

June 24, 2020

Subcommittee on Government Operations
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and members of the Subcommittee on Government Operations:

Thank you for holding this important hearing, “Frontline Feds: Serving the Public During a Pandemic,” to highlight the vital contributions made by our nation’s federal employees during the coronavirus pandemic, and to ensure we are honoring their service appropriately. I write to share the views of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE) in advance of the hearing and for the hearing record. NARFE is dedicated to advancing the interests of the more than five million federal and postal employees and retirees, as well as their spouses and survivors.

Federal workers have made outstanding contributions and sacrifices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many continue to perform essential jobs while facing a greater risk of infection, as more than ten thousand have tested positive for the coronavirus.¹ Doctors and nurses have cared for thousands of individuals with COVID-19 amidst shortages of personal protective equipment. Both the Internal Revenue Service and the Small Business Administration have distributed hundreds of billions of dollars to businesses and individuals at record speeds in response to the current economic crisis. As I write this, federal employees with the Department of Health and Human Services continue to spearhead the federal response: the National Institutes of Health researches treatments and vaccines, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tracks the spread of the virus and helps communities respond. Countless more federal workers continue to serve the nation through remote work, maintaining government operations amid difficult circumstances. We ought to recognize and honor their service through more than just words.

Thankfully, the House of Representatives has already taken action to do just that. In its latest COVID-19 response bill, the Heroes Act, H.R. 6800, the House passed various provisions support of the federal and postal community, which await consideration by the Senate. Specifically, NARFE supports the following provisions in the bill to:

- Require Federal Employees Health Benefit (FEHB) plans to fully cover the cost of COVID-19 treatment, without any cost-sharing imposed on participants. While many plans do this already, this covers any plans that do not.
- Provide hazard premium pay for executive, legislative (excluding members of Congress and staff) and judicial branch employees working in public-facing positions or where both social distancing is not possible and preventative

measures for COVID-19 exposure are unavailable at the worksite. Hazard pay is not just a form of appreciation to employees for putting their health at risk. It is also an effective recruitment and retention tool. We should not wait until we do not have enough employees left to do the job before we start compensating them appropriately.

- Provide \$25 billion in emergency funding for the U.S. Postal Service in fiscal year 2020 to cover revenue losses related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Postal Service has provided a vital lifeline linking communities and delivering essential goods and communications throughout this crisis. During this time of economic uncertainty and unprecedented challenge for every American, we can ill afford the demise of USPS. Yet the Postal Service is facing a dramatic decline in revenue as a result of declining first class mail during the pandemic. Congress must make the financial commitment to ensure this cherished institution endures.
- Establish a presumption of eligibility for workers' compensation for federal employees who are unable to work due to a COVID-19 infection and required to come into contact with patients, members of the public or coworkers. Frontline federal workers are putting themselves at increased risk of COVID-19 infection, and many have and will continue to contract the disease as a result. Without a presumption of eligibility, each worker infected will find it difficult to prove that they contracted the disease while on-duty and as such, they could be denied workers compensation benefits in connection with their COVID-19 infection, even though it is likely they contracted the disease while working.
- Extend provision of ten weeks of partially paid leave to federal workers unable to work due to the need to care for a child whose school or child care provider is unavailable due to COVID-19. This emergency family leave was provided to many private-sector employees (if working for an employer with less than 500 employees) and some federal employees (covered by Title I of the Family and Medical Leave Act, FMLA), but not to most federal employees (generally, those covered by Title 5 of the U.S. Code). There's little justification to deny child care benefits to the remaining federal employees, who have been dealing with the same challenges as other Americans.
- Require agencies to allow all eligible employees to telework through the end of 2020. Encouraging and permitting eligible federal employees to work from home and to be given the tools and resources to perform their jobs in a safe environment protects them, their families, and the public while allowing agencies to continue operations.

In the tradition of public service, our nation's federal and postal employees are doing what they do best: serving their country and their communities in the face of the COVID-19 outbreak. In a time of need, they have not hesitated to fulfill their duties and put themselves at risk to do so.

Thank you for holding this hearing to highlight their contributions and ensure they are honored.

I appreciate your 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ken Thomas', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ken Thomas
National President

¹ <https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2020/04/more-10000-federal-employees-have-contracted-covid-19/164986/>