

February 17, 2022

Hon. Denis R. McDonough  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Gina M. Grosso  
Assistant Secretary for Human Resources  
and Administration/Operations, Security and Preparedness  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**RE: Educating and Empowering VA Employees During COVID-19**

Dear Secretary McDonough and Assistant Secretary Grosso:

On behalf of the more than 350,000 VA employees represented by AFGE, NAGE, NFFE, NNU, and SEIU, we write to you with an urgent request that the Department take **immediate action to educate workers on the rights, benefits, and services available to them during COVID-19.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed our lives immensely. Civil servants in the federal government are no exception, especially VA employees working on the frontlines of the nation's largest healthcare system to deliver world-class healthcare and services to Veterans. To continue performing those duties to the best of their ability, VA employees must understand and have access to the full range of benefits and services we need to keep ourselves, our colleagues, and the Veteran community safe during COVID-19. By taking additional steps to empower the workforce and provide the resources needed to exercise our rights as federal employees, the Department would be taking a crucial step toward **delivering on President Biden's vision that the "Federal Government should serve as a model employer."** *Executive Order 14003: Protecting the Federal Workforce.*

Due to the expiration of emergency paid leave funds available under the American Rescue Plan Act on September 30, 2021, much of which was unused, the Office of Personnel Management has encouraged the Department to exercise its considerable discretion to grant administrative leave to employees who are unable to work because of COVID-19. But still, leave requests are either arbitrarily denied or employees simply do not know they have the option to request administrative leave in lieu of personal sick and annual leave. Another important feature of the American Rescue Plan Act was the presumption of workplace exposure for certain federal employees who contract COVID-19 and are eligible to file a claim for benefits under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act, which allows them to elect for continuation of pay instead of using personal leave, but the Department has done very little to educate workers about these rights either. A "model employer" should be consistently engaging its workforce and encouraging them to exercise their rights and take advantage of available benefits. **We urge the Department to take an active role in educating the VA workforce by conducting regular, immersive trainings designed to empower them with the knowledge they need to keep themselves, their loved ones, and Veterans safe during the pandemic and beyond.**

The Department's messaging and guidance to frontline employees have been inconsistent and inadequate. As we have said for years, the Department's decision to reorganize and centralize Human Resources functions has had a damaging impact on the lives of VA workers. While VA employees are working around the clock at healthcare facilities across the country, HR representatives are, in most cases, working remotely at the VISN level. As a result, employees with questions about their leave and benefits are left to call HR hotlines and

email faceless “business partners” in VISN offices. **Human Resources is not just another “business.”** It is a crucial part of any employee’s job experience and often serves as the first and primary point of contact for our most dire questions and concerns. But because of HR centralization, it has become more and more difficult for frontline employees to obtain the assistance and critical resources they need to exercise their rights and understand the leave and other benefits available to them during the pandemic.

Training and education are at the foundation of what we do as labor advocates. We have seen firsthand that when VA employees know their rights, they exercise those rights. **And when VA employees know their rights, it makes VA a safer, better place to work.** Simply publishing memos and lists of “frequently asked questions” by email is not effective training and education. Releasing fifteen-minute modules in the Talent Management System is not effective training and education. So many employees do even have regular access to computers during the workday, and when faced with staffing shortages in almost every service line and the inability to consult with an HR representative at their facility, **VA workers are being left behind.** The status quo must change.

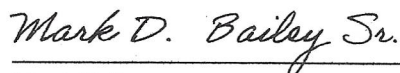
Over the past year, you spoke frequently about your desire to “reset” employee and labor relations at the VA and to “partner” with unions to rebuild and strengthen the career workforce. Our unions are working tirelessly to defend and educate VA workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that is not our responsibility alone. The Department must take an active, meaningful role in educating and empowering VA workers on the rights and benefits available to them during COVID-19.

**On behalf of AFGE, NAGE, NFFE, NNU, and SEIU, we propose establishing a joint COVID-19 Training Task Force charged with the sole responsibility of designing an immersive employee training series related to COVID-19 leave and benefits.** The Task Force should begin meeting immediately so that the Department can announce and begin implementing the training series within sixty days. Please contact us upon your receipt of this letter to identify the VA representatives who will serve on the Task Force and to make arrangements for our first meeting in the weeks ahead.



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Alma L. Lee  
President, National VA Council  
American Federation of Government Employees



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Mark Bailey  
Federal Division/Deputy Director  
National Association of Government Employees



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Irma L. Westmoreland  
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Jeffrey Shapiro  
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National Federation of Federal Employees

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Christine Polnak  
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CC: Tracy Therit, VA Chief Human Capital Officer  
Denise Biaggi-Ayer, Executive Director, VA Office of Labor-Management Relations