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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 20, 2021

Contact: communication@afgenvac.org

AFGE President Kelley, VA Secretary McDonough Kick-Off Annual Health and Safety Conference With Pledge to Protect VA Workers

With 139 VA Employee Lives Lost to COVID-19, McDonough Vows to “Protect, Empower, Rebuild the Federal Workforce”

NATIONWIDE - Members of the American Federation of Government Employees’ National Veteran’s Affairs Council (AFGE NVAC), the union representing over 265,000 Veteran’s Affairs (VA) workers, joined United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough yesterday in launching the union’s first-ever virtual Health and Safety Conference.

This annual four-day conference gives VA workers nationwide the opportunity to voice their most pressing concerns, including—but not limited to—their need for reliable access to hot water, workplace violence and gun safety measures, stronger veteran suicide prevention programs, access to telework and telemedicine and adequate staffing.

AFGE NVAC First Executive Vice President, Mary-Jean Burke, renewed the union’s demand that Secretary McDonough rescind the Trump era policy prohibiting Title 38 employees under 38 U.S.C. §7422 from using official time to protect and defend the VA workforce. AFGE National President Everett Kelley noted his eagerness to right the wrongs inflicted on the VA workforce by the Trump administration, and work with Secretary McDonough to prioritize the safety of VA workers and our nation’s veterans.

“Health and safety should always be something we work together on, because when we work together, we save lives. That is the goal of the VA Council—to save the lives of veterans and treat them with the very best care in the world. We have been very pleased with the words and deeds of President Biden and Secretary McDonough with regard to respecting the National VA Council,” said AFGE National President Everett Kelley. “We know that excellence starts with making sure that the VA is a great place to work—a healthy place, a safe place. That is a foundation for excellence in VA healthcare. It’s what you might call a necessary condition. And today is a fresh start in working back toward that goal.”

“AFGE NVAC’s work representing VA civil servants is critical to strengthening the VA, critical to making the VA more effective, and critical to improving access and outcomes for our veterans. We need good, strong, productive relations, open and transparent communications. We’re committed to fully implementing President Biden’s executive order on protecting the federal workforce, an order he signed just two days after inauguration—an order revoking the previous administration’s executive orders,” said United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough. “The VA’s career civil servants are the backbone of the federal workforce. We owe it to the nation—especially during the pandemic—to protect, empower, and rebuild the federal workforce.”

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

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

AFGE National VA Council



Under the Trump administration and former VA Secretary Robert Wilkie's leadership, VA management developed a [track record](#) of ignoring worker concerns and putting veterans' lives at risk—both during and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the early days of the pandemic, VA management [was not truthful](#) about the VA's shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), publicly [claiming the VA had enough PPE for staff](#) while [privately acknowledging](#) the department had only provided one mask to employees each week.

In a [January 2021 survey](#) conducted by AFGE, 60 percent of VA worker 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. Nearly 40 percent of survey respondents reported not receiving adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) at their VA facility.

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, workplaces free from [racial and sexual harassment](#), 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 [139 VA employees](#) and over [11,565 veterans](#).

AFGE NVAC's leadership, members and legal team are available for media interviews to discuss their fight for a fair contract, and how ongoing Health & Safety issues at VA facilities nationwide have impacted employees' health and ability to care for our nation's veterans.

###