

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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Contact: communication@afgenvac.org

Chillicothe Veterans Affairs Union Members Protest Sudden Closure of Inpatient Care Unit Which Led to the Displacement of Over 375 Veterans, Potentially Putting Them at Risk of Contracting COVID-19

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Protest Comes Amidst a Years-Long Fight for a Fair Union Contract, as Trump Administration has Repeatedly Undermined Federal Workers Union

Chillicothe, OH - Today, union members with American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 1631 were joined by veterans groups and supporters to protest the unexplained closure of the acute care facilities at the Chillicothe's Veteran Affairs (VA) Medical Center. Union members who work for the Chillicothe VA believe the impetus for closing these facilities is VA leadership's desire to privatize local veteran care, and that this decision has severely eroded employees' ability to care for Ohio's veterans.

On December 14, Chillicothe VA leadership closed the local inpatient care units without warning or explanation. Hundreds of impacted Chillicothe veterans have been rerouted to local private hospitals and community care facilities that are already overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, potentially putting them at risk of contracting the virus and incurring higher medical fees.

Members of the local Ohio AFL-CIO, American Legion, Mid-Ohio Jeepers Organization and Veterans of Foreign Wars joined AFGE Local 1631 for today's car caravan protest in support of the VA workers' demands, which include immediately reopening the acute care facility to better serve local veterans.

"I have watched as critical services have been stripped away from our local veterans as the VA pushes to privatize our facilities," says **Jessica Fee, Executive Vice President of AFGE Local 1631**. "A growing number of veterans are losing access to medical assistance and mental health support in the midst of a global pandemic. As the daughter of a combat veteran, I am protesting today and calling on our local community members to stand up for our veterans, just as they stood for us. We are demanding true accountability from VA leaders and the immediate reopening of our acute care facility, to allow us to do our jobs and give Ohioan veterans the care they were promised."

Local VA management have significantly downsized the Chillicothe facility, removing 26 beds for COVID patients and 30 beds for acute care patients, which has caused over 375 veterans to be discharged, including at least 28 COVID-19 patients. Another 10 veterans seeking medical assistance were refused service.

1970 Roanoke Blvd.
Building 76 Suite 106
Roanoke, VA 24153

Phone: 540-345-6301
Fax: 540-342-2196

AFGE National VA Council



In recent days, a COVID-19 outbreak at the facility has spread among staff and patients 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. As a result of the understaffing, the VA is sending detox and psych patients back into the community, or to subpar and expensive private facilities.

The Chillicothe inpatient care units are the only facilities available for veterans between Cleveland and Cincinnati. In closing the facility, management opened a 250-mile gap in care for local veterans seeking assistance. Local hospitals have been forced to turn patients away due to COVID-19 capacity issues. Private healthcare practitioners are imploring veterans to return to VA facilities with fewer patients where they can access better healthcare reimbursement plans.

The recent decisions have caught the attention of US Senator Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) who [voiced his concerns](#) regarding VA leadership's lack of transparency in a letter to the VA VISN 10 director.

Despite VA management stating that this is a temporary closure for undisclosed budgetary reasons, they have refused to provide a timeline for reopening. Workers are concerned that management is pushing to privatize veteran care in the area and will eventually begin to outsource additional veteran services, leaving dozens jobless in the midst of a pandemic. By outsourcing jobs to non-union workers, the VA is reducing workers' bargaining power and ability to advocate for themselves on the job.

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 National VA Council 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.

The importance of a fair contract is a matter of life and death during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed the lives of [120 VA employees](#) and over [8,400 veterans](#). Currently, more than [16,200 VA employees](#) and [155,000 veterans](#) have tested positive.

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