

April 20, 2020

United States Congress
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Member of Congress:

I write on behalf of the more than 5 million active and retired federal employees represented by the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE) to urge prompt action on legislation that will assist those on the front lines in the country's COVID-19 crisis: the nation's federal and postal workers. America's federal civil servants have worked tirelessly to keep our government running and our citizens protected during these trying times. In response to their service and their continued selflessness, I ask for your support.

While there are a number of COVID-19-related issues affecting federal and postal employees that NARFE and our coalition partners have advocated for, I am now writing to request your support for the following changes to federal law as you craft additional legislative responses to the pandemic:

- Require all Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program plans to cover the cost of telehealth services, where practicable.
- Give federal and postal employees who are not currently enrolled in an FEHB plan the opportunity to enroll now by deeming a public health emergency (such as the COVID-19 outbreak) as a "qualifying life event," permitting open enrollment and changes in coverage.
- Extend the emergency sick leave and family leave provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act ("Families First Act") to **all** federal employees, including health care providers and emergency responders. Correcting this oversight requires nothing more than a technical fix to the CARES Act.
- Extend weather and safety leave to employees who cannot safely travel to their duty stations because of the coronavirus outbreak but who are not able to perform their duties remotely, and authorize the use of weather and safety leave to cover child and dependent care responsibilities arising from the pandemic.
- Bolster the financial stability of the United States Postal Service (USPS) by providing emergency appropriations.

Health Insurance

First, I urge you to require coverage of the costs of telehealth services by all Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program plans, where feasible. In fact, it is only telehealth services that are available from many nonemergency health care providers during this time of sheltering-in-place and social distancing orders. Rather than risk patients contracting COVID-19 in a crowded waiting room or busy exam room,

numerous providers have adopted telemedicine as the default access point for service. While the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act extended this benefit coverage to Medicaid and Medicare beneficiaries, extending parallel coverage to FEHB plan enrollees would guard against certain conditions from becoming acute, as well as instill peace of mind to employees, retirees and federal families during this stressful time.

I also encourage you to permit federal and postal employees and retirees who are not currently enrolled in an FEHB plan to have the opportunity to enroll now by regarding a public health emergency (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) as a “qualifying life event.” This would allow current and retired civil servants to protect themselves and their families during this historic health crisis. Many employees, particularly those who are lower paid and those who are career part-time employees, forego enrollment in order to save money. FEHB premiums are not inexpensive and the employee share of FEHB premiums are much higher for part-time employees, many of whom are employed in public-facing and frontline jobs with the Transportation Security Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Paid Leave

I request that you extend the emergency family leave provisions of the Families First Act to all federal employees. While the Act provides many private-sector employees with ten weeks of partially paid family leave to care for a child due to the closing of the child’s school or daycare, similar provisions were extended to only those federal employees covered by Title I of the Family and Medical Leave Act. The measure excluded most federal employees (generally those covered by Title 5 of the U.S. Code). We urge you to correct this oversight in coverage.

Additionally, I ask that you expand emergency sick leave provisions of the Families First Act to all federal employees, including federally employed health care providers and emergency responders. The law provides two weeks of paid leave for employees who, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, are ill; must be quarantined, or need to care for an ill or quarantined family member; or need to care for a child if school or childcare are closed due to the pandemic. The Act empowers federal agencies to exclude from those provisions health care providers and emergency responders. These exclusions are counterproductive to the federal government’s response to the coronavirus crisis. Federal employees in these positions endure a heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 in the course of their work yet face the same family responsibilities as their colleagues at home.

We also urge Congress to recognize the health and safety risks facing federal employees who are not essential to the pandemic response or other critical government operations in the short-term, cannot perform their duties remotely, and cannot safely work at or travel to their duty stations due to the coronavirus outbreak. These employees should be afforded weather and safety leave in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to both the federal workforce and the public they serve. We also urge that you authorize the use

of weather and safety leave to cover childcare and dependent care responsibilities arising from the pandemic.

Financial Relief for the Postal Service

During this time of economic uncertainty and unprecedented challenge for every American, we can ill afford the demise of USPS. Apart from dealing with financial obligations placed on the Postal Service by Congress, USPS is facing a dramatic decline in revenue as a result of the pandemic. All the while, letter carriers serve as an important link between communities during this time of social isolation.

NARFE supports the infusion of immediate aid to ensure that universal service and a connection to every American is sustained. Rather than the conditional borrowing authority provided by the CARES Act, NARFE urges Congress to deliver emergency and continuing assistance to USPS as part of the nation's response to the ongoing pandemic.

Specifically, we call on Congress to enact provisions in the next stimulus bill that would provide direct appropriations to USPS to cover losses incurred from the COVID-19 crisis and continuing through fiscal year 2021 to ensure that this universal service is maintained.

Conclusion

In the tradition of public service, our nation's federal and postal employees are doing what they do best: rising as frontline warriors and putting their lives on the line to serve their country and their communities in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak. As you work to further address the human suffering and economic impact of this health crisis, we stand ready to partner with you, sharing our experience and talents as part of our commitment to preserve, promote and protect the country we love. We thank you and your staff for your service in defense of our common goal: a healthy and thriving United States.

Thank you for the consideration of our views. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact NARFE's Staff Vice President for Policy and Programs Jessica Klement at jklement@narfe.org.

Sincerely,



Ken Thomas
National President