

## P R E S S   R E L E A S E

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### **Survey: 60% of Veterans Affairs Union Members Polled Say They Weren't Notified When Fellow Staff Members Contracted COVID-19**

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*Nearly 50% of Respondents Said Their VA Facility Does Not Notify Them Before Working with a COVID-19 Positive Patient*

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*VA's Mishandling of COVID-19 Comes Amidst Union's Years-Long Fight for a Fair Union Contract*

**NATIONWIDE** - Mounting evidence shows that the Veterans Affairs (VA) Department has grossly mishandled its COVID-19 response, putting both VA workers and veterans nationwide at risk of contracting the virus. In a recent survey conducted by the American Federation of Government Employees' National VA Council (AFGE NVAC), the union representing over 265,000 VA workers, **60 percent of respondents reported that their facility did not alert them when fellow staff members contracted COVID-19 and nearly 50 percent of respondents stated that they were not notified prior to working with COVID-19 positive patients.**

Under Secretary Robert Wilkie's leadership, the VA has developed a [track record](#) of ignoring worker concerns and putting veterans' lives at risk. Members of AFGE NVAC have been fighting for a fair contract for years, demanding safe working conditions and adequate staffing levels, the space and equipment VA workers need to ensure veterans receive the best care possible, and mechanisms to protect workers from the whims of management.

"We are almost one year into this global pandemic and Secretary Wilkie and the VA have yet to adequately protect the health of employees and veterans from the increasing spike in Covid-19 cases," said **Alma Lee, President of AFGE NVAC**. "To date, over 100 VA employees and more than 7,000 veterans have died. By refusing to enact safety measures that are standard across all VAs, including the ability for employees to have access to testing, telework and the ability to quarantine, the virus will continue to spread, infect, and possibly kill workers and veterans. The VA must take accountability for its mishandling of this crisis."

Instead of listening to VA workers when they raised the alarm about shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) at the start of the pandemic, Secretary Robert Wilkie and VA officials dismissed public reports of the only to acknowledge the shortages once [internal memos were leaked](#) to the press. **Nearly 40 percent of survey respondents reported not receiving adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) at their VA facility.**

"The responses from our VA members confirm what we have been saying since the start of this pandemic – because of VA leadership's mismanagement and outright refusal to collaborate with employee representatives, this virus has continued to spread amongst veterans and workers across the country at an alarming rate," said AFGE National President Everett Kelley. "Enough lives have been lost. We look forward to returning to our seat at the table and working

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collectively with new VA leadership to develop a comprehensive plan that commits to ensuring worker and veteran safety, under the incoming Biden Administration.”

Union members have been taking to the streets for months, protesting the VA’s refusal to provide hazardous duty pay for VA staff and continuing shortages of PPE. They have also been calling for an end to [systemic racism](#) and union busting at VA facilities across the country. The survey results come after a years-long assault by the Trump administration on the collective bargaining rights of VA workers and a broader push to privatize the VA. **In fact, 20 percent of survey respondents say their facility has cut the number of beds available for veterans and have intentionally left vacant positions unfilled to make their case for expanding the privatization veteran care.**

“I have watched as critical services have been stripped away from our local veterans as the VA pushes to privatize our facilities,” says **AFGE Local 1631 Executive Vice President Jessica Fee, representing employees at the VA medical center in Chillicothe, Ohio.** “Management recently closed our COVID-19 and acute care units, displacing nearly 400 veterans. The closure of these units resulted in an outbreak among staff and veterans due to management’s inability to separate infected patients from other veterans in the psychiatric and detox units. Dozens of staff members have had to quarantine following exposure, leaving veterans with reduced access to vital services.”

The importance of a fair contract is a matter of life and death during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed the lives of [114 VA employees](#) and over [7,900 veterans](#). Currently, more than [15,400 VA employees](#) and [144,000 veterans](#) have tested positive. **Over 88 percent of survey respondents said they knew of an employee at their facility that has contracted COVID-19.**

*AFGE NVAC members are available for media interviews to discuss the severity of these issues and how they have impacted their health and ability to care for our nation’s veterans.*

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