



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 27, 2020

CONTACT: David Damron
David.Damron@mail.house.gov

Top VA Appropriators in Congress to Trump: Fully Deploy Defense Production Act to Protect Health Workers, Veterans

Washington DC – The lead Democratic appropriators who oversee the Veterans Administration health system in Congress implored President Donald Trump over the weekend to fully deploy the Defense Production Act to address the mounting concerns over shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) among all health care workers, especially those who protect veterans in the nation’s VA hospitals.

U.S. Rep. **Debbie Wasserman Schultz** (FL-23) and U.S. Sen. **Brian Schatz** (D-HI) wrote the President in response to various national news outlets detailing worker protests and numerous accounts of protective equipment shortages in VAs across the country. Schatz is Ranking Member on the Senate Appropriations Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee, and Wasserman Schultz chairs the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs.

“We understand that due to the delay in activation and method in which your administration is utilizing the Defense Production Act, VA does not have adequate PPE,” the letter sent to President Trump by Wasserman Schultz and Schatz stated. “It is tragic that due to your Administration’s disorganized response and failure to use its full powers under the Defense Production Act, VA, states, other federal agencies, and public hospitals simply are not equipped with the PPE that they need to treat the impacted population. Fully invoking the Defense Production Act could prevent this moving forward.”

Read the entire letter below:

*The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States*

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump:

We write to express profound concern over your failure to fully implement the Defense Production Act to meet the growing demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) across the nation's public health systems, as well as the largest integrated health system, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). An increasing number of media reports and our direct conversations with VA personnel indicate that VA healthcare facilities are struggling to guarantee the availability of necessary PPE for its health care providers and staff who are still working in hospitals to support veteran care. Any shortages or rationing of PPE within VA's health system pose unnecessary and intolerable risks to our veterans and VA health care providers who are on the front lines of the war against this virus.

As you know, the VA health care network includes over 1,000 hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes. These facilities provide critical care for more than 9 million heroes who served their country with honor and put their lives and well-being on the line to defend the United States of America. Roughly 400,000 VA employees work hard every day to provide the highest quality care possible for these heroes.

We recognize that VA's leadership team has engaged in extensive efforts to plan for the outbreak and ramp up VA's capacity to treat patients. Nevertheless, as of yesterday, VA reported that 6,238 veterans have tested positive for COVID-19, and, tragically, 391 of them have died as a result of COVID-19. Additionally, nearly 2,000 VA healthcare workers have become infected, and at least 20 have died. These numbers make abundantly clear that the austerity protocols in place at VA must be rescinded.

We understand that due to the delay in activation and method in which your administration is utilizing the Defense Production Act, VA does not have adequate PPE. It is tragic that due to your Administration's disorganized response and failure to use its full powers under the Defense Production Act, VA, states, other federal agencies, and public hospitals simply are not equipped with the PPE that they need to treat the impacted population. Fully invoking the Defense Production Act could prevent this moving forward.

The Associated Press reports that VA facilities lack "specially equipped rooms for infected patients" and "didn't have enough masks, gloves and other protective gear to guard against the spread of the highly contagious disease." Disturbingly, AP also reported that some VA health care workers were using a single N95 mask throughout an entire shift – the same mask for patient after patient. These media reports have been corroborated by VA internal memos as well as a disturbing VA Inspector General report in March. VA's own internal guidance admits, "current supply levels do not support providing a mask to all VHA staff."

Neglecting to provide all staff with surgical masks, while requiring others to reuse and clean their N95 respirator masks is wholly unacceptable.

Furthermore, the American Federation of Government Employees recently filed a complaint that alleges your Administration ordered VA personnel who were suspected of being infected to return to work. As you well know, CDC guidelines recommend that such persons should quarantine for 14 days. Forcing potentially sick workers to return to the front lines risks exacerbating the contagion and puts our veterans and additional employees at increased risk.

Despite all of the concerns mentioned above, VA leadership has consistently assured the public that VA has been following CDC guidelines throughout the public health emergency. If you had chosen to fully execute the Defense Production Act sooner, perhaps VA and the rest of our nation's hospitals would be fully equipped with necessary tools to manage this pandemic, and VA would not be forced to rely on CDC austerity measures.

As Congressional leaders of the Appropriations subcommittees responsible for providing VA the resources they need to care for our veterans, we have prioritized funding for the VA's emergency needs in the COVID-19 emergency supplemental funding bills. It is your responsibility to give them the tools to ensure that this sacrosanct commitment is maintained, especially in the midst of a public health emergency. We expect you to take every action necessary to ensure that VA employees have the supplies they need to protect themselves and their families while they continue to serve. We owe this to our veterans.

We would like a response to these concerns and to know your plans to ensure that the VA is fully capable of taking care of its employees and our veterans during this crisis. Specifically, will you commit to maximizing the use of the Defense Production Act to ensure that VA and our public health systems have the equipment and supplies necessary to protect veterans and front line health care workers?

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns and for your attention to the needs of our veterans and VA health care workers.

Sincerely,