

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

December 18, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary, U.S Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie:

We write to express our concern over recent reports that the VA New Jersey Health Care System will not be providing any form of COVID-19 related compensation, including Retention Pay, to eligible employees that are serving on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the start of this pandemic, over 2,000 VA healthcare workers have contracted the virus, and sadly, 56 have died. Of those 56 deaths, six have been employees of the VA New Jersey Health Care System. To date, the VA New Jersey Health Care System has lost the largest number of employees to COVID-19 in the nation. These numbers are staggering, and those who put their well-being at risk in order to serve our veterans deserve adequate and fair compensation. We urge you and your administration to institute COVID-related compensation for VA employees working in the hardest hit areas, review current policies related to staff health and safety, and provide greater transparency to employees and union leadership on how the VA is creating a safe work environment for all personnel.

As you know, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, our offices heard from VA employees across the state that there were shortages of personal protective equipment, and limited staff availability due to mandatory quarantine. In response, the New Jersey Department of Health encouraged individuals who had left the healthcare field to return in order to assist medical facilities like the VA obtain operational staffing levels. Employees from the VA New Jersey Health Care System rose to the occasion – managing a caseload that, at one point, was the highest in the nation. For many of those VA employees in New Jersey, their service resulted in the ultimate sacrifice. In order to ensure that New Jersey's vital VA healthcare centers remain open and fully staffed, COVID-related compensation, including retention pay, is crucial for retaining personnel. As you are aware, retention pay allows for employees that would not receive hazard pay to financially benefit from their essential service during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to staff members from the VA Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs, federal agencies are authorized to provide a retention incentive to employees as a substitute for hazard duty pay, and several Veterans Integrated Service Networks, VA Medical Centers, and other VA organizations across the country have started to provide this benefit. It is our understanding that the VA New Jersey Healthcare System is not only not offering retention pay, but also has no plans to implement any form of COVID-related compensation to employees. As New Jersey experienced one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the nation, we believe their employees should receive compensation for their service on the frontlines.

In order to best protect the VA New Jersey Health Care System's employees and their families, we respectfully request that you provide a response to the concerns raised in this letter, and to the questions listed below, by no later than January 15th.

- How many VA Health Care Systems are currently providing COVID-related compensation, including Incentive Pay and Retention Pay? Please provide a list with the breakdowns of each form of compensation currently being provided.
- As the VA begins to experience a spike in COVID-19 cases across the nation, what steps is your administration taking to ensure that all employees are provided with proper amounts of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)? Specifically, those serving in the New Jersey VA Health Care System.
- Has your administration been in contact recently with union leadership representing those employed by the New Jersey VA Health Care System to ensure that the VA is providing a safe and secure work environment for all personnel?

Thank you for your time and attention to these important concerns. We stand ready to work with you and your team to ensure that our veterans, their families, and the employees of the VA are provided with the highest quality of care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'C. Booker', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'DM Payne Jr.', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Donald M. Payne Jr.
United States Representative