



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

# News Release

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## Sec. Wilkie to Govt. Union: Stop Exploiting Veteran Suicide

**WASHINGTON** — Today the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released the following [letter from Secretary Robert Wilkie](#) to American Federation of Government Employees President J. David Cox:

Mr. J. David Cox  
National President  
American Federation of Government Employees  
80 F Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20001

Dear President Cox:

One of the most insulting and misleading stereotypes about Veterans today is that of the “Veteran as victim.”

While VA is dedicated to helping all Veterans, particularly those who are truly at risk, the notion that most Veterans are so fragile from their service that the slightest hint of hardship can push them to the brink of mental breakdown or even self-harm is preposterous, which is why Veterans and Veteran advocates are continuously fighting <sup>1</sup> this shopworn canard.

As leader of the largest union representing VA employees, many of whom are Veterans, you should know how harmful this stereotype is to Veterans, especially those attempting to enter the civilian workforce following their service. That is why I was surprised and disappointed to see one of the American Federation of Government Employees’ (AFGE) presidents pushing the “Veteran as victim” myth, and going so far as to exploit the real tragedy of Veteran suicide to make political arguments about the partial government shutdown.

“If this shutdown does not stop, we are going to have fatalities. We’re going to have suicides,” AFGE Local President Edward M. Canales said earlier this week, according to ABC News.<sup>2</sup>

While it is apparent some AFGE leaders consider Veterans as victims, allow me to inform you of the true character traits of those who have worn the uniform:

- Veterans are models of civic engagement<sup>3</sup>, holding stronger ties to their communities and volunteering and voting at higher rates than their non-Veteran counterparts.
- The Veterans’ unemployment rate is lower<sup>4</sup> than the national average, in part because companies<sup>5</sup> often look to hire Veterans for complex and demanding jobs, citing their leadership and work ethic.

In short, America’s Veterans are model citizens and leaders, and almost every American recognizes that. AFGE Local President Canales’ attempt to use Veterans as pawns in a political debate while exploiting the serious issue of Veteran suicide is nothing short of disgraceful.

I ask you to apologize publicly for your AFGE colleague’s reckless comments and to outline the steps you plan to take to ensure AFGE leaders demonstrate proper respect for our nation’s heroes.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Wilkie

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/06/us/a-veteran-works-to-break-the-broken-hero-stereotype.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/americas-veterans-disproportionately-affected-government-shutdown/story?id=60260832>

<sup>3</sup> <https://gotyour6.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2017-Veterans-Civic-Health-Index.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/vets/latest-numbers/> (accessed 1/11/2019)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.metlife.com/blog/business-insights/veterans-at-work/>