If every member of our union made just one call a day for the next 30 days, we would make just about 10 million calls.** Do you know what lawmakers would do if they received that amount of voices, opinions and stories in support of our cause? They'd fall out of their chairs.

It's time to call your lawmakers. It's time to have your brothers and sisters over for dinner after visiting your lawmaker's local offices. It's time to call your local press and news stations. We must take every new employee and every new member under our wing and continue to grow in size and activism.

What makes us strong is the unbreakable bond our members share. Together we are big enough to win.

In Solidarity,

AFGE—THE GOVERNMENT STANDARD

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To Fund Tax Cuts for the Rich, Politicians Propose to Slash and Eliminate Pensions

Politicians are reaching into the pockets of public servants, including law enforcement officers, to help fund tax cuts for the wealthiest of all Americans.

On July 19, the House Budget Committee approved the 2018 budget plan and sent the bill to the full House with three proposed cuts to federal employees' pensions:

- 1 Eliminate defined benefit contributions, or pensions, for ALL newly hired federal employees.
- 2 Cut your take-home pay by requiring employees to contribute more to their pensions.
- 3 Eliminate supplemental payments to employees who retire before age 62, such as law enforcement agents and firefighters.

*(The supplement was created because many law enforcement officers, due to the physical demands of their jobs, have to retire early before they become eligible for Social Security, which is part of their retirement package. The supplement bridges the gap.)

According to the budget resolution – a budget blueprint telling the authorizing committees how much they can spend – the committees can decide what they want to cut, but they have to come up with at least \$32 billion. There is no ceiling, so they could cut as much as they want.

More Tax Breaks for the Wealthy

Rep. John Yarmuth, House Budget Committee ranking member, immediately issued a statement rejecting the resolution.

“Americans deserve a budget that prioritizes their families, their communities, and their securities,” Yarmuth said. “Unfortunately, [this] budget fails them at every turn. It embraces the worst extremes of the Trump budget, sacrificing nearly every investment that helps American families get ahead in order to give huge tax breaks to millionaires and corporations.”

While federal employees played no role in the deficit, politicians time and again use “deficit reduction” as an excuse to scapegoat our public servants and line the pockets of millionaires and billionaires.



Lawmakers, community organizations and unions gather on the grounds of the Capitol to voice concerns about the President's proposed budget.

We Can't Let This Happen to Us

Members of Congress should be working to protect the interests of ordinary Americans, not just the billionaires on Wall Street. This budget blueprint is another example of how our policy has been hijacked by special interests and their allies in Congress.



**Call (844) 669-5146 (D.C. Office)
and (888) 775-3148 (District Office)**

**and tell your members of Congress to reject these cuts.
Your lawmakers need to hear from all of us, not just their
wealthy, well-connected friends.**

Main Street or Wall Street: Who Benefits from Privatization?



Here's who benefits when the government privatizes public services: Wall Street executives and corporate shareholders.

Here's who pays the price: everyone else.

When public services are sold off to private investors, the objective switches from serving the public to making a profit.

What privatization means for you:

- Increased costs to the public – often those who can least afford it.
- Lower wages and benefits, and less job security, for the contracted workers.
- Less accountability to the public for how our tax dollars are spent.
- Greater inequality as less funds are available for the programs and services that aren't contracted out.

Unfortunately, the threat to our most-sacred public

institutions has never been more real than it is today. The Trump administration would like nothing better than to outsource many of the government's functions that civil service workers now perform – from treating our veterans and supporting our troops, to regulating our airspace and housing prisoners.

The arguments for privatizing our public assets are based on rhetoric, not facts. That's because study after study shows that privatizing public assets is a bad deal for the American people.

A 2016 report by the policy research group In the Public Interest concludes that privatization is threatening the goals and missions of many of our public goods and services, especially those that serve the poor.

"Instead of a shared responsibility to fund public services, in many cases, the burden has shifted to the backs of the most vulnerable, while corporations managing these services skim off profits," the report says.

“Private companies have left social safety net programs in tatters. Many workers employed by government contractors have plunged further into poverty because of declining wages and benefits. And as private interests continue to siphon money away from public services, the dismantling of public goods not only perpetuates pervasive economic inequality, but also contributes to increasing racial segregation.”

AFGE is Fighting and Winning

Thanks to the advocacy of our members, we have been able to fight off some of the Trump administration’s privatization proposals.

Some of Our Recent Wins:

- Congressional appropriators rejected a White House proposal to privatize the Federal Aviation Administration’s air traffic control system.
- Congress rejected a White House proposal that could have led to outsourcing civilian jobs at the Department of Defense.
- We secured \$1.4 billion at the VA for hiring, workforce improvements, and dozens of new facilities that will make it easier for veterans to get their care at VA facilities, which they prefer over private hospitals.

These victories are great news for our members and for the American people, but we cannot become complacent. That’s because the lure of profiting off our public services is too great for Wall Street to ignore.

That’s why President Trump quickly reversed an Obama administration order from last year that would have phased out the federal government’s use of private prisons, which are less safe for workers and inmates than those operated by the federal Bureau of Prisons. Stocks in the nation’s two largest private prison operators doubled in the three months following President Trump’s election.

It’s why the Internal Revenue Service keeps trying to outsource collection of past due taxes, even though past attempts have been complete failures and cost taxpayers millions more than what these private companies collected.

And it’s why Congress has introduced no fewer than five bills this year alone that would privatize various parts of the Department of Veterans Affairs, even though veterans have said over and over again that they prefer to be treated at a VA hospital by VA staff – one-third of whom are veterans.

Our fight against these privatization efforts must be about more than self-preservation. It’s about preserving the government’s critical role in delivering programs and services to the American people.

“When we privatize, we’re padding the pockets of CEOs and giving up key aspects of our democratic control,” AFGE President J. David Cox Sr. said. “Their bottom line is profit, not the American people. In contrast, our government exists for the common good, to make our lives better. We need to fully fund our government programs, not divert public money to enrich millionaires and billionaires.”

— AFGE Diversity Week 2017 —

As one of the most diverse unions in the country, AFGE represents government workers from all backgrounds and walks of life. That’s why more than 600 AFGE activists gathered in August for the 2017 Diversity Week. This year’s conference theme “No Room for Hate” rang especially true as the events in Charlottesville unfolded just before the conference began. AFGE activists re-connected with each other and shared best practices on promoting

and protecting inclusion in the workplace and in their communities.

“If current events are any indication, there is still much work to be done in our communities,” said AFGE National Vice President for Women and Fair Practices Augusta Y. Thomas. “We are deeply committed within our labor community to uplift all workers and rise strongly against bigotry and discrimination.”

How 49,000 VA Vacancies Wreak Havoc on Veterans Health



For every medical position that remains unfilled at the Department of Veterans Affairs, there's a veteran who's stuck on a waiting list for care, or forced to seek care outside the VA system – or worse.

And with **49,000 vacant positions** and counting, that's a lot of veterans who aren't getting the care they deserve. That's why AFGE is making filling the VA vacancies one of our top priorities. And we're already seeing results.

In June, about 30 nurses at the VA hospital in Little Rock, Ark., filed a complaint about understaffing with the VA, the Inspector General, and the State Board of Nursing. Then they took to the streets, holding a picket outside the hospital to raise awareness about the staffing shortages.

“We are down 150 nurses. Floating to areas we aren't skilled in is at an all-time high,” said AFGE Local 2054 President Barbara Casanova, who is also a registered nurse. “We can't deliver appropriate care under those circumstances. Scheduling has suffered a direct impact of understaffing.”

The Little Rock VA healthcare system is one of the largest and busiest VA medical centers in the

country. It serves 65,000 veterans a year and provides a wide variety of inpatient and outpatient services including complex surgical procedures and extended rehabilitative care. The system also serves as a teaching facility for more than 1,500 students and residents with the University of Arkansas as its principle affiliate.

Since the rally, which received positive coverage in the local and national press, the VA announced it has hired 54 nurses and is detailing to the hospital two nurses from each of the 16 Veterans Integrated Service Networks hospitals, among other things. Cassanova is encouraged by the VA's response. “We are cautiously optimistic,” she said.

The positive reaction in Little Rock shows what our members and our union can accomplish when we set our minds to it. Little Rock got results by raising public awareness about the staffing shortages and communicating up the chain of command about the failure to act.

If Little Rock can do it, so can every other VA health care facility in the country.

The stakes could not be higher – both for veterans who deserve the best care and service that the government can provide, and for employees who need resources and support to deliver on that promise.

Across the country, VA hospitals and medical centers are facing staffing shortages similar to Little Rock's. In May, VA Secretary David Shulkin said the VA has roughly 49,000 vacancies departmentwide – with 45,000 of them in the Veterans Health Administration alone.

The staffing shortages have resulted in the VA sending veterans to expensive for-profit private hospitals that are not specialized in veterans' illnesses and often do not have the expertise required to take care of them.

Leaving so many positions vacant while thousands of veterans wait for care is a national outrage, and we need to hold lawmakers accountable for it. It's time for Congress to put aside politics and focus on helping the VA fulfil its mission: caring for those who have served their country with honor.

Here's how to do it:

- Increase salaries for health care providers and other staff so the VA can better compete with the private sector. According to Secretary Shulkin, the VA pays 18 percent less than the private sector for mechanical engineers and one-fourth less for biomedical engineers.
- Improve hiring incentives like tuition assistance for doctors and other hard-to-fill jobs.
- Require the VA to issue public reports on its progress in hiring workers. This will enable Congress, veterans' groups, and the public to hold the agency accountable.
- Be more aggressive in recruiting health care professionals from inside the military, like Navy corpsmen and Army medics, as they transition out of the service. One-third of federal employees are veterans already, but we can do better.

In July, Congress took an important first step in providing the VA with the resources it needs to serve veterans when and where they need it. The VA Choice and Quality Employment Act will provide the VA with \$1.4 billion for hiring, workforce improvements, and the authorization of 28 new leases that increase the department's internal capacity to deliver care.



The next step is to hold the VA accountable for hiring the right workers in the right locations to meet veterans' needs. That's where HR 3459 comes in. This bill, introduced in July by Congressman Anthony Brown of Maryland, would require the VA to post the number of job vacancies and report to Congress on what steps it is taking to reach full staffing.

“The VA is the best health care system to serve and treat our veterans. But to do so effectively, it must be fully resourced and staffed,” AFGE National President J. David Cox Sr. said.

“For too long, the American public has been kept in the dark about the growing number of vacancies at the VA. With this new piece of legislation, there will finally be accountability.”

To get involved go to:
www.afge.org/stafftheva



Stand Up Fight Back

4 Easy Ways to Fight for Your Job and Pay



Over the past few months, the Trump administration and Congress have made it clear they intend to balance the budget on the backs of government workers – cutting vital programs and thousands of jobs to give tax breaks to wealthy corporations and donors.

Trump’s proposed budget would cut your wages by making you pay substantially more for your retirement benefit, lower the take-home pay for current employees by raising mandatory retirement contributions, eliminate supplemental payments to employees who retire before age 62, and eliminate the defined benefit plan for new employees. Workers like us cannot afford these cuts.

It will take all of us to fight this budget, stand up for civil servants, and protect our pay, our pensions, and our jobs. So what can you do to take action? Follow this simple checklist.



Call Your Lawmakers and Fight For Workers’ Rights The quickest way to reach your elected officials is to make a phone call to their office and make your voice heard. To reach your representative and Senators, you can call the Congressional switchboard at **202-224-3121**.



Write to Your Lawmakers on Issues Facing Your Agency Is your lawmaker’s voicemail full? Try writing them a letter. You can find a list of current actions on AFGE’s Big Enough to Win page at www.afge.org/win.



Write a Letter to the Editor of Your Local Newspaper Too often, our communities are unaware of the important work that we do – and unaware of the impact cuts like these will have on our neighborhoods. It’s up to us to tell our stories, and show that the work we do is vital to the country. Visit www.afge.org/win.



Visit Your Lawmaker in Person Many of you live in cities that have local congressional offices, which provides the perfect opportunity to visit them and tell them your story in person. To find the local office for your Representative, visit www.house.gov. To find your Senator’s local office, visit www.senate.gov. If you need any help getting or preparing for these local meeting, please contact your Legislative and Political Organizer. After your meeting, please share what your Member of Congress or their staff said with the AFGE Legislative Department by filling out this online form at www.afge.org/lobbying.

Your Rights Are Non-Negotiable



2017 has been the year of attacks on civil servants as federal working people have faced numerous attempts to erode their rights at work. It's clear President Trump and his allies in Congress have their sights set on the workers who protect our borders and airports, process Social Security checks, inspect our food, and care for veterans.

And as Congressional leaders self-congratulate one another for the firings of veterans at the VA, it's important to remember why due process rights are so vital to a federal workforce, and why we cannot allow it to go away.

What is my right to due process?

Due process is a Constitutional requirement for federal workers to receive advance notice of any disciplinary action being proposed by their employer and to be given a meaningful opportunity to respond before the action takes effect.

Why does due process exist?

Due process is an essential part of having a merit-based personnel system. In 1883, Congress passed a law requiring that federal agencies hire employees based on their competence and abilities, rather than favoritism or political affiliation. Subsequent laws were passed to ensure that, by the same token, employees could not be fired or disciplined for reasons unrelated to their job performance.

Are due process rules necessary?

Absolutely, unless we want to go back to the days when employees were fired for disclosing wrongdoing by their agency or not voting for the boss's preferred candidate. The U.S. Supreme Court

has ruled on multiple occasions that, because the law requires agencies to show just cause as to why an employee should be fired, the Constitution automatically guarantees a due process requirement to ensure that the cause has been met.

What are the current due process rules for federal employees?

Employees must be given advance written notice of the proposed action, reasonable time to respond, the right to counsel, and a written copy of the agency's decision and reasoning. For more serious adverse actions, employees also are entitled to appeal the agency's decision to the independent Merit Systems Protection Board.

Do due process rules only protect problem employees?

Not at all. Due process rules are in place for everyone, not just the few problem employees who are inevitable in a workplace of more than 2 million people. Due process rules protect whistleblowers, employees who are targeted for having the "wrong" political beliefs, reservists whose military service is viewed as a hassle to the boss, and anyone else who is illegally targeted.

How do taxpayers benefit from due process?

The law ensures public sector employees are disciplined for valid reasons and that agencies do not violate the Constitution in a rush to punish an employee for perceived misconduct. It is not in the public's interest for agencies to discipline employees without cause or for reasons unrelated to their job performance, allowing federal employees to do their work, serving the American public.



Retiring Soon?

You can remain a member of AFGE in retirement and enjoy discounts and activities – and continue to be a voice for workers' and retirees' rights and benefits.

Please fill out form and turn it in to your Local office. You can sign up online at www.afge/retirees

AFGE Retirees support the work of AFGE and AFGE supports retirees. Retirees are organizers, mentors, advocates and more. Retirees receive all the same discounts and insurance you have while working, and enjoy activities together with other retirees and active members. **Sign up here:**

Name: _____

AFGE Local: _____ Member ID: _____

Home Email: _____

Street Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Mobile Phone: _____ Home Phone: _____

Expected Retirement Date: _____ Date of Birth (optional): _____

Interested in _____

Your Local may already have an active retiree group. Local retiree dues vary, but are inexpensive. Turn this card into your union office to learn more or go online to sign up at www.afge.org/retirees

Local officers: If you need information about how to start a retiree program or sign up a new retiree, contact us at **202.639.4103/202.639.6409** or retirees@afge.org.

Win \$5K by Entering Our “Love Letters to the EPA” Contest



As the Environmental Protection Agency continues to be threatened to have its budget cut, regulations rolled back, and jobs taken away, AFGE Local 3911 is turning to aspiring videographers and environmental activists with a smartphone to ask this simple, \$5,000 question: “Why do you love the EPA?”

As part of their “Love Letters to the EPA” contest, AFGE Local 3911 is accepting videos to be submitted now through October 31, 2017 about why the EPA is needed, and why we cannot let their budget

be severely slashed. Winners will be chosen early next year, with \$5,000 for first place, and prizes up to \$500 for 7th.

“The EPA has faced intense scrutiny this year as the president has rolled out his plans for the agency,” said AFGE Local 3911 President Antony Tseng “We want the American people to tell us why they don’t want to see the EPA dismantled, and why they want us to continue to protect our citizens for years to come”.

The contest is open to individuals who are United States citizens, and residents of the United States or a U.S. Territory, who are not employees or former employees of the EPA or their immediate families, and are not members of Local 3911 or their immediate families.

“If your video is the best, the \$5,000 first prize is yours,” said Tseng. “We know that a fully funded EPA protects human health and the environment.”

For more information about the contest check out www.afge.org/LL2EPA and follow #LL2EPA on Facebook and Twitter.

AFGE Members, Family, Awarded 2017 Union Plus Scholarships

Winners Honored for Achievement and Union Values

Union Plus recently awarded \$150,000 in scholarships to 106 students from 35 states, representing 31 unions, including seven winners representing the American Federation of Government Employees. The AFGE winners are:

Lara Aguiar of Peoria, Arizona. Aguiar, whose father, Armando Aguiar, is a member of AFGE Local 1547, has been awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

Gail Alexander of Sparks, Nevada. Alexander, who is a member of AFGE Local 2152, has been awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

Colby Atkinson of Smyrna, Delaware. Atkinson, whose father, William Atkinson, is a member of AFGE Local 1709, has been awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

Seth Cunningham of Bristol, Tennessee.

Cunningham, whose father, Eric Cunningham, is a member of AFGE Local 1405, has been awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

Michael Liptrot of Birmingham, Alabama. Liptrot, whose mother, Alethea Liptrot, is a member of AFGE Local 2206, has been awarded a \$4,000 scholarship.

Jacob McErlean of Towson, Maryland. McErlean, whose father, Matthew McErlean, is a member of AFGE Local 476, has been awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

Jack Moseley of Eagle River, Alaska. Moseley, whose father, George Moseley, is a member of AFGE Local 3028, has been awarded a \$1,000 scholarship.

AFGE



**AMERICAN FEDERATION OF
GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO**

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