



# AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

**Eric Bunn Sr.**  
*National Secretary-Treasurer*

**Dr. Everett B. Kelley**  
*National President*

**Dr. Kendrick B. Roberson**  
*NVP for Women & Fair Practices*

October 22, 2024

Ashish Vazirani  
Acting Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness  
The Pentagon  
Room 3 E986  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear. Mr. Vazirani,

I am writing to bring to your attention a critical issue that affects not only our military healthcare system, but also the well-being of countless individuals represented by American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE): the ongoing staffing shortages within the Defense Health Agency (DHA). While recent reports show multiple occupations are short staffed at DHA, the nursing profession is facing an unprecedented crisis. The DHA's medical treatment facilities (MTFs) are struggling with severe shortages of qualified nursing staff, which has led to increased workloads, compromised patient care, and a heightened stress among this group of healthcare professionals. This issue is not just a statistic, it is a matter of life and death for many patients who rely on timely and effective medical care.

The shortage of nurses has several profound impacts aside from access to health care for Service members, retirees, and their families—it compromises patient safety. With fewer nurses available, the ratio of patients to nurses increases, which can lead to delays in care, reduced monitoring, and increases chances of medical errors. Secondly, the quality of patient care is significantly affected. Overworked and fatigued nurses may find it challenging to provide the high standard of care that every patient deserves. Finally, burnout experienced by nurses can lead to even greater attrition, exacerbating the staffing crisis.

DOD has had a number of delegated authorities under Title 38 and flexibilities under Title 5 at its disposal for years but has failed to implement or utilize those flexibilities to assist with recruitment and retention of healthcare personnel.

I am urging you to take these actions expeditiously to alleviate the healthcare staffing shortages across DHA:

1. Implement Title 38 delegated authorities including:
  - a. Increase the rate of basic pay for healthcare personnel; while DOD has utilized Special Salary Rates (SSRs), there are additional authorities DOD available to increase the basic salary rate of employees beyond SSRs.
  - b. Utilize scheduling flexibilities such as Baylor Plan and other alternative work schedules for Registered Nurses;
  - c. Implement more flexible qualification requirements such as eliminating the one year experience requirement to hire RNs at the GS 11 level;
2. Implement other authorities such as:



- a. Significantly increase the usage of recruitment, relocation and retention pay;
- b. Enact a permanent overseas exemption that allows civilian healthcare personnel to work more than five continuous years. This exemption is already in place for NAF employees and overseas educators under DODEA.
- c. Implement the maximum amounts regarding student loan forgiveness by paying up to \$10,000 per year and up to \$60,000 overall to eligible employees

The staffing challenges in DHA are significant, but with decisive action and support, we can turn the tide and ensure that our military healthcare system remains robust and capable of meeting the needs of our community and the civilians who support the mission. I hope you will consider these recommendations and advocate for the necessary changes to address critical staffing issues.

Thank you for your attention to this pressing issue. I am available to discuss these proposals in further detail and assist in any way possible to develop effective solutions. I look forward to your positive response and to working together to improve our military healthcare system.

In Solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Everett B. Kelley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

Everett B. Kelley  
National President

cc: Lester Martinez-Lopez, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs  
LTG Crosland, DHA  
Alicia English, DHA J-1  
Zev Goldrich, DoD CPP