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AFGE Responds to Coronavirus

Roundup of AFGE Actions (updated July 17)

- **Federal prisons in Texas, South Florida facing COVID-19 outbreaks:** Federal prisons in North Texas and South Florida are experiencing alarming spikes in COVID-19 infections among inmates and staff. As of Thursday, July 16, 1,039 inmates at Federal Correctional Institution Seago in Dallas County – roughly 58% of the inmate population – have tested positive for the coronavirus, [more than any other federal prison](#). Nine staff also have tested positive, according to [BOP data](#). In South Florida, 93 inmates and 8 staff have tested positive at FCI Miami, while 140 inmates and 29 staff have tested positive at the two FCI Coleman facilities north of Tampa. **Joe Rojas**, the southeast regional vice president for AFGE’s Council of Prison Locals, told ABC News that the situation at Coleman is “dire.” [Read the article](#).
- **SSA in no rush to reopen as employees successfully telework:** While some federal agencies are [pushing to reopen](#) their offices, the Social Security Administration seems content to let most employees continue to work from home – which they have been doing successfully since the start of the pandemic. SSA employees have been more productive while teleworking than they were beforehand: average processing times for hearing decisions have improved from 491 days last May to 357 days this year, while employees handled 275,533 more calls to the national 800 number in May than they did during the same time last year. “There’s no need to bring people back. Our numbers agency-wide are the best they’ve been in a while,” AFGE Council 215 President **Rich Couture** told Federal News Network. [Read the article](#).
- **Looming furlough of U.S. CIS workforce causes uncertainty:** Nearly three-fourths of workers at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services will be forced off the job without pay starting Aug. 3 unless Congress provides emergency funding to offset revenue losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “Unlike during a government shutdown, if these employees are furloughed, they will not receive back pay, meaning that these civilians and their families will face [severe economic consequences](#) in the midst of a global pandemic,” AFGE National President **Everett Kelley** said during a press roundtable with national and local union leaders Tuesday, July 14. Employees are unsure whether or how the agency will be able to continue operations if the furlough takes effect. “You have a lot of people who just have [a lot of uncertainty](#),” AFGE Local 2660 President **Nicole Guess** said. “We don’t know how long this is going to last, so the morale is very low.” [Click here to view the roundtable](#).
- **Forcing feds to return to offices could trigger new infections, senators say:** U.S. senators from Maryland and Virginia [sent a letter](#) to administration officials Thursday, July 9, warning that sending federal workers back to offices prematurely could lead to additional COVID-19 infections. “Reopening too quickly by ending maximum telework threatens to erase the progress made against the virus and endanger the health and safety of federal employees and everyone else in an agency’s region through increased community spread,” says the letter, signed by Sens. Ben Cardin and Chris Van Hollen of Maryland and Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner of Virginia. AFGE has issued a roadmap detailing 10 actions the government should take to ensure federal employees can continue to safely serve the public during the pandemic. [Click here for details](#).
- **More than 1,000 TSA officers have tested positive for COVID-19:** The Transportation Security Administration revealed Thursday, July 9, that [more than 1,000 TSA employees](#) have tested positive for the coronavirus, resulting in six deaths. AFGE Council 100 President Hydrick Thomas says the rising infection rate is a result of TSA ordering employees back to work in crowded spaces without sufficient personal protective equipment. “Right now they’re bringing people back to work and the social distance is not in total effect. Employees are still complaining there’s too many of them in one area,” Thomas told the Washington Post. [Read the article](#).





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- **Lawmakers look to block dangerous line speed increases at meat and poultry plants:** The U.S. Department of Agriculture has been approving requests from meat and poultry processing and slaughter facilities to operate at dangerously high line speeds, even as the COVID-19 pandemic has infected tens of thousands of plant workers. Legislation [introduced Thursday](#), July 9, by Reps. Marcia Fudge, Rosa DeLauro, and Bennie Thompson would protect workers and consumers by prohibiting these waivers. “Under these new ‘modernized’ meat inspection systems, line speeds are increased and federal inspectors are removed from the slaughter lines while their duties are turned over to company employees. This puts meat companies in charge of their own food safety inspections, which is a recipe for disaster,” AFGE Council 45 Acting President Paula Schelling said. [Read the release](#).
- **Bipartisan legislation aims to avert CIS furloughs:** Reps. Emanuel Cleaver II of Missouri and Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska [introduced legislation](#) Thursday, July 9, to provide U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services with \$1.2 billion in emergency supplemental funding to prevent the furlough of nearly three-fourths of the workforce beginning Aug. 3. Sharp declines in visa and citizenship applications due to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in the agency losing 50% of its revenue, prompting the agency to issue furlough notices to 13,400 workers. Sens. Ben Cardin and Chris Van Hollen of Maryland [sent a letter](#) to agency leaders Thursday, July 9, detailing their deep concerns regarding the budget shortfalls and resulting furloughs. AFGE national and local union leaders will be holding a press call at 4:30 p.m. ET Tuesday, July 14, to discuss the impact of the furloughs and the need for congressional action. [Click here to RSVP](#).
- **EPA IG launches investigation into reopening activity:** The inspector general’s office at the Environmental Protection Agency announced July 1 that it is launching an investigation into EPA’s efforts to reopen offices even as the coronavirus continues to spread. “AFGE welcomes the IG’s investigation into EPA’s rushed reopening process,” AFGE National President **Everett Kelley** said. “EPA has not utilized a national plan for reopening, which has resulted in various – but always inadequate – health and safety provisions in different EPA work locations across the country. Employee health and safety should be the number one priority of the agency, not scoring political points for rushing employees back to offices without adequate health and safety considerations in place. AFGE will continue to push the agency to make sure that the workplace is safe for all employees.” [Read the IG’s notice](#).
- **Pandemic proves VA can fill vacant health-care positions:** The VA has been chronically understaffed for years, with nearly 50,000 positions languishing unfilled. Yet in response to the coronavirus pandemic, the agency swiftly moved to hire more than 10,000 people in a single month – providing it can fill vacant positions without additional hiring reforms, AFGE said in a July 1 statement to the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. “We now see that the VA is able to hire when it wants to, so Congress must act and insist that the agency continue to prioritize the filling of these positions so that veterans can receive the best care and services possible at the VA,” the union said. [Read the statement](#).





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- **Health-care workers question safety of reusing masks:** Nurses and other health care professionals are being required to reuse N95 masks because of supply shortages, potentially endangering their safety and the safety of patients, the Star-Tribune reported on June 29. “Why would you think that it’s OK to wear a potentially contaminated mask, from room to room to room?,” questioned AFGE Local 3669 President **Barbara Galle**, a registered nurse at the Minneapolis VA Health Care System. “In a nurse’s heart and mind, that is so disgusting.” [Read the story.](#)
- **USCIS Threatens Massive Furloughs Without Emergency Funding:** The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services said it would begin issuing furlough notices [as soon as this week](#) to three-fourths of its staff, roughly 13,400 employees. The furloughs would go into effect Aug. 3 and could last longer than 30 days. The immigration agency says it needs an emergency appropriation of \$1.2 billion to avoid the furloughs and offset a reduction in fee revenue caused at least in part by the COVID-19 pandemic. During a congressional hearing last week, AFGE President Everett Kelley called on Congress to approve the budget request on the condition that no employees be furloughed. “Furloughs of this magnitude would make it entirely impossible for the agency to carry out more than a tiny fraction of its mission,” Kelley said. [Read the testimony.](#)
- **AFGE Continues to Urge Caution in Reopening Rush:** AFGE Public Policy Director Jacqueline Simon cautioned lawmakers against prematurely reopening federal worksites during a June 25 hearing that examined how the government can protect federal employees while continuing operations and providing vital resources to the public. Simon said there should be no reopening unless and until federal agencies have the full capacity to test, protect, trace, and inform their workforces, and unless and until genuine, objective data on the status of the pandemic shows it has subsided. “A premature end of these measures is a guarantee of resurgence and a guarantee that thousands more will suffer and die,” Simon said. [Read the testimony.](#)
- **EPA Rushes to Reopen Offices Without Union Negotiations:** The Environmental Protection Agency is rushing to reopen offices with little regard to the health and safety of employees and without completing required negotiations with the union, AFGE said in a statement issued this week in response to a [June 24](#) letter the union received from the agency’s acting head of human resources. “Agency briefings are not the same as formal negotiations with the union. EPA is enforcing its plans for reopening worksites without satisfying its legal obligations to negotiate the impact of those changes with AFGE,” the statement said. [Read more here.](#)
- **Rush to Reopen Worksites Will Worsen Pandemic:** AFGE President Everett Kelley warned lawmakers this week that the administration’s rush to reopen worksites will further the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic unless safety protocols are in place to protect workers and the public. Testifying Tuesday in a [virtual hearing](#) before the House Homeland Security Committee, Kelley said there is “no excuse” for exposing workers to the pandemic in a rush to reopen the Department of Homeland Security or any other federal agency. [Read the testimony.](#)
- **Union Charges VA with Failing to Bargain:** AFGE’s National Veterans Affairs Council filed a grievance against the Department of Veterans Affairs for failing to bargain with the union over changes to working conditions made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. President Trump issued a national emergency declaration in March that allowed agencies to make changes to working conditions without first negotiating with unions, although agencies still are required to engage in post-implementation bargaining. [Read the grievance.](#)





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- **AFGE Urges Action to Protect Voting Rights:** AFGE was among 22 unions that called on Congress to pass legislation ensuring every voter can participate in the 2020 Election amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In a June 16 letter to House and Senate leaders, the unions called on Congress to expand online voter registration options, extend early voting periods, ensure the safety of in-person polling places, provide free mail-in voting, and follow best practices to protect the election process from security threats. [Read the letter.](#)
- **70% of USCIS workforce facing furloughs:** The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is proceeding with plans to furlough more than 70% of its workforce beginning in July barring congressional action to close a \$1.2 billion budget shortfall resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. AFGE Local 1924 President Michael Knowles [told Government Executive](#) that backlogs in processing asylum cases will balloon if the furloughs go into effect.
- **AFGE outlines priorities to protect workers and public:** AFGE submitted a statement to the [House Oversight and Government Reform Committee](#) June 10 outlining the union's priorities for protecting essential federal and D.C. government workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chief among our requests are hazard pay for essential workers, a lower burden of proof for coronavirus-related workers' compensation claims, maximum telework for all eligible employees, universal testing and contact tracing, and restoration of labor-management relations at federal agencies. [Click here for our statement.](#)
- **EPA Council calls for 'immediate moratorium' on reopening offices:** AFGE Council 238 President Gary Morton [sent a letter](#) to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler on June 8 calling for an "immediate moratorium on reopening any regional office until the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are more predictable." EPA announced plans to begin reopening shuttered offices on June 1, but on June 5 it reversed course and delayed planned reopenings in Boston and Dallas following upticks in new COVID-19 infections, the [Associated Press reports](#). On June 10, Sen. Patty Murray led a delegation of Washington State lawmakers in [sending a letter](#) to Wheeler questioning the agency's decision to reopen the Seattle field office. [More from Bloomberg.](#)
- **Benefits for fallen VA worker in jeopardy:** The family of a Veterans Affairs worker and veteran who died in early April of complications from COVID-19 has been unable to resolve issues regarding survivor benefits because the agency failed to notify federal authorities of the workers' passing as required by law. [Roy Coleman](#) was an emergency medical technician at the Overton Brooks VA Medical Center in Shreveport, La., and a member of AFGE Local 2525. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is conducting an investigation following inquiries by AFGE into the status of the case, [KSLA reports](#).
- **Correctional officers at risk as agency shuns testing:** Union leaders called out the Bureau of Prisons for failing to test federal correctional officers and staff for COVID-19, even as inmates continue to test positive. Two inmates recently tested positive for the virus at U.S. Penitentiary Thomson in Illinois, a high-security facility that has been [beset with staffing shortages](#), AFGE Local 4070 President **Jon Zumkehr** said. AFGE Council of Prison Locals President **Shane Fausey** issued a statement June 4 calling the agency's failure to prioritize voluntary testing of employees "irresponsible and objectionable." [Read the statement.](#)





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- **VA workers, veterans at risk as agency plots reopening:** The VA continues to minimize the risks that employees and veterans are facing from the COVID-19 pandemic and is repeating mistakes it made at the start of the crisis, union leaders said this week. Lack of national leadership has resulted in inconsistent policies being applied across VA locations, while the VA has failed to provide employee representatives with clear and consistent guidance on how VA workers can return to worksites safely. “Many facilities continue to have PPE shortages, unsafe conditions and policies in place that put VA workers and veterans at risk,” AFGE National Veterans Affairs Council President **Alma Lee** and Local 933 Recording Secretary **Yvonne Evans** wrote in an op-ed published Wednesday, June 3, in USA Today. [Read the column.](#)
- **Social Security failing to comply with coronavirus sick leave law:** AFGE Council 220, which represents about 25,000 employees at Social Security Administration field offices nationwide, filed a grievance June 2 accusing the agency of not complying with a law Congress passed in March to provide workers with additional paid leave to address illnesses and child care needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. SSA has failed to adjust its payroll system to prevent employees from facing potential overpayments and has discouraged employees from taking the leave, the grievance asserts. “Basically we feel like this is really a slap in the face of employees who have stepped up to the plate to serve the American people,” Council 220 President **Ralph de Juliis** [told Government Executive](#). [Read the grievance.](#)
- **Push to reopen EPA offices worries employees:** Workers at the Environmental Protection Agency in New England learned that the agency would begin a phased reopening process this week, contradicting previous messages and raising concerns of a rushed return that will endanger their health even as Massachusetts continues to report hundreds of new COVID-19 cases daily. “Employees feel as though they are political pawns for this administration’s agenda,” AFGE Local 3428 President **Steve Calder** told the Boston Globe in an article published June 2. “We feel our safety is not being considered first.” [Read the article.](#)
- **Push to reopen agencies endangers workers:** Bloomberg News reported Tuesday, May 26, that federal employees are receiving “confusing and often contradictory messages” about reopening worksites that have been largely closed since the coronavirus outbreak began. “Their lives shouldn’t be taken for granted, and that’s the way we feel right now,” AFGE President Everett Kelley told the outlet. “Agencies are trying to appease some in this hierarchy by saying, ‘OK we’re going to reopen,’ but the reality is it’s just not feasible.” [Read the article.](#)
- **EPA Council warns against speedy reopening:** AFGE Council 238 President Gary Morton sent a letter to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler on May 22 urging him to allow employees to continue working from home until the threat of acquiring or transmitting COVID-19 has passed. EPA informed employees last week that offices in Seattle, Atlanta, and Kansas were being prepped for reopening. “There is no justification to send us back into offices until EPA workers’ safety can be guaranteed,” Morton wrote. [Read the letter.](#)





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- **AFGE urges action to prevent CIS worker furloughs:** AFGE President Everett Kelley sent letters to [Senate](#) and [House](#) appropriators on Wednesday, May 27, urging Congress to approve \$1.2 billion in additional funding for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. CIS is threatening to furlough nearly 11,000 employees – more than half of the entire workforce – beginning in July due to funding shortages it blames at least partially on the COVID-19 pandemic. “While the COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous negative impact on our nation’s economy, it is important that USCIS continue its capacity for administering legal immigration processes. Without this supplemental appropriation, this capacity will be profoundly undermined,” Kelley wrote.
- **AFGE presses USDA on lack of data on worker illnesses:** AFGE President Everett Kelley sent a formal request to USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue on Thursday, May 28, for all information regarding the number of positive COVID-19 cases at meat and poultry processing plants. Kelley wrote to Food Safety and Inspection Service Administrator Paul Kiecker on [April 7](#), requesting that the agency engage with the union on all issues regarding the pandemic, but as of today has received no response. “In fact, newspaper reports suggest strongly that this Agency is attempting to conceal the number of infected employees within the plants,” Kelley wrote to Perdue. [Read the letter.](#)
- **VA workers continue protests against unsafe work conditions:** AFGE members protested outside VA hospitals in [Richmond, Va.](#), and [Gainesville, Fla.](#), on Friday, May 22, to call attention to the unsafe conditions workers and patients are still facing due to the coronavirus, including lack of protective equipment and testing. Employees also have been denied hazardous duty pay and must use their own leave if they need to self-quarantine due to coming in contact with someone exposed to COVID-19.
- **VA workers demand protective measures:** AFGE members in Chicago protested outside the Hines VA Medical Center on May 19, demanding that the agency take appropriate measures to protect workers’ health and safety from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Veterans Affairs is requiring employees who have been working from home to return to worksites beginning June 1, but Local 781 President **Germaine Clarno** told WGN that employees are nervous to return without assurances of personal protective equipment, social distancing, and testing. [View the protest.](#)
- **Food safety inspectors still at risk:** Federal meat and poultry inspectors are still risking their health and safety as they perform their jobs in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, AFGE Council 45 Acting President **Paula Schelling** told Nevada’s KUNV on May 18. “Up until the last week, there has been no protective gear that has been handed out – whether it is to the company employees or whether it is to the USDA inspectors that are performing these tasks to make sure the food is safe. When you don’t have any protection, you pretty much leave yourself exposed.” [Listen to the interview.](#)
- **COVID-19 survivors’ bill introduced in House:** AFGE strongly supports legislation introduced in the House May 19 by Reps. Jackie Speier, Joe Neguse, and Max Rose that would compensate the families of essential workers who die as a result of COVID-19 or related complications. “Essential workers are keeping our country running and delivering vital services to the American public despite this global pandemic – and they are doing so at great personal risk to themselves and their families,” AFGE President **Everett Kelley** said. “Anyone who sacrifices their life while in the performance of their official duties deserves to know that their loved ones will be cared for.” [Read the release.](#)





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- **Pro-worker coronavirus legislation in House:** AFGE sent letters to members of the [House](#) and [Senate](#) on May 12, outlining our priorities for the next round of coronavirus legislation. That same day, House leaders [released a bill](#) that contains many of the enhanced protections and benefits we have been championing – including premium pay for essential workers, more protective equipment, expanded testing, continued telework for federal employees, and a presumption of workplace illness for employees who test positive for COVID-19 while reporting to work. “We are glad to see that this legislation emphasizes the needs of front-line workers, who continue to put themselves and their families in harms’ way every day they report to work,” AFGE National President Everett Kelley said. [Read the release.](#)
- **AFGE blasts VA for defending hazard pay denial:** AFGE fired back on May 12 after Veterans Affairs leaders defended their decision not to provide hazard pay to front-line health care providers. More than 1,300 VA employees have tested positive for COVID-19, while 28 have died. “All front-line employees who have been or could have been exposed to COVID-19 while on the job and were not provided the proper protective equipment – at any point during this pandemic – deserve hazard pay,” President Kelley said. “To say the opposite is insulting to all front-line men and women who have risked the health of themselves, their families and their communities to serve the American people.” [Read the full statement.](#)
- **Fourth food safety inspector dies:** A federal food safety inspector from Dodge City, Kansas, [died May 13](#) after contracting COVID-19, becoming the fourth USDA inspector to die from the virus. On May 15, AFGE leaders issued a statement calling out Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts for failing to disclose COVID-19 infection rates at meatpacking plants. “Hiding the number of infections from the public doesn’t make the infections go away – if anything, it encourages this deadly virus to spread further by giving people a false sense of security,” said AFGE District 8 National Vice President Gregg James, whose district includes Nebraska. [Read the statement.](#)
- **The dangers facing federal correctional officers:** In an interview that aired May 14, AFGE Council of Prison Locals President Shane Fausey told Federal News Network’s Tom Temin how the safety of correctional officers has been impacted by the coronavirus spreading inside federal prisons, by lack of communication from Bureau of Prisons leaders about PPE supply levels, and by years of staffing cuts. [Listen to the interview.](#)
- **Federal prisoner transfers halted in West Virginia following protests:** Following days of protests and actions by AFGE leaders and members, the Federal Bureau of Prisons [announced May 7](#) it would no longer transfer prisoners who have tested positive to COVID-19 to West Virginia prisons. AFGE National President Everett Kelley [sent a letter](#) to Bureau of Prisons Director Michael Carvajal on May 5, urging him to immediately cease inmate transfers between all BOP facilities during the COVID-19 outbreak. Three days earlier, union activists lined up along an interstate exit in Morgantown, W. Va., to protest BOP’s decision to transfer inmates from prisons heavily infected with COVID-19 to facilities in West Virginia. [More about the protest here.](#)
- **AFGE recognizes nurses for going above and beyond:** In recognition of National Nurses Week, which runs from May 6 to May 12, AFGE National President Everett Kelley [hosted a video call](#) May 7 with front-line nurses from the Veterans Affairs and Defense departments. These AFGE members discussed the difficulties they face in continuing to do their jobs without the proper safety equipment and other resources. [Click here for the release.](#)





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- **Senators echo AFGE's requests to help workers:** On May 5, a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators asked the administration to use its existing authority to address urgent issues facing federal workers on the front lines of the pandemic. Their requests regarding hazard pay, telework, protective equipment, safety leave, and collaboration with labor representatives echo requests our union has been making since the pandemic began. [Read the senators' letter.](#)
- **Hundreds of meat inspectors sick, exposed to virus:** At least 145 meat inspectors have contracted COVID-19 and another 130 are under self-quarantine due to exposure, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service [told CBS News](#) on May 4. Three inspectors have died from the virus – in New York City, Chicago, and Mississippi. Nevertheless, they continue to work without proper protective equipment or social distancing.
- **AFGE commends correctional officers for their service:** Correctional officers put their lives on the line every day they come to work – no more so than now, when they face the added danger of the coronavirus that is spreading through our federal prisons. In recognition of National Correctional Officers Week, which is held the first week of May, AFGE Council of Prison Locals President Shane Fausey issued a statement thanking officers for their continued dedication to the job in spite of the dangers to themselves and their families. [Read the statement.](#)
- **Help for TSA workers focus of lawmaker roundtable:** AFGE President Everett Kelley joined the House Homeland Security Committee for a virtual roundtable on April 30 to discuss what Congress can do to help Transportation Security Officers working on the front lines during the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, nearly 500 TSA officers have tested positive for coronavirus. [Read our statement.](#)
- **VA workers protest unsafe work conditions:** AFGE members at the Department of Veterans Affairs continue to highlight the unsafe working conditions they are facing and lack of personal protective equipment, employee testing, telework opportunities, and hazardous pay amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Rallies were held the week of April 27 outside VA medical facilities in [Las Vegas](#), Nev.; [Tampa Bay](#), Fla.; [Marion](#), Ind.; Dayton and Cincinnati, Ohio; and Philadelphia, Pa. AFGE members also joined with members of Congress on a [live Facebook town hall](#) Wednesday.
- **President's order requiring meat plants to remain open is 'recipe for disaster':** President Trump issued an executive order April 28 requiring meat processing plants to remain open even though thousands of workers have tested positive for COVID-19, including 137 federal inspectors represented by AFGE. "Without protective equipment and testing of all workers, more employees will get sick and the safety of our food supply will be compromised," AFGE Council 45 Acting President Paula Schelling said. [Read our statement.](#)
- **House letter echoes AFGE's demands to protect workers:** More than 150 members of the U.S. House sent a letter to congressional leadership this week urging Congress to include worker safety provisions protecting front-line federal workers in the next round of coronavirus legislation. The lawmakers' requests largely align with [AFGE's preconditions](#) for reopening government worksites. [Read the letter.](#)





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- **AFGE sets preconditions for reopening federal worksites:** On April 23, AFGE National President Everett Kelley provided the administration with a set of preconditions that must be met before workers return to federal worksites. Topping the list is universal testing, protective equipment, and using science-based and objective standards to determine when it's safe to return. [Read the release.](#)
- **VA workers rally for safe working conditions:** AFGE members at the Department of Veterans Affairs took to the streets this week to protest unsafe working conditions and employee concerns of lack of personal protective equipment, employee testing, telework opportunities, and hazardous pay amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Rallies were held the week of April 20 outside of VA medical facilities in Baltimore, Md.; Salem, Va.; and Carrolton, Ga. [View footage from Salem, Va., protest.](#)
- **100 food inspectors have contracted COVID-19:** As of April 24, at least 100 food inspectors with the U.S. Department of Agriculture have tested positive for the coronavirus, and at least two have died, AFGE Council 45 Acting President Paula Schelling confirmed to Bloomberg. USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service has not provided adequate personal protective equipment to federal inspectors or provided any guidance on how to maintain social distancing while working in slaughter and processing facilities. [Read the Bloomberg article.](#)
- **Immigration appeals workers challenge unsafe worksites:** AFGE Local 3525, which represents workers handling Justice Department immigration appeals, filed a complaint with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration on April 22 charging the agency with failing to provide a safe workplace in response to the coronavirus. The Executive Office for Immigration Review is violating social distance guidelines by requiring too many Board of Immigration Appeals employees to report to work, along with immigration judges and court staff, and has failed to provide employees with masks and other personal protective equipment. [Read the release.](#)
- **Maintaining telework following pandemic:** Social Security employees have been more productive while working from home during the coronavirus than they were before the agency reinstated telework – leading the head of the union representing field operations employees to recommend allowing employees to continue teleworking indefinitely. “There’s no need for hundreds of employees to be packed together like sardines in a multistory building if they’re going to be on the phone the whole time anyway,” AFGE Council 220 President Ralph de Juliis wrote in an op-ed published April 23 in the Baltimore Sun. SSA field office employees have increased their response rate to claimants from 70% to 95% following implementation of telework, de Juliis said. [Read the op-ed.](#)
- **OSHA to launch investigation of VA coronavirus response:** The Occupational Safety and Health Administration notified AFGE on April 15 that it will be investigating AFGE’s charges that the agency has exposed workers to patients with COVID-19. AFGE filed a complaint with the Department of Labor on March 31 charging that the agency has violated OSHA laws by failing to keep workplaces free from known hazards. [Copy of OSHA letter to AFGE.](#)
- **VA adjusts PPE policy following worker complaints:** Veterans Health Administration Executive in Charge Richard Stone announced April 15 that the agency will begin providing one mask daily to employees who work in community living centers, spinal cord injury units, and inpatient mental health units – an increase from one mask weekly under previous “austerity measures.” AFGE President Kelley called the move “encouraging” but said more must be done to protect workers and veterans. [Copy of AFGE statement.](#)





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- **FEMA union leader cites “desperate lack” of PPE:** Workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic lack the proper equipment to protect themselves from exposure, the head of the AFGE local representing FEMA workers says in a letter to Congress issued April 17. “What I am seeing on the ground is that there is a desperate lack of personal protective equipment (PPE),” AFGE National Local 4060 President Steve Reaves writes. [Click here for the letter.](#)
- **Justice IG reviewing coronavirus response in federal prisons:** Responding to complaints from correctional officers and inmates, the Justice Department’s inspector general announced April 15 that it has launched “remote inspections” to review whether the Bureau of Prisons is following federal guidelines to prevent the spread of the coronavirus inside the federal prison system. [Link to Reuters story.](#)
- **Food inspectors risking health as plants violate social distance guidelines:** Major meat processing plants have had to close temporarily after hundreds of plant workers have contracted COVID-19. Federal food inspectors lack protective gear and must work alongside plant workers in violation of social distance guidelines, AFGE Council 45 Acting President Paula Schelling told the Associated Press. “There is no social distance that is possible when you are either working on the slaughter line or in a processing assignment.” [Link to AP story.](#)
- **Grievance at VA over DEMPS volunteer program:** AFGE’s National VA Council filed a grievance April 14 with the Department of Veterans Affairs for ordering employees to enroll as volunteers in the Disaster Emergency Medical Personnel System (DEMPS), in violation of federal law and the agency’s labor contract with the union. [Copy of grievance.](#)
- **Salem VAMC adjusts screening, PPE procedures:** Responding to AFGE concerns that not enough was being done to protect caregivers and patients, the director of the VA Medical Center in Salem, Va., announced April 15 that it would begin screening all residents and staff at the community living center and will begin requiring all staff at the medical center and community based outpatient clinics to wear masks beginning Monday, April 20. [Copy of memorandum.](#)
- **First AFGE member deaths confirmed.** AFGE received confirmation on April 8 that at least two of our members have died from complications from COVID-19 – both health care workers at the Department of Veterans Affairs. [Link to statement.](#)
- **Grievance at VA over emergency paid leave:** AFGE filed a grievance April 9 against the VA for failing to comply with the emergency paid sick leave provisions set forth in the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (“FFCRA”). The FFCRA provides eligible employees with up to eighty (80) hours of emergency paid sick leave for qualifying reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic. [Link to grievance.](#)
- **Calls on Congress to address federal worker priorities:** AFGE President Everett Kelley detailed what Congress can do to help federal workers in the face of this pandemic in a Roll Call op-ed published April 9. The op-ed followed an April 3 letter to members of the House and Senate. [Link to op-ed.](#) [Link to letter.](#)
- **OSHA Complaints at VA, BOP:** AFGE filed two complaints March 31 with the Department of Labor charging that the VA and BOP are violating Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) laws by failing to keep workplaces free from known hazards. [Link to release.](#)





Eric Bunn Sr.

National Secretary-Treasurer

Dr. Everett B. Kelley

National President

Jeremy A. Lannan

NVP for Women & Fair Practices

- **Hazard pay lawsuit:** Three BOP employees at Federal Correctional Center Oakdale, Louisiana, including a correctional officer, are among five plaintiffs named in a class action lawsuit AFGE filed March 30 on behalf of the tens of thousands of federal employees who have been exposed to the coronavirus while performing their official duties and are entitled to hazard pay pursuant to federal law. [Link to press release.](#)
- **Inmate transfers:** On March 24, AFGE leaders called on BOP Director Michael Carvajal to stop the transport of untested inmates during the midst of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. [Link to press release.](#)

Updated information online

- All of our coronavirus-related letters, press releases, guidance, informational videos, and more can be found online at www.afge.org/coronavirus.

