



INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF PROFESSIONAL & TECHNICAL ENGINEERS AFL-CIO & CLC

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November 25, 2020

AREA VICE PRESIDENTS

Hon. Michael Rigas, Acting Director
U.S. Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20415-1000

Dear Director Rigas:

The International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) represents highly skilled professionals across the federal government. NASA rocket scientists, engineers at the Department of Defense and judges who hear cases at the Social Security Administration as well as at the Justice Department are among our members. They play an essential role keeping the wheels of government turning in the nation's defense, the implementation of its laws, and in awarding benefits to the elderly and the disabled.

On behalf of our executive board, which met this past week, we formally request that frontline workers represented by IFPTE be given top priority in receiving COVID-19 vaccinations when they become available to federal agencies, either in December of this year or early in 2021.

Furthermore, we are asking for assurances in writing from that federal frontline workers are granted higher priority than either political appointees, most of whom will soon leave the federal government; or senior-level managers employed by federal agencies who often have the ability to work from home.

Thousands of dedicated public servants represented by our union go to work every day, risking their own personal safety in order to serve the taxpayers. While our members are doing their best to follow CDC safety guidelines while on the job, their anxiety from the increased risk of contracting COVID-19 remains high. Our members are not only concerned about contracting this terrible virus; they are concerned about spreading it to others.

For example, the approximately 1,300 administrative law judges IFPTE represents at the Social Security Administration generally work in small hearing rooms where they are in close contact with claimants who are overwhelmingly elderly, ill or disabled. If these judges are not vaccinated, they not only are at risk, they increase the risk for a vulnerable population.

Our members at NASA supporting astronauts at the space station should be high on the list to receive the vaccine, as should the workers we represent at EPA. These men and women go into areas hit by forest fires to make sure that the air is safe for the public to breathe. Our members working on critical projects with national importance at the Army Corps of Engineers or racing against timelines at Navy shipyards also deserve priority. We can give you many other examples.

Our board asks that the Office of Personnel Management set clear guidelines and priorities on vaccine distribution. Based on our experiences dealing with a range of federal managers over the past nine months, some agencies and departments within the federal government may not be up to the task of fairly and efficiently prioritizing who should receive the vaccine.

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Our union will long remember that in the spring of 2020, when the country was shutting down and the number of people testing positive was surging, the Justice Department kept our nation's immigration courts open with packed rooms. Inside, families and their lawyers sat side by side for hours waiting to be called.

The DOJ chose to go with a one-size-fits-all strategy for its employees. Clearly the risks then and the risks now are far different for a DOJ attorney working in an office behind a closed door with little social interaction and an immigration judge who might come into contact with hundreds of individuals.

We know that determining who should get a vaccine and in what order of priority is a difficult task. Age, health histories and the ability to socially distance add to the complexity. Given OPM's integral role in the working lives of federal workers, including the administering of healthcare benefits, IFPTE urges your agency to act quickly to assure that the vaccine is distributed by government agencies to frontline essential federal workers and to those who, based on risk factors, need it most.

Our union wants to reassure federal workers whom we represent that the vaccine is being rolled out at government agencies in a fair, efficient and prompt manner. We would like to assist OPM in this endeavor. As a first and very important step, please forward to us, as soon as possible your plan for prioritizing which federal workers get the vaccine and when.

Sincerely,



Paul Shearon,
President



Matthew Biggs,
Secretary-Treasurer/
Legislative Director

