



Veterans Affairs Media Summary and News Clips

25 March 2020

1. [Top Stories](#)

Coronavirus / COVID-19

1 - NBC News: [Coronavirus updates: Trump ponders return to normal life by Easter as death toll climbs](#) (25 March, Rich Gardella, 37.2M uvm; New York, NY)

VA nearly doubles number of tests administered in a day, invites retired medical workers to return. The Department of Veterans Affairs has administered over 2,726 tests for coronavirus nationwide, a jump of 1,202 tests from the number reported just the day before, the VA announced Tuesday.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

2 - Chicago Tribune (Lake County News-Sun): [Two staff members at Lovell Federal Health Care Center in North Chicago test positive for coronavirus](#) (24 March, Emily K. Coleman, 11.6M uvm; Chicago, IL)

Two staff members at North Chicago-based Lovell Federal Health Care Center tested positive over the weekend for the novel coronavirus, according to the U.S. Navy. One of the staff members, who tested positive Sunday, works at the main Lovell hospital while the other, an active duty member of the Navy who tested positive Saturday, works at the Lovell clinic at the Navy's Recruit Training Command at Great Lakes, according to a news release.

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3 - Breitbart: [65 VA Patients in New Orleans Test Positive for Coronavirus, 1/3 of All Vets Being Treated](#) (24 March, Michael Patrick Leahy, 5.9M uvm; Los Angeles, CA)

One-third of the 204 veterans treated by the Veterans Health Administration who have tested positive for coronavirus have been admitted for treatment at the New Orleans VA Medical Center. Of the 65 patients who have been admitted for treatment, 44 remain in the hospital and 21 are being treated at home.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

4 - Military.com: [Bill Would Save GI Bill Benefits for Student Veterans with Canceled Classes](#) (24 March, Dorothy Mills-Gregg, 4.2M uvm; San Francisco, CA)

A legislative package introduced by a bipartisan group of lawmakers Monday would extend education benefits for student veterans and dependents by the length of time their school is closed due to the novel coronavirus outbreak. It would also pay work-study students during the closure.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

5 - KNSD (NBC-7, Video): [Coronavirus Keeps Marine Veteran's Family From Attending Burial](#) (24 March, Bridget Naso, 922k uvm; San Diego, CA)

The family of Marine combat veteran Jose Chavez is preparing to lay him to rest, but because of the coronavirus pandemic not one family member or friend will be at the ceremonies. The 62-year-old retired Master Gunnery Sergeant died March 12 after a two-year battle with cancer.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

6 - KGW (NBC-8): [Funeral homes, cemeteries adjust to new restrictions during coronavirus pandemic](#) (24 March, Devon Haskins, 732k uvm; Portland, OR)

William Carr's mom Joyce Swarn passed away on March 12 from natural causes. "My mom was everything, she was a rock, she was strong, she was independent, she was a go-getter," Carr said.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

7 - Federal News Network: [Agencies can virtually onboard new employees during coronavirus pandemic](#) (24 March, Nicole Ogrysko, 628k uvm; Chevy Chase, MD)

In an effort to continue federal hiring activities but observe social distancing recommendations, the Office of Personnel Management advised agencies to virtually or remotely onboard new employees.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

8 - WTVC (ABC-9): [Veterans Administration suspends military funeral honors during COVID-19 pandemic](#) (24 March, Aaron Farrar, 501k uvm; Chattanooga, TN)

David Cox never misses a chance to play "Taps" for his fellow brother or sister in arms. "It's the nation's way of saying 'Thank you for your service' one last time," he told us Tuesday morning. The mournful notes are a way for this Coast Guard Auxiliary Division Commander to say goodbye.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

9 - WRCB (NBC-3, Video): [Chattanooga National Cemetery Suspends Funeral Services, Local Veteran Reacts](#) (24 March, 497k uvm; Chattanooga, TN)

Two-minute video: The coronavirus outbreak has delayed or canceled large public gatherings of all kinds this year and now that applies to how Chattanoogaans pay tribute to their local United States armed forces.

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10 - WWMT (CBS-3, Video): [VA Medical Center uses tele-town hall to aid veterans during COVID-19 outbreak](#) (25 March, 482k uvm; Kalamazoo, MI)

With an eye toward improving communication, while helping veterans keep a healthy distance, The Battle Creek VA Medical Center hosted its first tele-town hall Monday; more than 6,500 people participated. "The main goal is to improve information in the community and decrease anxiety because the more you know, the less you are going to make it up or try to come up with the answer yourself," said James Doelling, director of the medical center.

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11 - WSTM (NBC-3): [Why a Cayuga County man says his COVID-19 test never came back](#) (24 March, Lisa Spitz, 383k uvm; Syracuse, NY)

Anthony Southworth of Weedsport felt like he had the flu. He was sweaty and felt like he had a fever. Then one morning the 38-year-old woke up and couldn't talk. "I was coughing to the point that I was vomiting," he said. Last Wednesday morning he went to the Emergency Department at the Syracuse VA Medical Center where he was given a test for COVID-19. He described the test as feeling very uncomfortable.

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12 - WJAC (NBC-6): [Altoona Curve assists local VA hospital staff conducting screenings](#)

(24 March, Marshall Keely, 337k uvm; Johnstown, PA)

Representatives from the James E. Van Zandt Medical Center say they are screening for COVID-19 before visitors and patients even leave their cars. They say it's especially important, considering the population they serve. But the new practice leaves some hospital employees out in the cold.

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13 - The Enterprise: [VA employee, 2 patients have coronavirus after Brockton nurse tests positive](#)

(24 March, Cody Shepard, 119k uvm; Brockton, MA)

The employee, whose specific position wasn't released, tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday, the VA Boston Healthcare System said in a statement. Just days after a nurse at the Brockton VA hospital campus tested positive for the coronavirus, a second VA employee and two patients have now also tested positive.

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14 - Redlands Daily Facts (The Press-Enterprise): [Coronavirus crisis ends military funerals at Riverside National Cemetery](#)

(24 March, Rayan Hagen, 88k uvm; Redlands, CA)

Riverside National Cemetery and other Veterans Affairs national cemeteries have ended military funerals but continue to bury people who are eligible. Since Monday, March 23, VA cemeteries have allowed only up to 10 immediate family members of the deceased to witness burials, a news release states.

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15 - Kokomo Tribune: [Peru VA clinic stops direct patient care. Veterans can apply for funding through new coronavirus emergency application.](#)

(24 March, 70k uvm; Kokomo, IN)

The Veteran Affairs clinic in Peru has stopped direct-patient services and is routing resources in preparation for an anticipated surge of COVID-19 patients. The move took affect Thursday and is part of a three-state operation in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan. The VA said the decision is meant to focus resources to help treat the most vulnerable veterans.

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16 - GovernmentCIO: [VA Bolstering National Coronavirus Response](#)

(24 March, Adam Patterson, Washington, DC)

In response to the mounting COVID-19 epidemic and rapid increase in U.S. cases, the Department of Veterans Affairs is bolstering the amount of clinicians and providers practicing within VA hospitals while preparing to mobilize its care network to support the national effort. Taking to social media, the VA has begun encouraging retired clinicians and healthcare providers to re-employ with the agency.

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17 - Connecting Vets: [Misleading COVID-19 flyer linked to VA hospital is fake, officials say](#) (24 March, Abbie Bennett, Washington, DC)

A flyer purporting to be an official Department of Veterans Affairs document full of misleading COVID-19 advice is fake, VA officials said. The flyer circulating on social media and being provided to veterans has a VA seal and letterhead that makes it appear to have originated from the Roseburg Healthcare System in Oregon and the Brookings VA clinic.

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18 - Sheridan Media (Audio): [VA Response to COVID-19](#) (24 March, Rustin Burr, Sheridan, WY)

The Sheridan VA Health Care System has said that their number one goal in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic is to ensure the safety of their Veterans and staff. In light of that, the organization has been pre-screening 100% of people that are interacted with, including those at any of the 8 community outpatient clinics. VA Pulmonologist and Chief of Medicine Dr. Kathy Schuster explained how the screening process works.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

1.1 - WFNC (AM-640, Audio): [The Best of Good Morning Fayetteville: Robert Wilkie](#) (24 March, Fayetteville, NC)

Ten-minute audio: U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie on the effect the COVID-19 Crisis is having on the military and veterans.

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1.2 - NPR: [VA Wants Retired Health Care Workers Back To Treat Surge In Vets With Coronavirus](#) (24 March, Hannah Hagemann, 36.6M uvm; Washington, DC)

The number of veterans who have tested positive for coronavirus has increased from 204 on Monday to 296 confirmed cases on Tuesday. Reported deaths also inched up from two on Monday, to four on Tuesday. The uptick comes as the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs braces for an influx of patients, and asks for additional health care workers to staff medical facilities.

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1.3 - The Washington Times: [VA hospitals prepare to treat coronavirus patients](#) (24 March, James Varney, 4.7M uvm; Washington, DC)

Outside the Veterans Administration hospital here — by far the hardest hit by the coronavirus in the U.S. network of military care facilities — it's something of a ghost town. Tents are being erected outside the facility on Galvez Street that will serve as a drive-through testing site, and a handful of employees eat lunch or stroll outside. Like most VA hospitals, New Orleans is closed to visitors.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

1.4 - Stars and Stripes: [Pandemic prompts an increase in calls to Veterans Crisis Line](#) (24 March, Nikki Wentling, 1.1M uvm; Washington, DC)

Calls to the Veterans Crisis Line have increased since the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States, the Department of Veterans Affairs confirmed Monday. The crisis line, a suicide

prevention tool for veterans and their families, has experienced a 12% increase in call volume, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told veterans organizations on a call Sunday. About 20% of recent calls to the hotline were related to the pandemic, the VA press secretary confirmed.

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1.5 - Stars and Stripes: [Two veterans die from coronavirus at New York VA hospitals](#) (24 March, Nikki Wentling, 1.1M uvm; Washington, DC)

Two more veterans died after testing positive for the coronavirus, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced Tuesday. Both veterans were being treated at VA facilities in New York — one at the New York Harbor Healthcare System and the other at the Bronx VA Medical Center. The veterans' identities had not been made public Tuesday.

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1.6 - Stars and Stripes: [Work on getting homeless veterans into permanent housing has halted, advocates say](#) (24 March, Nikki Wentling, 1.1M uvm; Washington, DC)

As offices close and much of the country shifted to remote work this month, progress in getting homeless veterans into permanent housing stopped at a time they need the help most, advocates say. Veterans who received housing vouchers from the government but had not yet rented homes before the coronavirus pandemic are now unable to find housing, said Kathryn Monet, chief executive officer of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.

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1.7 - Lexington Herald-Leader (Video): [Lexington VA isn't letting staff work from home in response to COVID-19](#) (24 March, Alex Acquisto, 758k uvm; Lexington, KY)

The Lexington VA Medical System is not giving staffers who could work from home any flexibility to do so in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite contrary directives from Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, according to internal emails obtained by the Herald-Leader. Despite Beshear's strong urging and repeated recommendations from state public health officials for as many people to work from home as possible, an internal email on Friday...

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

1.8 - Kennebec Journal and Morning Sentinel: [Togus VA adds external triage tent to handle coronavirus cases, testing](#) (24 March, Keith Edwards, 205k uvm; Augusta, ME)

An external triage unit will handle the coronavirus cases — or potential ones — that come to the state's Veterans Affairs Medical Center. The unit, housed inside a Maine National Guard tent in a parking lot, has been set up to provide a place to test for and begin treatment of veterans infected with or suspected to have the coronavirus. The move has been made to avoid exposing patients and workers inside the adjacent hospital to the virus.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

1.9 - Connecting Vets: [Four veterans have died of COVID-19, VA tracking nearly 300 cases](#) (24 March, Abbie Bennett, Washington, DC)

At least four veterans have died of the coronavirus and the Department of Veterans Affairs is now tracking nearly 300 cases of infected veterans, the agency reported March 24. The number is a sharp increase from Monday, a day prior, when VA reported 204 cases and was still reporting two previous deaths attributed to the virus.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

2. Improving Customer Service

2.1 - The National Interest (The Conversation): [Trump Is Making It Harder For Older Americans To Prove Workplace Discrimination](#) (24 March, Catherine Harnois and Vincent Roscigno, 5.3M uvm; Washington, DC)

Age discrimination remains one of the greatest vulnerabilities that American workers face. A 2018 AARP study of adults age 45 and older found that more than 60% said they had seen age discrimination in their workplace or experienced it themselves. While most incidents go unreported, over 15,000 workers filed a claim of workplace age discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 2019 alone.

[Hyperlink to Above](#)

3. Business Transformation

4. DOD Cooperation / Electronic Health Records / MISSION Act Implementation

5. Suicide Prevention

6. Women Veterans / Homelessness / Benefits / Cemeteries

7. Other

[Back to Top](#)

1. [Top Stories](#)

Coronavirus / COVID-19

1 - NBC News: [Coronavirus updates: Trump ponders return to normal life by Easter as death toll climbs](#) (25 March, Rich Gardella, 37.2M uvm; New York, NY)

VA nearly doubles number of tests administered in a day, invites retired medical workers to return

The Department of Veterans Affairs has administered over 2,726 tests for coronavirus nationwide, a jump of 1,202 tests from the number reported just the day before, the VA announced Tuesday.

Of the tests administered, 296 have been positive. The highest concentration of positive cases is in the New Orleans region of Louisiana, where the Louisiana Veterans Health Care System has seen 63 positive cases.

The agency is also now waiving a section of federal law about retired VA workers to make it easier to rehire retired VA health care workers as facilities work to increase staffing during the coronavirus pandemic.

[Back to Top](#)

2 - Chicago Tribune (Lake County News-Sun): [Two staff members at Lovell Federal Health Care Center in North Chicago test positive for coronavirus](#) (24 March, Emily K. Coleman, 11.6M uvm; Chicago, IL)

Two staff members at North Chicago-based Lovell Federal Health Care Center tested positive over the weekend for the novel coronavirus, according to the U.S. Navy.

One of the staff members, who tested positive Sunday, works at the main Lovell hospital while the other, an active duty member of the Navy who tested positive Saturday, works at the Lovell clinic at the Navy's Recruit Training Command at Great Lakes, according to a news release.

The two staff members are currently at home in isolation in accordance with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and to mitigate further risk of transmission to other patients and staff, according to the release.

The Lovell Federal Health Care Center was established in 2010 as a partnership between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense, integrating both departments' medical care into a single facility. Its staff treats active duty military, their family members, military retirees, veterans and the nearly 40,000 who transition through the Great Lakes training command each year.

An attempt to reach a Department of Veterans Affairs spokesman Tuesday was unsuccessful.

[Back to Top](#)

3 - Breitbart: [65 VA Patients in New Orleans Test Positive for Coronavirus, 1/3 of All Vets Being Treated](#) (24 March, Michael Patrick Leahy, 5.9M uvm; Los Angeles, CA)

One-third of the 204 veterans treated by the Veterans Health Administration who have tested positive for coronavirus have been admitted for treatment at the New Orleans VA Medical Center. Of the 65 patients who have been admitted for treatment, 44 remain in the hospital and 21 are being treated at home.

The 65 patients admitted for treatment at the New Orleans VA Medical Center are more than three times the number of cases in any other VA medical center in the country. Other clusters of veterans testing positive for coronavirus are in Atlanta (17) New York Harbor (10), Puget Sound, Washington (9), Bronx (8), and the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center, according to a statement released by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Monday afternoon.

The Veterans Health Administration is one of the largest organizations within the VA, and describes itself as, “America’s largest integrated health care system, providing care at 1,255 health care facilities, including 170 medical centers and 1,074 outpatient sites of care of varying complexity (VHA outpatient clinics), serving 9 million enrolled Veterans each year.”

VA officials provided no explanations for the cluster in New Orleans, Stars and Stripes reported late Monday:

A spokesman for the New Orleans VA Medical Center said it was unclear why the facility had so many more patients than other VA hospitals. . .

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie held a phone call with veterans organizations Sunday. Wilkie told the groups he had sent teams of medical professionals to help with the pandemic response in New York City. Wilkie was preparing to send more to New Orleans, said Joe Chenelly, national executive director of AMVETS, who was on the call.

Health officials in Louisiana said Monday there were 1,172 cases of the coronavirus in the state, 567 of them in New Orleans. Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards issued a stay-at-home order, effective Monday.

“These cases are being tracked by the Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System. The hospitalized patients are located at the New Orleans VA Medical Center,” a spokesperson for the VA told Breitbart News on Tuesday.

“The Southeast Louisiana Veterans Health Care System has seen a higher number of positive cases than other VA facilities, but we cannot speculate as to why at this point,” the spokesperson told Breitbart News when asked if the VA had any idea why there was such a cluster in at the New Orleans VA Medical Center.

Two of the 204 veterans who have tested positive for coronavirus have died.

Fourteen days ago, on March 10, only five VA patients had coronavirus, USA Today reported:

Veterans Affairs medical facilities across the country are screening patients and restricting visitors to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus as the agency grapples with five cases of COVID-19.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said visitors are not allowed at the agency's roughly 135 nursing homes, which house more than 8,000 veterans, saying those facilities are "going into an emergency situation."

One veteran has a confirmed case of the virus, VA officials said. Four others have tested positive, but those findings have not yet been confirmed.

The agency did not specify where the veterans are, saying they are "either in isolation at home, in accordance with CDC guidelines, or being cared for in isolation by staff who are specially trained on the latest CDC treatment guidelines and utilizing personal protective equipment and infection control techniques."

The percentage of VA patients who have taken the COVID-19 test that test positive is 13 percent as of March 23 (204 out of 1,532), roughly on a par with the nationwide average, which is about 14 percent (42,000 out of 294,000) as of March 23 according to the COVID Tracking Project.

[Back to Top](#)

4 - Military.com: [Bill Would Save GI Bill Benefits for Student Veterans with Canceled Classes](#) (24 March, Dorothy Mills-Gregg, 4.2M uvm; San Francisco, CA)

A legislative package introduced by a bipartisan group of lawmakers Monday would extend education benefits for student veterans and dependents by the length of time their school is closed due to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

It would also pay work-study students during the closure.

The Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 would build on S. 3503, which the president signed into law Saturday to restore GI Bill payments to student veterans whose classes transitioned online due to COVID-19.

This latest student veteran package would ensure veterans aren't charged for not completing their program or course because of COVID-19 closures and that their monthly housing allowance isn't reduced because their school moved to online teaching, among other things.

"As we respond to the coronavirus pandemic, we cannot forget about our student veterans," House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Chairman Mark Takano, D-California, said in a statement. "Under this bipartisan legislation, we can ensure no students have their housing cut off, lose their work study payment, exhaust their disaster housing stipend continuation payments, or lose their benefits due to a school closure from COVID-19."

He, along with ranking member Phil Roe, R-Tennessee, said their bill package would ensure student veterans and dependents won't lose their eligibility for next semester because classes were moved online and they won't be charged for a class they were unable to finish if their school or program closed due to an emergency

"Over the last two weeks, we worked hard to assure student veterans that the support they count on from the GI Bill to cover tuition and housing costs won't be taken away during the COVID-19 pandemic," Roe said. "Our bill would preserve work study, vocational rehabilitation and employment, and GI Bill benefits for students during emergency situations like the one we are currently experiencing."

If passed, student veterans enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs' work-study program would still be paid and the "use or lose" eligibility period for veterans and dependents would be extended by the length of time their school is closed.

The bill's protections also apply to Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) veterans, granting them two more months of "subsistence allowance" in anticipation that COVID-19 might hinder their near-term employment prospects.

Veterans' resources and more information about what the House VA committee is doing can be found [here](#).

[Back to Top](#)

5 - KNSD (NBC-7, Video): [Coronavirus Keeps Marine Veteran's Family From Attending Burial](#) (24 March, Bridget Naso, 922k uvm; San Diego, CA)

The family of Marine combat veteran Jose Chavez is preparing to lay him to rest, but because of the coronavirus pandemic not one family member or friend will be at the ceremonies.

The 62-year-old retired Master Gunnery Sergeant died March 12 after a two-year battle with cancer.

"He went out like a great warrior should, you know, surrounded by people that loved him, and people that appreciated him," said his son Joey Chavez.

Before his life ended, Jose Chavez chose to be buried at Miramar National Cemetery.

What he didn't know was the spread of the coronavirus would keep his family and friends from being at that burial. Veteran's Affairs told the Chavez family the cemetery is closed to the public because of the pandemic. It also means Chavez will be buried without military honors.

Not even his wife Annie Chavez can be there.

"My heart, just not being able to give him that burial because he so deserves it," she told NBC 7.

Jose Chavez joined the Marine Corps at 17 years old. He met his wife Annie, who was also a Marine, while in the service.

"My dad loved the Corps almost as much as he loved his own family," Joey Chavez said.

The elder Chavez was a decorated combat veteran who served in Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. After he retired he continued to work with Marines at Camp Pendleton.

The coronavirus has also postponed the large funeral service the family had planned at a nearby catholic church.

A local funeral home is allowing a small funeral service for seven family members. But that too is disheartening as Chavez had four children and twelve grandchildren.

"I know this isn't easy on anybody. Nobody feels good about this, not them, not us," his son said.

One day they will give Jose Chavez the service he earned and deserves, his son told NBC7.

"When this is all over we want to have the 21 gun salute for him. We want to have the flag folding," he explained.

But they are still holding out hope for a miracle -- that at least Annie Chavez be able to be there for her husband's burial at Miramar National Cemetery so she can say goodbye to the love of her life, who loved the Marine Corps with all of his.

[Back to Top](#)

6 - KGW (NBC-8): [Funeral homes, cemeteries adjust to new restrictions during coronavirus pandemic](#) (24 March, Devon Haskins, 732k uvm; Portland, OR)

PORTLAND, Ore. — William Carr's mom Joyce Swarn passed away on March 12 from natural causes.

"My mom was everything, she was a rock, she was strong, she was independent, she was a go-getter," Carr said.

In planning her funeral, he wants to honor his mom in the finest way possible, but with restrictions around gathering sizes and the spread of the coronavirus, Carr is finding that it's more difficult to celebrate the life of a woman so close to his heart.

Swarn was the second oldest of 17 children, a mother of three and a grandmother to many more. She'll be buried on Thursday at Sunset Memorial Cemetery in southwest Portland.

Carr says he's been in constant contact with the cemetery's director about how he can best honor his mom. At first, he was told they wouldn't allow a graveside viewing and then says things changed and now a limited amount of family will be able to pay their respects. Cars can drive up near the plot, a small group will be able to pay their respects and then get back in the car and allow the next car with family and friends to do the same.

"It's so restrictive that we hope to plan for something better and bigger for my mom for her friends to be able to attend when this restriction gets lifted."

At Willamette National Cemetery, Louise Larkin's family is running into some of the same issues. The mother of six will be buried at the National Cemetery sometime this week. The family is working to finalize a date and find out how restricted it will be.

"What I'm looking at is for some family to be there to follow the car up to where she's going to be buried, we can stay by the road, that's not a problem," Sandra Heath, Larkin's daughter said.

The cemetery's director cited safety issues with heavy machinery nearby as why they needed to keep family away from the grave site.

"We're still allowing our families to do the interment and then come back at a later date and do their service," Pete Sardo, Director of the Willamette and Vancouver Barracks National Cemeteries, said.

Veterans Affairs National Cemeteries announced on March 23 that all "committal services and the rendering of military funeral honors will not be conducted until further notice at VA national cemeteries. Immediate family members (limited to no more than 10 individuals) of the deceased may witness the interment if requested," A media release said.

The cemeteries will remain open for visitors, but ask that everyone visiting maintain the proper 6-foot space from others.

Others are trying to come up with different ways to honor a families wish, but also keep gatherings to less than 10 family members. At Finley-Sunset Hills Mortuary and Memorial Park in Southwest Portland, they are still offering services, but socially distanced, in a way.

"What that means is we're having very limited services, we are offering streaming via Facebook Live or other means," said Shannan Speicher, General Manager at Finley-Sunset Hills Mortuary and Memorial Park.

Speicher says they are working with the state government to better clarify if funerals are considered essential and hoped to have better clarification by the end of the week.

"This shouldn't be touched, people are grieving over lost ones that have to have some closure and be able to move on with a burial service. Those should not be included in this lockdown," said Carr.

[Back to Top](#)

7 - Federal News Network: [Agencies can virtually onboard new employees during coronavirus pandemic](#) (24 March, Nicole Ogrysko, 628k uvm; Chevy Chase, MD)

In an effort to continue federal hiring activities but observe social distancing recommendations, the Office of Personnel Management advised agencies to virtually or remotely onboard new employees.

"Agencies may elect to perform onboarding processes remotely, via visual inspection using remote electronic capabilities (e.g., Skype, FaceTime, etc.)," Michael Rigas, OPM's acting director, wrote Tuesday in a new memo to agencies. "Agency HR directors should work with their respective agency chief information officers to determine the best options."

Specifically, agencies should consider virtually offering the oath of office to new employees over Skype, FaceTime or another video platform.

Agencies should also make onboarding documents available electronically. New employees should sign these documents and email them to their agencies, either with an electronic form and signature or by simply taking a picture of the completed document, OPM said.

HR specialists should review these documents and include them in the employee's electronic personnel file and official personnel folder.

In addition, the Department of Homeland Security said it will ease up on Employee Eligibility Verification (Form I-9) requirements. To comply with these requirements under the Immigration and Nationality Act, agencies typically must review an employee's identity and employment authorization documents in his or her physical presence.

But given the current circumstances, DHS will allow agencies to review employee documents remotely. These flexibilities only apply to employers who are operating remotely.

"If there are employees physically present at a work location, no exceptions are being implemented at this time for in-person verification of identity and employment eligibility documentation for Form I-9, Employment Eligibility Verification," DHS guidance reads. "However, if newly hired employees or existing employees are subject to COVID-19 quarantine or lockdown protocols, DHS will evaluate this on a case-by-case basis."

All of these procedures, including the DHS exceptions, are meant to be temporary and only apply to the current public health crisis, OPM said.

Once the national emergency ends, agencies should hold in-person swearing-in ceremonies, for example, to ratify the temporary actions taken to onboard employees during the coronavirus pandemic, Rigas said.

Agencies will need to keep hiring to maintain current operations during the pandemic, and some departments have suggested they'll need additional staff specifically for coronavirus response.

The Department of Veterans Affairs said it will rehire former physicians, nurses and other medical professionals for its own coronavirus response.

To help VA sweeten the deal for its retirees, OPM granted the department the authority to offer reemployed annuitants a full-time salary and a full pension.

Typically, reemployed annuitants receive their pensions and a paycheck, but the paychecks are offset by the amount of the annuity. OPM's authority allows reemployed annuitants to earn a full salary and pension.

Other agencies can apply for this authority too.

"I have directed my staff that such requests will receive expedited review and approval in order to help agencies meet their critical mission needs," Rigas said last Friday in a memo to agencies.

Besides dual compensation waivers for reemployed annuitants, OPM also authorized Schedule A hiring authority for agencies. The goal, Rigas said, is to allow agencies to quickly appoint new employees to excepted service positions, again, for coronavirus response.

“Agencies may appoint individuals nationwide, at any grade level. These appointments may be extended up to one additional year,” he said. “If this public health emergency or pandemic continues, agencies may also request extensions of appointments beyond 24 months from OPM on a case-by-case basis.”

Agencies can only use this authority to hire for coronavirus response, not to fill any other organizational vacancies.

[Back to Top](#)

8 - WTVC (ABC-9): [Veterans Administration suspends military funeral honors during COVID-19 pandemic](#) (24 March, Aaron Farrar, 501k uvm; Chattanooga, TN)

David Cox never misses a chance to play "Taps" for his fellow brother or sister in arms.

“It's the nation's way of saying 'Thank you for your service' one last time,” he told us Tuesday morning.

The mournful notes are a way for this Coast Guard Auxiliary Division Commander to say goodbye.

“I've stood out in thunderstorms when it was raining so hard, I wondered if anyone could even hear me play,” Cox said.

But the COVID-19 virus pandemic is silencing the song and each of its special 24 notes for the time being, because the department of Veterans Affairs is suspending all military funeral honors indefinitely

That includes services at the Chattanooga National Cemetery.

Cemetery Director Deborah Kendrick said this is all to prevent spreading the virus.

"Looking at it as a public safety, their safety," Kendrick said. "Doing what's best for the families at a time like this."

“We can't take those kind of chances having big groups together for a funeral or a wedding,” Cox said.

To limit the number of people at a veteran's burial, that means no playing of "Taps" or the folding and presenting of the flag to the family for now.

But Kendrick said families will have the opportunity to reschedule a memorial service to have those military funeral honors for a loved one at a later date, if they would like.

“We're still here for you and we still want to provide that quality service, especially at a time of need,” she said.

“We certainly can make up for it later at a more proper time,” Cox said. Funerals, cremation services and even committal services are allowed to still go on in Chattanooga.

However, the city's executive order says only close family members should attend and less than 10 people should be at those services.

Kendrick said families can reach out to organizations like "Bugles Across America" to arrange having military funeral honors in the future for a loved one that has passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Back to Top](#)

9 - WRCB (NBC-3, Video): [Chattanooga National Cemetery Suspends Funeral Services, Local Veteran Reacts](#) (24 March, 497k uvm; Chattanooga, TN)

Two-minute video: The coronavirus outbreak has delayed or canceled large public gatherings of all kinds this year and now that applies to how Chattanooga residents pay tribute to their local United States armed forces.

[Back to Top](#)

10 - WWMT (CBS-3, Video): [VA Medical Center uses tele-town hall to aid veterans during COVID-19 outbreak](#) (25 March, 482k uvm; Kalamazoo, MI)

BATTLE CREEK, Mich. — With an eye toward improving communication, while helping veterans keep a healthy distance, The Battle Creek VA Medical Center hosted its first tele-town hall Monday; more than 6,500 people participated.

"The main goal is to improve information in the community and decrease anxiety because the more you know, the less you are going to make it up or try to come up with the answer yourself," said James Doelling, director of the medical center.

Doelling said the tele-town hall gave veterans the opportunity to ask questions and get the correct information about coronavirus disease 2019.

Operations at the VA Center haven't change a great deal due to the pandemic, hospital officials said. Veterans are still allowed to seek assistance in person. Group are being held to smaller numbers, though. And most general checkup appointments are being rescheduled.

Hospital staff said they are calling everyone who is scheduled for an appointment , asking them how they are doing and then if there are no issues, scheduling them for an new appointment time later in the year.

Doelling said the tele-town hall was a success, and as the pandemic evolves, the VA center might do it again.

"We're here, we have people around the clock. We don't want anyone to forego care," Doelling said. "We would like to push it toward virtual right now, to keep them safe. I really want the veterans to self-quarantine right now. Stay home, wash your hands, don't touch your face and don't be out in public."

[Back to Top](#)

11 - WSTM (NBC-3): [Why a Cayuga County man says his COVID-19 test never came back](#)
(24 March, Lisa Spitz, 383k uvm; Syracuse, NY)

Anthony Southworth of Weedsport felt like he had the flu. He was sweaty and felt like he had a fever. Then one morning the 38-year-old woke up and couldn't talk.

"I was coughing to the point that I was vomiting," he said. Last Wednesday morning he went to the Emergency Department at the Syracuse VA Medical Center where he was given a test for COVID-19. He described the test as feeling very uncomfortable.

He said he was told the test was going to be sent to a New York State lab and he waited for the results while in quarantine. While he waited for the results, he said a doctor and nurse would check in with him. One night was especially rough, he said he stayed up with difficulty breathing. This morning, he said he got a call saying the test was lost. He contacted CNYCentral to investigate.

"I want to know how they lost a test, a swab, especially with everything that's going on," he said.

He went onto say he isn't putting down the VA, which he says has taken care of him. He just wants to get the word out to other people who are waiting for test results.

"I want to let people know If they are constantly calling maybe the same thing has happened to them whether it be from the VA or from somebody else," he said. "We're told that this is supposed to be a 3-5 day test and now I'm going on Day 7 and being told on Day 6 that my test, my swab was lost."

After CNYCentral contacted the VA to get a response, Southworth said the VA contacted him with new information. He said he was told the test was sent to a laboratory and it was there where some "liquid spilled on it and they couldn't test it." Southworth said he was given the option to get another test or just continue his quarantine which has 8 days left.

"I'm happy they responded," he said. "It took for you reaching out to them for them to tell me what was going on."

We reached out to the Syracuse VA and got this response from Robert McClean who is the public affairs officer:

"The procedure for the processing of test samples consists of the collection of the sample from the patient and the forwarding of the specimen to an outside non-VA lab for testing. There are rare instances when the sample may not be able to be tested for a variety of reasons. Once we become aware of the situation, we reach out to the Veteran patient immediately to inform them and check on their well-being. At that point, there is a clinical determination made as to whether re-testing is necessary and if so, the testing is repeated. We work very hard to ensure the timeliness and integrity of this procedure and maintain constant communication with the Veteran throughout the process."

Southworth is choosing to wait-out his quarantine, and has decided not to get re-tested.

[Back to Top](#)

12 - WJAC (NBC-6): [Altoona Curve assists local VA hospital staff conducting screenings](#)
(24 March, Marshall Keely, 337k uvm; Johnstown, PA)

ALTOONA, Pa. (WJAC) -- Representatives from the James E. Van Zandt Medical Center say they are screening for COVID-19 before visitors and patients even leave their cars. They say it's especially important, considering the population they serve. But the new practice leaves some hospital employees out in the cold.

"About 50 - 55% of our total patients are above the age of 55," said Shaun Shenk, chief of stakeholder relations at the Veterans Affairs hospital. "Additionally, we have long-term living here and inpatient care on our fourth, fifth and sixth floors. So these are the higher vulnerable populations"

Shenk said the medical center has restricted access from Pleasant Valley Boulevard, cutting down on entry points to control traffic flow.

"There's two points of entry, the main employee parking lot off of 27th Street and the garage off of Fairway Drive," he said.

Passengers in each vehicle undergo a four question screening, assessing overall health and potential exposure.

"Once they are screened they can enter the campus and then go about their appointments or go about their normal duty days and they won't have to be screened again," Shenk said. "Prior to this we had people screening at every single door."

If a visitor or patient is exhibiting symptoms, Shenk said the new system helps keep any potential virus contained.

"If someone does present out in the garage they get a mask and then they are quarantined until they can see a provider," Shenk said.

Shenk said the screenings, while necessary, require some hospital staff to be outdoors for hours at a time.

"When you're out for an extended period of time, it does get quite cold for our screeners," he said.

On Tuesday, executives from the Altoona Curve stepped up to the plate, donating six propane heaters to the hospital. They hope to offer staff a little relief while they keep veterans and visitors safe.

"They're really on the front lines, the people here at the VA and all of our health care providers around the country," said Nate Bowen, the club's assistant general manager. "Anything we can do to make their lives more comfortable and a little bit easier as they are helping people here in Blair County and around the country as a whole, we're definitely in favor of helping them out however we can."

Shenk said the hospital could not take care of veterans without partners like the Altoona Curve.

He wants veterans to know if they are feeling ill, call ahead if possible.

[Back to Top](#)

13 - The Enterprise: [VA employee, 2 patients have coronavirus after Brockton nurse tests positive](#) (24 March, Cody Shepard, 119k uvm; Brockton, MA)

The employee, whose specific position wasn't released, tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday, the VA Boston Healthcare System said in a statement.

Just days after a nurse at the Brockton VA hospital campus tested positive for the coronavirus, a second VA employee and two patients have now also tested positive.

The employee, whose specific position wasn't released, tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday, the VA Boston Healthcare System said in a statement.

"Two veterans have tested positive and are recovering at home," the statement says. "In accordance with CDC guidelines, they are mitigating further risk of transmission to other patients and staff."

In an emailed "director's update" to employees on Monday, which was obtained by The Enterprise, Vince Ng, director of the VA Boston Healthcare System, said five additional patients are "under investigation."

On Friday, a nurse at the Brockton campus, which is located on Belmont Street, tested positive for the coronavirus.

Pallas Wahl, a spokesperson for the VA Boston Healthcare System, said going forward the federal agency will no longer specify the exact positions of anyone who may test positive for COVID-19.

The agency also wouldn't specify if the second employee and two patients were at the Brockton campus. The VA Boston Healthcare System also operates hospitals in West Roxbury and Jamaica Plain.

"We're reporting numbers, not locations, names, jobs, for privacy," Wahl said.

Last week, after the nurse tested positive, the VA said its Infectious Disease and Occupational Health Department was reaching out to veterans and other employees who may have come in contact with the nurse.

"Precautions are underway at all VA Boston facilities," Wahl said.

(Editor's note: This content is being provided for free as a public service to our readers during the coronavirus outbreak. Please support local journalism by subscribing to The Enterprise.)

The VA is screening veterans and staff who present symptoms of the coronavirus — a fever, cough and shortness of breath, the statement said.

“Per CDC guidance and VA protocols, individuals known to be at risk for a COVID-19 infection are immediately isolated to prevent potential spread to others,” Wahl said.

The VA is planning to open appointment-only drive-thru testing “in the future” for veterans and employees experiencing symptoms of the coronavirus.

“Veterans and staff are encouraged to take everyday preventive actions to avoid being exposed to the virus,” the statement says.

[Back to Top](#)

14 - Redlands Daily Facts (The Press-Enterprise): [Coronavirus crisis ends military funerals at Riverside National Cemetery](#) (24 March, Rayan Hagen, 88k uvm; Redlands, CA)

Riverside National Cemetery and other Veterans Affairs national cemeteries have ended military funerals but continue to bury people who are eligible.

Since Monday, March 23, VA cemeteries have allowed only up to 10 immediate family members of the deceased to witness burials, a news release states.

“VA national cemeteries will continue to perform our essential function – to inter Veterans and eligible individuals,” said Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Randy Reeves in a news release. “We trust the public understands that we must place priority on the health and safety of veterans and families and our team members who serve them.”

Cemeteries are still open for visits, but some areas such as chapels and public information centers may be closed to the public, according to the news release. The VA urges guests to avoid unnecessary travel.

Coronavirus has placed a strain on other funerals, too, as people practice social distancing to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus.

[Back to Top](#)

15 - Kokomo Tribune: [Peru VA clinic stops direct patient care. Veterans can apply for funding through new coronavirus emergency application.](#) (24 March, 70k uvm; Kokomo, IN)

PERU – The Veteran Affairs clinic in Peru has stopped direct-patient services and is routing resources in preparation for an anticipated surge of COVID-19 patients.

The move took effect Thursday and is part of a three-state operation in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan. The VA said the decision is meant to focus resources to help treat the most vulnerable veterans.

“This measure is in the best interest of our nation’s heroes,” said Michael Hershman, director of VA Northern Indiana Health Care System. “We are working to eliminate unnecessary face to

face contact to help minimize the spread of COVID-19 and maximize our resource allocation to help treat the sickest veterans.”

Veterans who use the Peru Community Based Outpatient Clinic who are in need of acute medical care are encouraged to seek medical attention at VA facilities in Fort Wayne, the Marion Campus and St. Joseph Community facilities. Veterans can also utilize urgent care facilities within the VA network.

Veterans can visit <https://www.va.gov/find-locations/> to find a nearby urgent care facilities in the VA network.

The Muncie Community Based Outpatient Clinic has also suspended face-to-face services.

For veterans in these affected areas who have questions about routine medical care, please contact 1-800-360-8387 ext. 75113. For those needing pharmacy refills, please call 1-800-360-8387 and follow the directions.

The VA Northern Indiana Healthcare System said it greatly values veterans’ understanding and flexibility as it continues to adapt to new information and combat the global pandemic.

“We are committed to the health needs of all our veterans and look forward to returning to normal operations as soon as we can,” the VA said in a release.

The closure of the Peru clinic came the same day that the Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs relaxed the guidelines for veterans to receive money from the Military Family Relief Fund.

The department released a coronavirus emergency application, which provides uninterrupted assistance to veterans and their families during the National Emergency COVID-19 crisis.

The criteria to access the fund have been changed as follows:

- Removal of the requirement that the veteran’s hardship must have occurred as a result of their military service.
- Removal of the required periods of war or conflict.
- Modification of the \$2,500 lifetime limit to allow the IDVA director to approve MFRF requests in excess of \$2,500.
- Removal of veteran’s ability to only utilize the fund to the total of \$2,500, allowing veterans who have previously used the fund to apply for the MFRF COVID-19 relief.

The following are the new eligibility requirements for the MFRF COVID-19 application:

- Veteran must have written documentation proving that their position and/or job has been affected by COVID-19, e.g. a letter from an employer, a letter from a supplier.
- Proof of hardship as a result of COVID-19, e.g. a letter from an employer on official letterhead detailing a period in which the veteran will lose income as a result of COVID-19.

[Back to Top](#)

16 - GovernmentCIO: [VA Bolstering National Coronavirus Response](#) (24 March, Adam Patterson, Washington, DC)

In response to the mounting COVID-19 epidemic and rapid increase in U.S. cases, the Department of Veterans Affairs is bolstering the amount of clinicians and providers practicing within VA hospitals while preparing to mobilize its care network to support the national effort.

Taking to social media, the VA has begun encouraging retired clinicians and healthcare providers to re-employ with the agency. The VA appears intent on expediting the process as safely as possible, including through offers of dual compensation waivers to bolster the human capital base available to treat patients and contain the virus.

The VA is taking these measures both as COVID-19 cases rise within the agency's care network, but also as the spread of the virus has started to multiply in particularly hard-hit regions such as New Jersey and New York state — both having reported 2,844 and 21,689 respective cases as of March 24. However, experts say these figures are likely well below the extent of transmission considering the current shortage of available testing kits.

Beyond its responsibilities to America's veterans, the VA has a formal duty to support America's health system and public health response in case either become overburdened during a national crisis. Commonly known as the VA's "fourth mission," this health care support is the agency's central contribution to national disaster response.

Press releases and statements from VA leadership indicate the agency is mobilizing towards this likelihood.

In statements to Politico, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie has disclosed the agency is preparing to deploy 3,000 VA nurses to support the nationwide coronavirus effort. Beyond the allocation of qualified staff, Secretary Wilkie also noted the possibility of, "[providing] nutrition centers, medical vans, mobile pharmacies to support those needs."

This has been coupled with consideration around opening VA medical facilities on contingency that local care centers become overwhelmed, with Secretary Wilkie disclosing that "we would augment civilian capabilities when it comes to medical space available" in the case of overflow.

While the pathology of the novel coronavirus remains a topic of ongoing research, it is currently known that the availability of medical resources has a drastic impact on survival rates and patient outcomes. While the World Health Organization places the current global mortality between 3 and 4%, the CDC reported that 12% of all known cases in the U.S. thus far have manifested symptoms dangerous enough to require hospitalization. Of the 21,689 confirmed cases in New York state, 2,213 patients have been hospitalized with 525 in an intensive care unit.

Health care systems that lack the staff and medical devices to adequately treat a given volume of incoming cases present elevated mortality risks to both their patients and personnel.

VA currently has over 400,000 employees and a reported 44,000 vacancies in facilities maintained by the Veterans Health Administration. VHA maintains clinics and care centers

throughout each of the 50 states as well as Puerto Rico, American Samoa and Guam. Dedicating this infrastructure to helping combat the coronavirus would almost certainly diminish the COVID-19 mortality rate nationwide and save lives as long as the epidemic persists.

[Back to Top](#)

17 - Connecting Vets: [Misleading COVID-19 flyer linked to VA hospital is fake, officials say](#) (24 March, Abbie Bennett, Washington, DC)

A flyer purporting to be an official Department of Veterans Affairs document full of misleading COVID-19 advice is fake, VA officials said.

The flyer circulating on social media and being provided to veterans has a VA seal and letterhead that makes it appear to have originated from the Roseburg Healthcare System in Oregon and the Brookings VA clinic.

That's not the case. The flyer was not issued by the Roseburg VA or any VA medical facility and does not represent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance. In fact, the information it contains is misleading and could be harmful.

"This is not official Roseburg VA Health Care System, Veterans Health Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs or Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance," VA Press Secretary Christina Mandreucci told Connecting Vets. "We are currently looking into the origins of this document."

The most current, genuine updates for COVID-19 from the VA are on its website, Mandreucci said. For more information, go to www.publichealth.va.gov/n-coronavirus.

The origin of the document is so far unclear, but it has been posted on social media platforms repeatedly. It includes misleading information about COVID-19 symptoms and makes unsubstantiated claims about the virus, such as a claim that the virus dies at temperatures above 80 degrees. But the CDC and other experts says too little peer-reviewed research has been completed on COVID-19 to make such claims.

"It is not yet known whether weather and temperature impact the spread of COVID-19," according to the CDC.

"From the evidence so far, the COVID-19 virus can be transmitted in all areas, including areas with hot and humid weather," according to the World Health Organization.

The Roseburg VA itself shared the document, edited to include bold red letters that read "Not official. Do not share" in an attempt to prevent misinformation.

[Back to Top](#)

18 - Sheridan Media (Audio): [VA Response to COVID-19](#) (24 March, Rustin Burr, Sheridan, WY)

The Sheridan VA Health Care System has said that their number one goal in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic is to ensure the safety of their Veterans and staff. In light of that, the organization has been pre-screening 100% of people that are interacted with, including those at any of the 8 community outpatient clinics. VA Pulmonologist and Chief of Medicine Dr. Kathy Schuster explained how the screening process works.

Dr. Schuster

Dr. Schuster said that if any veterans have or feel that they need an appointment, they are encouraged to use Secure messaging through the My Healthy Vet app. To learn more contact the Sheridan VA.

[Back to Top](#)

1.1 - WFNC (AM-640, Audio): [The Best of Good Morning Fayetteville: Robert Wilkie](#) (24 March, Fayetteville, NC)

Ten-minute audio: U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie on the effect the COVID-19 Crisis is having on the military and veterans.

[Back to Top](#)

1.2 - NPR: [VA Wants Retired Health Care Workers Back To Treat Surge In Vets With Coronavirus](#) (24 March, Hannah Hagemann, 36.6M uvm; Washington, DC)

The number of veterans who have tested positive for coronavirus has increased from 204 on Monday to 296 confirmed cases on Tuesday. Reported deaths also inched up from two on Monday, to four on Tuesday.

The uptick comes as the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs braces for an influx of patients, and asks for additional health care workers to staff medical facilities.

The department has called out to retired VA and federal health care workers on Twitter and Facebook, to reapply for clinical jobs: "WE NEED YOU! Help us in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider #VA re-employment."

The appeals from the VA, which is the largest health care system in the U.S., come after Secretary Robert Wilkie said last week that the department was getting ready to deploy 3,000 medical staff to assist in the national fight against coronavirus.

The department entered the coronavirus epidemic short-staffed with 44,000 vacancies.

Those health care workers willing to come out of retirement to help VA clinics and hospitals may themselves be at higher risk of contracting coronavirus, because they're likely to be in the most vulnerable age group.

The job openings "could include both direct patient care and telehealth options, as well as call center and other administrative support."

[Back to Top](#)

1.3 - The Washington Times: [VA hospitals prepare to treat coronavirus patients](#) (24 March, James Varney, 4.7M uvm; Washington, DC)

NEW ORLEANS - Outside the Veterans Administration hospital here — by far the hardest hit by the coronavirus in the U.S. network of military care facilities — it's something of a ghost town.

Tents are being erected outside the facility on Galvez Street that will serve as a drive-through testing site, and a handful of employees eat lunch or stroll outside. Like most VA hospitals, New Orleans is closed to visitors.

"But as far as the virus goes, I think they're doing a good job when it comes to the safety of the vets and staff," said McNeal Lewis, a former Marine who now works in the VA records department.

Indeed, as hospitals across the country scramble to make sure they have enough medical supplies to meet the coronavirus pandemic's demands, the nation's VA facilities aren't worried.

Officials at the network of 170 medical centers that provide care to an estimated 9 million veterans say they've got plenty of critical items such as masks and ventilators. VA is treating almost 300 cases of COVID-19 infections nationwide.

"VA facilities are equipped with essential items and supplies to handle an influx of coronavirus cases," said Christina Mandreucci, the department's press secretary. "Regarding testing, VA facilities' testing capacity meets current demand."

The VA has administered 2,726 coronavirus tests and is tracking 204 cases of COVID-19 infection or potential infection, according to data released Monday. The U.S. had recorded more than 53,000 cases and about 700 deaths as of Tuesday evening, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker.

The biggest hot zone by far is New Orleans, where the VA has 63 potential cases, 12 of whom are inpatient and another 31 pending as of Tuesday. The next closest, Atlanta, has 17 cases, 15 of whom are quarantining at home.

Staffers in New Orleans believe the number hospitalized is a bit higher — between 20 and 25 they said — and those are being housed almost exclusively on a second-floor wing where the hospital's first coronavirus patient surfaced.

Other areas with multiple cases are New York Harbor (13 cases: 8 home quarantined and 5 inpatient); Puget Sound (4 of 13 are inpatient); Washington (2 of 10 inpatient) and San Juan, Puerto Rico, where one of 11 is being treated inpatient.

The Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics, the nation's third largest VA hospital with 600 staffed beds, instituted drive-through testing Monday. Like its counterparts nationwide, the facility announced that everyone entering its buildings must be screened for the COVID-19 disease caused by the coronavirus.

The screening, which every employee undergoes daily, involves a series of questions about fever, coughing and the like, the major symptoms associated with the coronavirus, New Orleans workers said.

Last week, the popular African American radio personality DJ Black-n-Mild (the name comes from a cigarette brand), died from coronavirus at 44, and his brother, a veteran who checked on DJ Black-n-Mild when they thought he had pneumonia, is now a patient at the VA hospital, according to staffers.

Anticipating a surge in cases, the eight outpatient clinics in northeastern Ohio run by the Cleveland VA were converted Monday into “tele-triage,” said spokeswoman Kristen Parker, meaning they no longer handle appointments on site.

“When it comes to testing, we are taking samples on-site and getting them processed locally. “We will soon have on-site testing capabilities.”

Fears have risen in the U.S. that the crush of patients infected with the virus would overwhelm hospital staffs, leaving them without masks for physicians and health care workers, and ventilators to help patients’ infected lungs.

The VA had assured Congress early this month that it was preparing for the worst.

“We train for this. We train not only for national disasters but we train for epidemics,” VA Secretary Robert Wilkie testified March 4 before a House committee. “We have been putting in place those courses of action that we use for Ebola and H1N1 in the past. So, we will be approaching this as we have these other issues.”

Still, most VA facilities have been closed to all but patients and health providers. In New Orleans, all noncritical appointments have been moved to at least April 24, and staff have been instructed not to book new appointments before June, several workers said.

Major veterans groups have had to cancel activities, under state orders or because they’re following the White House’s “social distancing” guidelines.

Communication lines to some of the VAs most likely customers at local American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars were also damaged, given so many of them have canceled activities, such as weekly Bingo games, either under state order or by common sense guidelines about social distancing.

“As far as I know, nobody has come down with it,” said Mary Leaycraft, the office manager of the American Legion in Covington, Louisiana, which has more than 400 active members. “But they don’t go anywhere unless they really have to.”

[Back to Top](#)

1.4 - Stars and Stripes: [Pandemic prompts an increase in calls to Veterans Crisis Line](#) (24 March, Nikki Wentling, 1.1M uvm; Washington, DC)

Calls to the Veterans Crisis Line have increased since the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States, the Department of Veterans Affairs confirmed Monday.

The crisis line, a suicide prevention tool for veterans and their families, has experienced a 12% increase in call volume, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told veterans organizations on a call Sunday. About 20% of recent calls to the hotline were related to the pandemic, the VA press secretary confirmed.

The staffing levels at the call centers are enough to meet the current demand, Press Secretary Christina Mandreucci said. She said the department is tracking the number of calls and updating its staffing plans to ensure all of them are answered.

The VA posted to its website a list of recommendations for veterans who are anxious about the pandemic. They suggested staying connected with friends and family over the phone and on social media, meditating, reducing their news consumption before going to sleep, doing activities they enjoy, focusing on what they can control, eating a balanced diet and exercising, among other things.

The department is also encouraging VA patients to stay engaged with their treatment by meeting virtually with their mental health providers. VA staff are being trained to transition their patients to telehealth, Mandreucci said.

AMVETS, a national veterans organization, urged its members to check on other veterans as social distancing guidelines continue to be in effect.

“We are highly concerned over the likelihood the suicide crisis is deepening,” said Joe Chenelly, national executive director of AMVETS. “The combination of required physical isolation, the worry about getting sick, and the economic turbulence has the potential to be devastating.”

The group is asking their members to reach out to fellow veterans at least five times each day.

“[We want to] let them know that while they may be alone physically today, you are there for them by phone or online,” Chenelly said.

The House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs is also encouraging people to check on veterans who may be struggling.

The committee requested information from the VA about veterans’ mental health during the pandemic, including the call volume and types of calls at the Veterans Crisis Line and whether the VA is successfully transitioning to telehealth for therapy. Lawmakers hadn’t received a response as of Tuesday.

The VA is encouraging veterans in crisis, or their families, to contact the Veterans Crisis Line. Dial 1-800-273-8255, and then press 1, or text the crisis line at 838255. An option to chat online is available at veteranscrisisline.net.

[Back to Top](#)

1.5 - Stars and Stripes: [Two veterans die from coronavirus at New York VA hospitals](#) (24 March, Nikki Wentling, 1.1M uvm; Washington, DC)

Two more veterans died after testing positive for the coronavirus, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced Tuesday.

Both veterans were being treated at VA facilities in New York — one at the New York Harbor Healthcare System and the other at the Bronx VA Medical Center. The veterans' identities had not been made public Tuesday. The veteran at New York Harbor, in his or her 70s, died Friday, and the veteran at the Bronx VA, who was in his or her 60s, died Saturday.

The announcement doubled the number of coronavirus deaths at VA facilities from two to four. A 70-year-old man died at the VA hospital in Portland, Ore., on March 14. A veteran in his mid-90s died March 19 at the White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont.

The VA, which operates 172 hospitals and serves more than 9 million veterans, reported Tuesday that it had administered 2,726 coronavirus tests nationwide.

The department had 296 positive cases across 74 VA facilities Tuesday. On Monday, the VA reported 204 cases across 50 locations.

New Orleans continues to account for many of the coronavirus patients in the VA system, with 63. Behind New Orleans, the locations with the most cases were Atlanta with 17, New York Harbor with 13 and Washington, D.C., with 10.

A spokesman for the New Orleans VA Medical Center said Monday it was unclear why the facility had so many more patients than other VA hospitals.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told veterans organizations Sunday he had sent teams of medical professionals to help with the pandemic response in New York City and was preparing to send more to New Orleans.

[Back to Top](#)

1.6 - Stars and Stripes: [Work on getting homeless veterans into permanent housing has halted, advocates say](#) (24 March, Nikki Wentling, 1.1M uvm; Washington, DC)

As offices close and much of the country shifted to remote work this month, progress in getting homeless veterans into permanent housing stopped at a time they need the help most, advocates say.

Veterans who received housing vouchers from the government but had not yet rented homes before the coronavirus pandemic are now unable to find housing, said Kathryn Monet, chief executive officer of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. Meanwhile, the homeless population is at increased risk of contracting the coronavirus, and the economic fallout is expected to push more Americans into homelessness.

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans is urging Congress to approve \$200 million in emergency funding to house homeless veterans temporarily in hotel rooms and secure coronavirus tests for those who get sick.

“If homeless veterans are left behind in any congressional response to this pandemic, the consequences will be deadly,” Monet said. “Congress must distribute additional resources to

[the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor] so that organizations serving this population can continue to do so, safely and effectively.”

‘Huge spike’ expected in homeless vets

The HVAF of Indiana, which stands for “helping veterans and families,” houses homeless veterans in Indianapolis. The organization has been unable to get veterans with housing vouchers into permanent homes since the pandemic hit the U.S., said Emmy Hildebrand, HVAF’s vice president of public policy.

“It seems like those move-ins will be on hold until all of this is over,” Hildebrand said.

Employees at the local housing authority are working from home and are unable to complete the inspections that are required before veterans can move into their rental units. Landlords also are closing their offices.

Some of the veterans waiting to use their vouchers are currently residing in shelters or transitional housing programs, on the street or in their cars. Without the usual flow of veterans moving into permanent housing, shelters and transitional programs are expected to reach capacity. At HVAF, their beds are already full.

“Anyone who has a voucher is basically homeless until the coronavirus subsides in their community,” Monet said. “Without permanent housing, we’re going to see a huge spike in veterans who don’t have access to a shelter or transitional housing beds.”

To help with the problem, local groups like HVAF are getting veterans and their families into hotel and motel rooms, which is permitted in emergency situations. On Monday alone, Hildebrand received requests from three veterans who wanted to get themselves and their families into motels. The problem: There’s limited funding to do it.

“We’re hoping to find additional resources to be able to meet that need,” she said. “Without permanent housing options available, we have nowhere to put people.”

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans sent a list of requests to House and Senate appropriators, including millions of dollars to help get veterans and their families into hotels. They based their requests on the expected need for the next two months.

‘Likely to wreak havoc’

Getting veterans into hotels and motels will help with the need for social distancing, particularly for those older than 60 or with underlying health conditions, Monet argued. The population of homeless veterans is aging, lacks reliable access to running water and hygiene products and has few safe spaces to isolate or self-quarantine, she said.

Experts at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of California Los Angeles and Boston University published research March 20 that estimated more than 21,000 homeless Americans, about 4.3% of the country’s total homeless population, would require hospitalization because of the coronavirus, and more than 3,400 would die. The coronavirus has created a “severe and emergent health care crisis” for the homeless population that is “likely to wreak havoc” on this already vulnerable group, the report says.

The experts estimated the country would need an additional 400,000 shelter beds to house all homeless Americans and to provide for social distancing to help prevent the spread of the virus.

They called on local, state and federal governments to work together immediately to shelter the homeless, to provide space for social distancing and to isolate the sick.

“There are obvious and immediate steps that we can take to mitigate this situation,” they wrote. “... The urgency is clear, as is the moral imperative to act.”

The effects are likely to be felt most on the West Coast, particularly in California, the research shows. Los Angeles County is expected to be hit the hardest.

Though the research isn't veteran-specific, Monet said it provided some insight into the extent of the problems that homeless veterans might face.

The funding request from the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans includes money for coronavirus tests for homeless veterans. The group also is seeking funding for the government to train outreach staff to administer the tests, to provide protective gear for those staff members, to supply shelters with disinfectant and sanitation products and to increase surveillance of the homeless veteran population to identify and track cases of the virus.

“Those who had been exposed are unable to follow the recommendations of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and stay ‘at home,’” Monet wrote in her letter to lawmakers. “Instead, these individuals are surviving unsheltered, in congregate shelters or group homes where transmission to others is increasingly likely.”

Not enough resources

The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans also is requesting \$15 million for the Department of Labor to direct toward homelessness prevention. The funds would help veterans who lost their jobs because of the pandemic to stay financially afloat.

Monet said she was expecting a wave of veterans seeking assistance, but the numbers were difficult to estimate. Hildebrand expects the immediate need will be slowed by the White House policy to stop housing foreclosures and evictions for 60 days.

“We are all aware of people getting laid off left and right,” Monet said. “There's only a couple of weeks before the rent will be due. As people start to exhaust their savings and other options, we're all on high alert and trying to make sure there are resources available to serve the people we anticipate will be coming in.”

The HVAF of Indiana already is having trouble keeping its food pantry stocked after seeing higher demand since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S., Hildebrand said. The pantry is open twice each week. Last week, 90 veterans and their families came to the pantry to look for food.

Donations have dried up, and stores remain out of stock of many food items as shoppers take to panic buying, Hildebrand said.

“The crisis is hard on the entire country, but for veterans and everyone experiencing homelessness, it's particularly hard,” she said. “They don't have a lot of resources.”

Congress is working this week on multiple funding packages to stimulate the economy and to boost response efforts to the coronavirus pandemic. Monet was working Tuesday to get her organization's requests into one of the bills.

[Back to Top](#)

1.7 - Lexington Herald-Leader (Video): [Lexington VA isn't letting staff work from home in response to COVID-19](#) (24 March, Alex Acquisto, 758k uvm; Lexington, KY)

The Lexington VA Medical System is not giving staffers who could work from home any flexibility to do so in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite contrary directives from Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, according to internal emails obtained by the Herald-Leader.

Despite Beshear's strong urging and repeated recommendations from state public health officials for as many people to work from home as possible, an internal email on Friday, March 20 informed Lexington VA primary care department, which includes administrative staff: "For now we do not have authorization to send anyone home on telework."

This lack of authorization applies to the many non-health care providers who work in administrative or outpatient departments and do not directly serve veteran patients seeking medical care.

Kentucky VA staff are just a fraction of the millions of federal employees across the country who are awaiting telework authorization since the outbreak of novel coronavirus.

That policy was still in place locally early this week, though a spokeswoman for the Lexington VA said Tuesday morning they were "in the process of granting" these applications "when appropriate to the duties" of the employee.

When asked Monday during his daily Capitol news conference whether federal policies prohibiting telework should supersede his recommendations and mandates, Beshear said, "That's something I'll have to look at. They certainly do fall under federal regulation, but I don't think that necessarily means that they shouldn't at least be following our guidance."

The U.S. Veterans Health Administration is the largest integrated health system in the country. About 2,500 people in Kentucky are employed by the VA health care system, a spokeswoman said. Spread between about half a dozen locations, the VA operates a hospital in Louisville, and outpatient clinics in Berea, Hazard, Morehead and Somerset.

The Lexington VA Medical Center is split between two locations: the Franklin R. Sousy Campus off Leestown Road, and the Troy Bowling Campus off Veterans Drive.

In an email circulated to staff on Thursday, March 19, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs told all employees at both Lexington campuses that "mass cancellations of outpatient appointments is NOT authorized." Outpatient refers to a service or procedure that doesn't require spending the night.

Beshear has not explicitly asked for the cancellation of these appointments, but many outpatient services, medical and otherwise, often fall within the category of elective, or non-emergency, procedures. Last Wednesday, Beshear asked that the medical community delay these procedures as yet another step to tamp down the inevitable spread of COVID-19, which has so far infected at least 163 Kentuckians and contributed to the deaths of four. The governor made his recommendation as a formal mandatory executive order on Monday.

With the subject line, “Primary Care Leadership COVID19 service level plan,” the email tells employees, “We understand that [Kentucky Hospital Association], the Governor’s office, etc. is providing recommendations, however we are a federal entity and must take our directions from VA Central Office through the [Veterans Integrated Service Network], through our incident command center.”

While any surgeries and clinical procedures “deemed to be elective/non-emergent are being postponed,” the email said, generally, “If you receive guidance from another entity that has not been vetted and approved through this incident command center, you are not allowed to follow it.”

For appointments that aren’t canceled, VA officials are encouraging telehealth — a virtual visit, either by phone or video — unless a veteran chooses to visit a VA provider in person: “We are encouraging all other face-to-face appointment to be converted to telehealth, where clinically appropriate. Face-to-face appointments will continue if clinically indicated, or the Veteran chooses to be seen face-to-face at this time.”

Though patients and providers are being asked to keep their distance through virtual visits, non-essential staff aren’t.

The lack of telework authorization at this federal agency as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be a trend nationwide. On March 13, a day before Beshear asked medical providers to delay elective procedures, ProPublica reported that the head of the U.S. Veterans Health Administration in a memo asked all VA locations to “immediately” stop all authorizations allowing administrative employees to telework.

“Telework is not to be authorized for administrative staff at this time,” the memo from Dr. Richard A. Stone said.

When asked why employees aren’t being granted telework authorization, the Lexington VA in a statement said, “While we do encourage telework, we also must ensure our providers and their support teams are on hand to care for our patients in-house and ensure they have what they need to perform telehealth appointments with Veterans.”

Not all VA employees, including medical providers, would be able to work from home if given the chance, but many likely could.

Since it’s unclear when telework will be authorized, VA staff have to rely on workplace social distancing, which can be challenging when surrounded by hundreds of employees.

Both Lexington VA Medical Center locations began last week screening all visiting veterans and their guests who entered, asking them whether they have a fever or flu-like symptoms, have traveled to an area with widespread COVID-19 outbreak, or whether they’ve been exposed to someone with a confirmed case.

In addition, supervisors and managers have been asked to “screen your employees every day,” according to an internal email.

To help maintain space in clinics, “Some clinics have used tape on the floor to limit check-in to 6-foot distance,” the March 20 email said.

If a Lexington employee is sick and needs to take leave, supervisors were told, “do not give full 14 day work excuse, [but] give as you follow up, as [their] condition may change.”

Citing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, the email reminded staff that “asymptomatic employees” are required to “come to work.”

But asymptomatic doesn’t necessarily mean one isn’t carrying the virus, Beshear and Department for Public Health Commissioner Dr. Steven Stack have repeatedly said this month. In another email obtained by the Courier Journal last week, Louisville VA Medical Center staff were directed to continue coming to work even if they’ve been possibly or certainly exposed to COVID-19 “as long as they are not symptomatic.”

Even though it isn’t being currently granted, Lexington VA staff were still encouraged to apply for telework authorization.

Employees were urged to connect, through steps outlined in the March 20 email, to the internal server from their home internet. “Test it at home and make sure you can get access,” the email said.

[Back to Top](#)

1.8 - Kennebec Journal and Morning Sentinel: [Togus VA adds external triage tent to handle coronavirus cases, testing](#) (24 March, Keith Edwards, 205k uvm; Augusta, ME)

TOGUS — An external triage unit will handle the coronavirus cases — or potential ones — that come to the state’s Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

The unit, housed inside a Maine National Guard tent in a parking lot, has been set up to provide a place to test for and begin treatment of veterans infected with or suspected to have the coronavirus. The move has been made to avoid exposing patients and workers inside the adjacent hospital to the virus.

VA Maine Healthcare-Togus opened the new makeshift triage facility Monday in hopes it will provide a safe place to test patients who may be infected with COVID-19. If they are found to have the virus, they will treat them there while awaiting admission to a hospital or transfer to another facility.

“The external triage unit was set up to maintain a brick and mortar emergency room that has not, to our knowledge, been exposed to COVID-19,” said Tracye B. Davis, medical center director for VA Maine Healthcare-Togus. “We are trying to segregate suspected or known infected patients with COVID-19 from those at low-to-no risk of infection. Thus, the external triage unit will allow us to minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure to veteran patients and staff internal to the facility.”

The unit has so far seen three patients.

Davis said the unit is equipped to be able to initiate a mechanical ventilator on a veteran who is in respiratory distress or failure.

The large tent that contains the triage unit, a heating and ventilation system and lighting for it, were provided by and set up by the Maine National Guard. The Maine Emergency Management Agency linked the veterans' hospital to the Guard after the medical center sought help establishing an exterior facility.

Last week, 11 airmen from the South Portland Air National Guard station, from the 243rd Engineering Installation Squadron and 265th Combat Communications Squadron, set up the facility.

"As community members ourselves, the Maine National Guard always considers it a privilege to serve the community at large," said Maj. Carl Lamb, public affairs officer. "We are absolutely pleased to have been asked to perform a mission that positively impacts our neighbors that have worn our nation's uniforms. We are all walking in their footsteps, and continue to learn from their example."

So far, Lamb said, setting up the tent facility at Togus has been the Maine National Guard's only direct mission related to the coronavirus. But he said they are operating under the assumption there will be additional requests for assistance, upon which they are ready to act.

The VA Maine Health Care System said Sunday it was initiating "emergency measures" after two veterans and one employee tested positive for coronavirus. Officials said they could not disclose whether the employee worked at Togus or the location of the patients.

All three patients are in isolation at home, the system said in an update on its website. The VA Maine employee tested positive Friday for COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, and was isolated in accordance with CDC guidelines.

Veterans concerned they are showing symptoms of the coronavirus, if they have an urgent need, are asked to contact VA Maine. Davis said they recommend the veteran contact their primary care provider, via secure message through "My HealthVet." Veterans may also call the VA during business hours, or call 877-421-8263 or 207-623-8411, ext. 7490 outside of those hours. A veteran experiencing a life-threatening medical emergency should call 911 and inform them of potential COVID-19 symptoms.

The veterans' hospital at Togus is rescheduling any nonurgent elective surgeries and procedures until after June 1, the VA notes on a website where it provides updates to its operating status, if concerns over the coronavirus have passed by then.

While the facility remains open to provide healthcare to veterans, access to it has been restricted. When practical, patients are asked to consult with their healthcare providers virtually, through a video system or by telephone. Face-to-face appointments will still be available if a veteran is at risk of imminent harm by not seeing their healthcare provider, according to VA officials.

Visitors to the facility are not allowed in any site of care, and outpatients are encouraged to come to VA appointments alone if possible, though they may bring one adult family member or caregiver, who is not sick, with them. Entrances to the medical center and outpatient clinics will be limited and people entering will be screened for symptoms of fever, cough, or shortness of breath. Patients are advised to allow extra time for screenings and getting to their appointments.

Davis said people at the VA are experiencing a range of emotions as they work through the pandemic.

“These are unprecedented times, and the biggest challenge is likely still ahead of us here in Maine,” she said. “However here at VA Maine, we are united in our mission to serve veterans.”

[Back to Top](#)

1.9 - Connecting Vets: [Four veterans have died of COVID-19, VA tracking nearly 300 cases](#) (24 March, Abbie Bennett, Washington, DC)

At least four veterans have died of the coronavirus and the Department of Veterans Affairs is now tracking nearly 300 cases of infected veterans, the agency reported March 24.

The number is a sharp increase from Monday, a day prior, when VA reported 204 cases and was still reporting two previous deaths attributed to the virus.

Veterans, family members and advocates told Connecting Vets the number is likely larger, but VA so far only confirmed the deaths.

The two deaths were both in the New York City area, one a veteran in their 70s at the New York City VA and the other a veteran in their 60s at the Bronx VA.

VA said it had administered "over 2,726 COVID-19 tests nationwide" as of Tuesday, almost double the 1,524 it reported over the weekend and on Monday.

The city with the largest number of infected veterans remained New Orleans, at 63 cases, with 12 in VA inpatient care, 20 quarantined at home and 31 pending. It was not immediately clear what the "pending" designation meant, and VA officials did not immediately respond to requests for clarity.

The next largest concentration of infected veterans was Atlanta with 17, two in VA inpatient care and the rest quarantined at home.

The New York area is another hard-hit spot for veterans, with nine veterans infected in the Bronx, seven in Hudson Valley, one in Albany and nine in Northport.

The locations of veterans testing positive for the virus continues to grow, with at least 74 locations reporting at least one veteran infected, up 24 from a day prior.

It's unclear so far whether those areas did not have infected veterans until recently or if tests have become more widely administered.

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told veteran service organization leaders over the weekend that his department planned to deploy additional resources to both areas.

While VA leaders including Wilkie continued to reassure the public that VA capacity is not strained by its coronavirus response and that supplies, equipment and staff are at adequate levels, veterans, like many Americans, are still concerned.

VA put out a call to its retired doctors, nurses and other medical staff, asking them to return to work to help with the coronavirus response.

Over recent weeks, VA has shut down visitation at its nursing homes and other facilities with vulnerable veterans, later expanding that to most of its facilities.

VA officials are asking veterans with symptoms such as fever, cough or shortness of breath to call before arriving at a VA medical facility. Many appointments are being moved online using VA's telehealth system in an attempt to further prevent the spread of infection.

VA already began canceling elective surgeries and other procedures to pivot its focus more fully to immediate needs, including virus response.

VA also produced a guide for veterans on coronavirus.

[Back to Top](#)

2. Improving Customer Service

2.1 - The National Interest (The Conversation): [Trump Is Making It Harder For Older Americans To Prove Workplace Discrimination](#) (24 March, Catherine Harnois and Vincent Roscigno, 5.3M uvm; Washington, DC)

Age discrimination remains one of the greatest vulnerabilities that American workers face.

A 2018 AARP study of adults age 45 and older found that more than 60% said they had seen age discrimination in their workplace or experienced it themselves.

While most incidents go unreported, over 15,000 workers filed a claim of workplace age discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 2019 alone. This makes ageism one of the most commonly reported forms of workplace discrimination, just below race (23,976 cases) and sex discrimination (23,976 cases), and above cases pertaining to national origin (7,009 cases) and religion (2,725 cases).

Along with a general reluctance to report their employers for unfair treatment, aging workers face notable obstacles when and if they do decide to move forward with legal action. Cases, for instance, rarely go to trial, and studies suggest that when they do employers are twice as likely to win, given the difficulties victims face in proving their claims.

And now, the Trump administration is trying to further curtail the protections afforded to aging workers.

To the courts

On Jan. 15, the Supreme Court heard the age discrimination case *Babb v. Wilkie*.

Noris Babb worked as a pharmacist at a Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Florida, where she helped to develop a program for older veterans. The VA later developed a nationwide plan based on the one that Babb's team initially developed.

Babb and other female co-workers, each of whom was over 50, applied for promotion and training opportunities as well as clinical positions, yet were denied the opportunity to advance. Instead, the VA promoted two other women – both under the age of 40.

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act requires the government to make employment decisions “free from any” age discrimination. The EEOC has long held that this language means that age should not be even a contributing factor for determining workplace decisions in federal jobs.

Babb filed charges of gender-plus-age discrimination, but the court sided with the VA. Babb challenged that decision, arguing that the court had relied on an overly stringent standard for demonstrating discrimination.

The case then made its way up to the Supreme Court, where the Trump administration argued that, to be protected by the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, federal workers must prove that age is the singular motivating factor in an employment decision – a standard referred to as “but for” causation.

Proof of discrimination

Nearly three decades of research on workplace discrimination show that it is already extraordinarily difficult to prove that employment decisions are discriminatory.

Our own work, analyzing EEOC case histories and interviewing workers about their experiences of mistreatment and discrimination, provides insight into why.

Many employment decisions are made behind closed doors. This understandably creates situations in which a worker is left wondering why they were denied a job, not promoted or even terminated. Identifying the cause of one’s mistreatment is often difficult.

To complicate matters, employers rarely, if ever, own up to their discriminatory actions when accused. Rather, they often point to alleged violations of company policy by the employee in question. Or, they couch their discriminatory actions as the result of smart and profitable decision-making, company downsizing or business restructuring.

If the Trump administration is successful in arguing that the Age Discrimination in Employment Act applies only when age is the solitary factor in a federal employer’s conduct, the burden of proof for those encountering age discrimination will raise to an even higher level.

With the Trump administration’s stricter interpretation of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, almost any employer counterargument would effectively remove the possibility that aging workers would be protected.

This is further complicated by the fact that, in about 50% of age discrimination cases and 80% of all EEOC cases involving denial of promotion, plaintiffs make multiple claims within a single case. Research shows that the odds of legal victory are cut in half for charging parties who make multiple claims.

Negative effects

Research shows that age discrimination is bad for workers, bad for families and bad for the United States as a whole.

Discrimination takes a toll on the health and well-being of all workers. It decreases workplace morale and workplace productivity. Discrimination also artificially limits the pool of competent and talented workers stifling economic growth.

Moreover, when workers are unfairly denied employment, unjustly excluded from promotion and training opportunities, or terminated in a discriminatory fashion, the possible negative impacts also spill over to family members, spouses and children.

The U.S. population is aging, and so is the U.S. workforce. For more than 50 years, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act has been the primary mechanism for workers across the nation to contest ageist treatment at the hands of employers.

The current push to interpret the Age Discrimination in Employment Act as strictly requiring “but for” causation will raise the burden of proof for victims to a nearly impossible level. It will also make it difficult for aging federal workers to maintain and succeed in their jobs.

Catherine Harnois, Professor of Sociology, Wake Forest University

Vincent Roscigno, Professor of Sociology, The Ohio State University

[Back to Top](#)

3. [Business Transformation](#)

4. [DOD Cooperation / Electronic Health Records / MISSION Act Implementation](#)

5. [Suicide Prevention](#)

6. [Women Veterans / Homelessness / Benefits / Cemeteries](#)

7. [Other](#)