

# PROTECT OUR CARE

## Trump Is Failing Veterans on Coronavirus

The Trump administration's failure to adequately respond to the coronavirus crisis was a key factor in thousands of deaths of veterans across the country. America's veterans, especially those at veterans homes and in VA hospitals, are particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic due to serious shortages of PPE and an insufficient supply of medications, staff and equipment available to treat veterans with COVID-19. The Trump administration failed to provide adequate care to veterans by squandering precious time and resources as thousands of veterans died under their watch.

Below is a rundown of how the Trump administration failed to prepare for the spread of the virus, and the devastating impact on veterans and their families.

### **At Least 1,400 Veterans Have Died Of Coronavirus At VA Facilities, With The Death Total For All Veterans Likely Being Much Higher**

**June 10, 2020: 1,470 Veterans Have Died At VA Facilities.** According to the VA, 1,470 veterans have died at VA facilities and there are 16,347 cumulative cases in the system. [Department of Veterans Affairs, [accessed 6/10/20](#)]

**28 States Are Not Reporting How Many Veterans Are Dying Of Coronavirus Outside Of The VA System.** "And even then, 28 states are not reporting veteran deaths, making the cumulative total unknown, said Linda Schwartz, a special adviser to the group and a former VA assistant secretary for policy and planning." [Washington Post, [5/18/20](#)]

### **The VA's Coronavirus Death Toll Excludes The Deaths Of Veterans In State-Run Homes, Where At**

**The VA's Death Count Does Not Include Veterans Who Died At State Run-Homes, Where At Least 550 Veterans Have Died Across The Country.** "But Noel acknowledged VA's count does not include veterans who have died at state-run veterans homes. That death count is at least 550, according to Vietnam Veterans of America, an advocacy group collecting nationwide data for a forthcoming report." [Washington Post, [5/18/20](#)]

**The GAO Is Investigating The VA's Oversight Of State-Run Veterans Homes.** "A congressional watchdog agency has agreed to investigate the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' oversight of homes for aging veterans following a surge of coronavirus deaths at the state-run facilities. The Government Accountability Office said in a letter Thursday that it will conduct a review into the VA's oversight of care at state veterans homes after a request by a group of Democratic U.S. senators. Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey of Massachusetts, Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, and Jon Tester of Montana asked the watchdog earlier this month to look into the VA and states' roles in ensuring veterans get proper care at the homes. They also want to know whether the agency or states have a system to 'capture real time spikes in mortality rates,' among other things." [Associated Press, [5/15/20](#)]

**Coronavirus Has Hit Dozens Of Veterans Homes In At Least 16 States With Scores Of Deaths:**

- **Stars and Stripes: Coronavirus Has Now Hit Veterans Homes In 16 States** [Stars and Stripes, [4/15/20](#)]
- **Philadelphia Inquirer: ‘It’s A Sinking Ship’: Covid-19 Deaths Triple At State-Run Vets Nursing Home In Chester County As Families Clamor For Information** [Philadelphia Inquirer, [4/25/20](#)]
- **WWLP: Another Veteran Passes Away, 84 Deaths Total At Soldiers’ Home In Holyoke** [WWLP, [5/3/20](#)]
- **New York Times: ‘The Whole Place Is Sick Now’: 74 Deaths at a Home for U.S. Veterans** [New York Times, [5/21/20](#)]
- **New York Newsday: Stony Brook Veterans Home Has 46 Coronavirus Deaths, Highest On LI** [New York Newsday, [4/23/20](#)]
- **NorthJersey.com: Commissioner of NJ veterans homes where 103 have died of coronavirus resigns** [NorthJersey.com, [4/8/20](#)]
- **Colorado Public Radio: Coronavirus Deaths More Than Double In Colorado State-Run Home For Veterans** [CPR, [5/13/20](#)]

## **The VA Has Struggled To Acquire Supplies And Personal Protective Equipment**

**124 VA Workers Have Died Of Covid-19.** According to the VA, 124 system employees have died from the coronavirus. [Department of Veterans Affairs, [accessed 6/10/20](#)]

**After Weeks Of Warnings, On April 25, The VA Finally Admitted That The Department Was In “Austerity” Mode With PPE After FEMA Seized 5 Million Masks From The VA For Destinations Unknown.** For weeks, nurses and other employees at Veterans Affairs hospitals have said they were working with inadequate protective gear. VA officials denied it. But in an interview, the physician in charge of the country’s largest health-care system acknowledged the shortage — and said masks and other supplies are being diverted for the national stockpile. “I had 5 million masks incoming that disappeared,” said Richard Stone, executive in charge of the sprawling Veterans Health Administration. He acknowledged that he’s been forced to move to “austerity levels” at some hospitals. Stone said the Federal Emergency Management Agency directed vendors with equipment on order from VA to instead send it to FEMA to replenish the government’s rapidly depleting emergency stockpile. [Washington Post, [4/25/20](#)]

**Internal Memos Obtained In April Show That The Department Of Veterans Affairs Faced A Serious Shortage Of Protective Gear For Medical Workers.** “In Kansas City, Mo., doctors have to store their used N95 protective masks in paper bags in between shifts. In Hampton, Va., a clinical pharmacist said they get a new mask every few days and are told to be careful with them. In a VA hospital in Georgia, nurses are trying to limit how much face-time they have with patients to help cut down on mask use. One memo, which was written Friday for the VA’s working group on the new coronavirus that meets daily by conference call, said mask supplies are failing ‘Experiencing serious PPE shortage,’ said the memo, which was circulated among top-ranking VA officials. ‘Several sites doing 3-D printing, but it is not enough. Soon, PPE will be rationed; one surgical mask issued per week, one N95 per day,’ it said, using a common abbreviation for personal protective equipment. [Wall Street Journal, [4/8/20](#)]

**A Federal Watchdog Report In March Underscored That The Department Of Veterans Affairs Had “Insufficient” Medications To Manage, Treat, And Sedate Patients Infected With COVID-19.** “The VA’s Office of Inspector General published: “Challenges exist in determining adequate supplies of medication to care for COVID-19 infected patients. In that no medications are currently proven to treat COVID-19, several

medications are under active investigation, and if proven effective, may significantly increase the demand of medications typically stocked in low volumes. Additionally, the inventory of medications used to (1) manage symptoms, (2) treat critically ill patients to support cardiovascular functions, and (3) sedate intubated patients may be insufficient.” [Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, [3/26/20](#)]

### **Only 71 Percent Of Medical Centers Inspected By The VA’s Office Of Inspector General Were**

**“Generally Adequate” For Coronavirus Screening.** The VA’s Office of Inspector General published a report on the Veterans Health Administration’s screening processes and readiness for the coronavirus crisis: “The OIG determined that 41 of the 58 (71 percent) visited medical centers’ screening processes were generally adequate; 16 of the 58 (28 percent) medical centers had some opportunities for improvement.1 One facility, the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System, had inadequate screening processes.” [Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, [3/26/20](#)]

### **Department Of Veterans Affairs Office Of Inspector General: “Facility Leaders Expressed Concerns Related To Supplies Needed To Test Patients For COVID-19.”**

“Anticipating equipment and supply needs is challenging as it is unclear when COVID-19 will reach its peak in the United States and ultimately test the capacity of healthcare systems to care for patients who require prolonged, high-level inpatient, and often, intensive care. At the time of this OIG inspection, facility leaders expressed concerns related to supplies needed to test patients for COVID-19. They also acknowledged low inventory of personal protective equipment for staff. Of note, leaders at two facilities—Durham VA Medical Center, and John D. Dingle VA Medical Center, Detroit, Michigan—reported shortages of mechanical ventilators.” [Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, [3/26/20](#)]

### **Facing PPE Shortages, The Veterans Affairs Medical Center In Brooklyn Instructed Staff To Use One N95 Mask Per 12-Hour Shift, Instead Of The Normal Protocol Of Changing Masks After Every Patient.**

“A shortage of protective equipment is further exacerbating the risk to healthcare workers on the front lines of the pandemic. Maria Lobifaro, a New York intensive care unit (ICU) nurse treating veterans with COVID-19, said they normally change masks after every patient interaction. Now, they are getting one N95 mask to use for an entire 12-hour shift. The ratio of patients to nurses in the ICU is usually two-to-one. As of Monday it was already four-to-one, she said.” [Reuters, [3/27/20](#)]

### **In May, The South Korean Government Donated 500,000 Masks To The VA.**

“Veterans Affairs received a shipment of 500,000 protective masks from the South Korean government on Tuesday, a gift that will be used to bolster the department’s imperiled coronavirus prevention supply reserves. In a statement, officials from South Korea’s Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs said the donation was linked to the ‘noble sacrifice made 70 years ago by the American veterans of the Korean War.’ The masks arrived at Joint Base Andrews Naval Air Facility in Maryland Tuesday morning. ‘These masks symbolize our countries’ alliance and the appreciation of the Korean people who have never forgotten the American veterans’ service and sacrifice,’ Minister Sam-duck Park said in a statement. ‘We are always grateful for them.’” [Military Times, [5/12/20](#)]

### **The VA Continues To Treat Coronavirus Patients With Hydroxychloroquine Despite Evidence That It Is Ineffective And Dangerous**

#### **May 27, 2020: The VA Was Still Using Hydroxychloroquine On Veterans In Its Care Despite Mounting Evidence Of Its Dangers And Ineffectiveness.**

“The Department of Veterans Affairs will continue to use hydroxychloroquine to treat some coronavirus patients despite warnings from experts and a decision by the World Health Organization to halt its clinical trials because of safety concerns. [...] The VA, however, said it would continue to administer the drug to some coronavirus patients. ‘In certain cases, medical providers and patients want to try hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19, and [Food and Drug Administration] guidance, which VA follows, permits that,’ VA Press Secretary Christina Noel said in an email. ‘VA only permits use of the drug after ensuring Veterans and caretakers are aware of potential risks associated with it, as we do with any other drug or treatment.’” [Stars and Stripes, [5/27/20](#)]

**The VA Treated More Than 1,000 Veterans With Hydroxychloroquine.** “The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has used hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for the coronavirus for approximately 1,300 veterans, according to a letter sent to the top Senate Democrat. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, in a letter and documents provided to Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), said the department had prescribed hydroxychloroquine to about 1,300 coronavirus patients of more than 10,000 veterans treated for the coronavirus ‘and will continue to do so in accordance with Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines.’ In addition to treating approximately 1,300 veterans with hydroxychloroquine for the coronavirus, the VA has also prescribed the medication to approximately 7,500 for non-COVID-19 conditions since the start of the pandemic. [The Hill, [5/22/20](#)]

**April 20th 2020: VA Secretary Robert Wilkie Defended Using Hydroxychloroquine For Coronavirus Treatment, Claiming That Drug Was Only Being Used On “High Risk Veterans.”** “Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert Wilkie on Wednesday defended the department's use of an unproven anti-malaria drug for treating patients with COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, saying that the drug was only being administered for high-risk veterans. ‘In a letter sent to veterans organizations, Wilkie claimed that a recent analysis of those hospitalized in Veterans Health Administration medical centers led to ‘misinformation’ about what was taking place at its facilities. He said that hydroxychloroquine was only being given to veterans at the ‘highest risk prior to receiving medication.’ Wilkie also asserted that hydroxychloroquine was not an experimental drug, noting that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had authorized its emergency use when clinical trials are not available. VA is adhering to these guidelines, only using hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 in cases where Veteran patients and their providers determine it is medically necessary,’ he said.” [The Hill, [4/30/20](#)]

**The VA Spent Hundreds Of Thousands Of Dollars Stockpiling The Unproven Malaria Drug Trump Promoted As A “Gamechanger” For Coronavirus.** “Two major federal agencies are stocking up on hydroxychloroquine, a longtime anti-malarial medication touted by President Trump as a potential ‘game changer’ in the coronavirus pandemic, amid experts’ warnings that its use for COVID-19 is risky and unproven. Federal contracting records show the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Bureau of Prisons have placed emergency orders for more than \$250,000 of hydroxychloroquine sulfate tablets from private suppliers over the last two weeks, with both agencies planning to use the drug in certain cases to treat COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.” [Los Angeles Times, [4/7/20](#)]

**A Study Of Hundreds Of Patients At VA Medical Centers Found No Benefit And A Higher Death Rate In Patients Taking Hydroxychloroquine.** “Coronavirus patients taking hydroxychloroquine, a treatment touted by President Trump, were no less likely to need mechanical ventilation and had higher deaths rates compared to those who did not take the drug, according to a study of hundreds of patients at US Veterans Health Administration medical centers. The study, which reviewed veterans' medical charts, was posted Tuesday on medrxiv.org, a pre-print server, meaning it was not peer reviewed or published in a medical journal.” [CNN, [4/21/20](#)]

**The VA Continues To Use Hydroxychloroquine Despite Mounting Evidence That It Is Ineffective And Dangerous -- And Veterans Advocates Want To Know Why.** “The Department of Veterans Affairs says it is continuing to use an anti-malarial drug touted by President Donald Trump to treat coronavirus cases in a manner ‘consistent with current FDA guidance’ despite the Food and Drug Administration warning it's not proven to work and could cause deadly side effects. The FDA made clear Friday that the drug has not been shown to be ‘safe and effective for treating or preventing Covid-19,’ and carries ‘known risks’ of potentially deadly heart complications. The FDA said those risks “may be mitigated when health care professionals closely screen and supervise these patients such as in a hospital setting or a clinical trial,” which is mentioned in an emergency-use authorization for the drugs issued last month. [CNN, [4/24/20](#)]