

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

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VA Union Members in 7 States Join Memorial Day of Action to Honor Colleagues, Veterans Lost to COVID-19

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With 139 VA Employee Lives Lost to COVID-19, VA Union's Fight for a Fair Contract and New Safety Measures Are A Matter of Life and Death

Nationwide - Today, hundreds of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) union members from the American Federation of Government Employees' National VA Council (AFGE NVAC)—the union representing over 265,000 VA workers—demonstrated across the country in a Workers Memorial Day of Action. Workers in 8 cities across 7 states joined together to honor the lives of VA workers and veterans lost to COVID-19, fight for better workplace protections and demand a fair contract.

“Over one year into this global pandemic and local VA leaders still have not developed consistent and uniform protocols in the fight against COVID-19,” said Alma Lee, President of AFGE NVAC. “To date, over 139 VA employees and more than 11,600 veterans have died from the virus. We are demanding the enactment of standard safety measures across all VAs, including the ability for employees to access testing, telework and quarantine. Without these measures, the virus will continue to spread, infect, and possibly kill workers and veterans. We honor those we have lost, and pledge to act now in order to avoid another crisis of this magnitude down the line.”

The essential VA workers who have kept veterans safe, fed, and healthy throughout the pandemic held rallies, delivered petition deliveries, and released balloons to make their demands for immediate relief heard. The actions were held in Leavenworth, Kan., St. Louis, Mo., Las Vegas, Nev., Chillicothe, Ohio, Minneapolis, Minn., Hampton, Va., Poplar Bluff, Mo., Riverside, Calif. - among others.

This moment of VA worker solidarity comes just days after AFGE NVAC members joined United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough in launching the union's first-ever virtual Health and Safety Conference, with the goal of giving 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 National President Everett Kelley launched the conference by noting 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. McDonough responded, *“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.”*

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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 [11,671 veterans](#).

All rally participants were spaced six feet from one another to ensure social distancing is maintained. Participating AFGE members are available for media interviews upon request.

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