

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051  
MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<http://oversight.house.gov>

### Opening Statement Chairman Gerald E. Connolly Hearing on “Frontline Feds: Serving the Public During a Pandemic” Subcommittee on Government Operations Thursday, June 25, 2020

The need to support and protect the health and safety of the federal workforce has never been more important. Today’s hearing is about life and death decisions being made by this Administration amid the coronavirus pandemic that will affect the 2.5 million federal public servants and an estimated 3.7 million federal contractors who comprise our civil service. Our federal workforce is our nation’s greatest asset. It is our duty to protect the health and safety of the millions of public servants who have continued to work throughout this pandemic.

This is a very difficult time for everyone in our nation and across the globe. But this is also an opportunity to remind our country of how much we rely on the federal workforce every day.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the federal government never shutdown. In fact, our federal workforce has continued to work throughout this unprecedented time and has even ramped up its efforts to ensure that the public has access to critical services, including new unemployment benefits, small business funding, and financial relief provided by Congress.

Today’s hearing will highlight the important work of federal employees on the frontlines of this pandemic and also the incredible efforts of those working remotely. Today’s hearing will also focus on what we can do to protect federal employees while continuing government operations and providing vital resources to the public.

Let me be clear: today’s hearing is NOT about returning to work. The federal workforce has been working, tirelessly, throughout this pandemic.

This hearing is about ensuring federal agencies have the plans and resources they need to enable continuity of operations as well as keep the federal workforce and the public safe.

Thousands of federal workers have contracted the coronavirus, and many have died. The Postal Service has reported 1,606 positive cases and 60 deaths; Veterans Health Administration has reported 1,633 positive cases and 20 deaths; and Bureau of Prisons has reported 1,346 federal inmates and 172 staff tested positive for COVID-19 and 87 federal inmate deaths and 1 staff member death attributed to COVID-19.

Among the federal workers who have lost their lives from the virus is my constituent, Chai Suthammanont (Soo - tam - man - aunt). Chai was a federal employee who lost his life after contracting the coronavirus while working as part of the kitchen staff at a Quantico daycare center. His widow related that before the pandemic restricted such interactions Chai, who was dedicated to his job caring for small children, invented a unique handshake with many children at the daycare, sharing a special greeting with each one every day.

My office sent a letter to Quantico asking about the policies in place to maintain a safe work environment, however, it remains unclear how effective the enforcement of these policies was.

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051  
MINORITY (202) 225-5074  
<http://oversight.house.gov>

We must ensure that federal agencies have smart, evidence-based policies in place to protect the workers who are unable to work remotely. And any efforts to return federal and contract workers to their workspaces must be done safely and consistent with guidance from public health experts, and must ensure that all workers returning to their workplaces have the proper protective equipment and ways to communicate their underlying health conditions or other concerns without fear of reprisal or removal.

In an April letter to the acting Deputy Director of Management at the Office of Management and Budget, who is also concurrently serving as the acting head of the Office of Personnel Management, this Subcommittee noted grave concerns with the Administration's reopening guidance. The guidance fails to provide plans for personal protective equipment and testing provisions for federal agencies. It also makes no mention of what agencies should do in the event coronavirus cases begin to spike again as we are currently witnessing in states like Florida, Texas, and Arizona. It fails to take a leadership role, delegating all responsibilities to agency administrators without providing support and assistance should reentry go horribly wrong. The Administration's guidance is unclear and incomplete, and, at its worst, allows the Administration to treat our federal civil servants like guinea pigs. In summary, the guidance deflects responsibility and mirrors the worst of the Administration's national response to the pandemic.

This lack of leadership from the Administration is why last week, this Subcommittee sent 24 letters to federal inspectors general requesting investigations into their agencies' plans and contingencies for returning employees to federal office buildings. This also includes a letter to the DOD IG asking for an investigation into the tragic and likely preventable death of Mr. Suthammanont (Soo - tam - man - aunt).

In recent coronavirus stimulus bills, Chairwoman Maloney and I championed several provisions offering protections and resources to both federal and contract workforces as they continue to deliver services to the public during the coronavirus pandemic.

Protecting the millions of federal workers who continue to serve our nation every day should not be a partisan issue. That is why this morning, my colleagues and I introduced two pieces of legislation that would support the civil servants who continue to serve our country.

In remembrance of Chai, we introduced legislation that would require agencies to publish online coronavirus response plans for their workforces. This bill would increase transparency and accountability as federal agencies begin to ask employees to return to federal office buildings.

We also introduced the Federal Workforce Health and Safety During the Pandemic Act, which would, among other things, extend hazard pay and provide childcare reimbursements to those federal employees working on the frontlines.

As our country continues to confront the threat of the coronavirus pandemic, Congress must do more to protect the federal workforce. It is our duty as Congress and overseers to make sure any return to office space is done efficiently and safely — and for the right reasons. No more lives should be lost because of this Administration's lack of leadership, competence, and accountability.