

Heroes on the frontlines of COVID-19



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This has been a month like no other in modern American history. We are in a war against an invisible virus that has required most people to stay home to fight it. With each day of the coronavirus pandemic, Americans have grown increasingly grateful for things we used to take for granted, like grocery workers, without whom we could not meet our most basic needs. Parents have a new appreciation for how complex and demanding teaching is, and for how teachers are helping their children continue learning, stay engaged and stay safe inside during this uneasy time. And then there are our healthcare heroes—the nurses, EMTs, doctors, orderlies, respiratory techs and other workers who put their health and lives at risk every time they report to the frontlines of this pandemic.

Many of these heroes are among the more than 672,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the United States and, as of Friday, the more than 32,000 souls who have died. This includes at least 50 current and 11 retired New York City school employees, and the three members of New York state's AFT-affiliated Public Employees Federation who died on one day last week. The pandemic is taking an especially dangerous toll on healthcare workers, many of whom are treating patients without adequate personal protective equipment or other safeguards. More than 5,400 healthcare workers in the United States have contracted COVID-19, and dozens have died. At least 80 nurses at one hospital in Ohio have tested positive for the coronavirus.

The actual numbers of infections and fatalities are certainly much higher, due to the Trump administration's abject failure to get us the tools we need to fight and win this war, starting with adequate testing.

I have been listening to the governor of my home state, Andrew Cuomo, who, like many other governors, is upholding his oath to protect the safety and health of those who live and work in his state. While physically distant, I have never been on my phone or Zoom so much, connecting with family and friends, as mental health experts suggest we do, and with leaders and members of my union—nurses, state employees and educators among them. They're worried about teachers and professors who made the stressful shift to remote instruction in a nanosecond; special education teachers struggling to meet their students' individual learning needs from afar; bus drivers and food service workers scrambling to ensure families get "grab-and-go" meals; nurses working without the necessary PPE; and social workers, juvenile justice workers, and others who work in facilities like nursing homes and prisons, wondering if they and the people they care for are invisible to others. But along with these worries, I hear their hope and ingenuity and joy.

From the moment the first school closures were contemplated, I got urgent calls and

emails from AFT members and leaders trying to figure out ways to feed students who rely on school meals so they wouldn't go hungry. The Toledo (Ohio) Federation of Teachers is packing grab-and-go meals for students to last several days at a time. Tia Harris, a veteran school bus driver in Grants, N.M., is working with 20 other school bus drivers to deliver some 1,000 meals every day. Driving their normal routes, instead of picking up students, they drop off food. In Dallas, Yolanda Fisher and her colleagues go to work before dawn—preparing and packaging 700 breakfasts, 700 lunches and 700 dinners that they distribute to students. And in Lee County in Florida, school food service workers are preparing and distributing up to 25,000 free grab-and-go meals every day, available to any child 18 or younger.

Millions of students are now learning remotely because of the amazing work of their teachers. In just a few days, 75,000 public school teachers in New York City alone converted their homes into remote learning centers. For United Federation of Teachers member Erica Wilde, an eighth-grade teacher at P.S. 99 in Brooklyn, this included using Google Translate to communicate with her students' parents, who speak a wide range of languages—from Albanian to Uzbek. Sari Beth Rosenberg greets the students in her virtual AP U.S. history classes with an upbeat song each day, then they launch into high-level discussions. But, Rosenberg says, "I will never be able to replicate the magic of teaching in a classroom from my laptop."

School closures have exposed many inequities in our country, including the digital divide. In the nation's capital, where up to 40 percent of students lack a computer or internet access, the Washington Teachers' Union is partnering with local TV stations to air lessons aligned with district learning standards for different grade groups. And the digital divide is not just an urban problem. Michele Bushey teaches high school biology in Saranac, N.Y., where the mountainous terrain sharply limits internet access. The district's shift to online learning doesn't work for students without internet, so Bushey spends hours each day calling students to provide alternate instruction, all while helping her second-grade daughter learn remotely.

The AFT and the National PTA convened a telephone town hall last week about supporting our students and families during this time. The No. 1 issue among the 55,000 people on the call was coping with stress. Research shows that chronic stress may affect a child's ability to regulate emotion, attention and behavior, and to learn and remember. But research also shows that the deciding factor for whether stress is tolerable or toxic is the presence of supportive relationships, like that of a caring parent or other adult. Experts in mental health, learning science and psychology offered suggestions for alleviating children's anxiety with routines, relationships and resilience. (We have links to these resources in the "Learn More" box.)

Remote learning is not ideal. Teachers miss their kids, and many students have surprised themselves by wanting to go back to school. When we return, we will be able to address many of the learning-loss issues that have been raised. But for now, let's try to reduce stress on families while also trying to sum up the year—with ideas like capstone projects that show how much

learning has already taken place—and helping our seniors graduate.

Many healthcare professionals are redeploying to where they are needed most. In Connecticut, some school nurses are now performing COVID-19 testing at drive-through testing centers. A longtime registered nurse with the New York State Department of Health volunteered to administer tests in New Rochelle, the first place in New York to see community spread of the virus, and is now administering tests in other areas with outbreaks. "Seeing all these nurses volunteering," she said, "it struck me that when everyone else is running away, nurses are there."

Their collective heroism leaves us with a debt of gratitude.

Many healthcare personnel at risk of exposure to the coronavirus are isolating from their families in order to protect them. Others are having family separations imposed on them, such as Trisha Garcia, a registered nurse in Tacoma, Wash., who works in a surgical recovery room, not with COVID-19 patients. Nevertheless, a judge agreed with her ex-husband that her job as a nurse puts her kids at risk, and granted an emergency order barring her from seeing her own children.

Healthcare personnel are risking their lives every day not just because of the virus, but because of the Trump administration's failure to plan and to use its power to increase supplies. Health Professionals and Allied Employees member Jose DeJesus, a registered nurse in New Jersey, said that hospital employees are being issued one single-use paper surgical mask that is supposed to last a whole week. Nurses at his hospital are being asked to save their single-use yellow gowns for possible laundering and reuse—gowns nurses routinely rip from their bodies to minimize exposure before throwing them away. The AFT is trying to get PPE for frontline workers like Jose DeJesus.

America's health professionals are showing the compassion, competence and commitment that are in short supply from the president, who claims absolute authority but shirks responsibility. He has even insulted healthcare workers, who are risking their lives to save others, by making unfounded insinuations that nurses are thieves.

Experts note that the Trump administration's failure to acquire and distribute tests for COVID-19 resulted in far more cases and fatalities from the virus than in countries that made the necessary preparations. State employees—scientists and technicians you may not have known even existed—have rushed to fill the void. AFT members in Montana and New York have developed tests for COVID-19, and are working weekend shifts, early mornings and late nights in state labs to turn around test results quickly so healthcare providers can plan treatment and stop the spread of the virus.

This pandemic has upended all our lives, but it has also put many things into perspective: Science is important. Government is important. Everyday Americans—grocery workers at my neighborhood C-Town; teachers in car parades or making videos to show their students how much they are loved; the restaurants and small businesses trying to stay open and to keep their workers employed; nurses, orderlies and intensive care doctors, like my kid sister—they are the best of America and the glue holding us together. And, when this crisis passes, we will properly mourn those we have loved and lost.

We all yearn to get back to normal and back to work. The way to restart the economy is, first and foremost, to expand testing and contact tracing, protect medical workers, and accelerate the development of a vaccine, to protect health and safety. It is not an either-or choice; public health and economic vitality go hand in hand. And we must "reopen America" better than we closed it.

This crisis has exposed the disastrous consequences of cuts to the nation's public health infrastructure, the lack of paid sick leave for all workers, the prevalence of food insecurity, the gaping digital divide, and the unconscionable number of Americans who are uninsured or underinsured. And now Americans have been set back even further because of the pandemic. We will need bold steps, through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act and other government action, to repair the harm to people's health, the economy and our democracy. Economic stimulus measures must include funds for states and localities struggling to maintain basic government functions. And they must be designed to create a recovery shared by all Americans, especially the most vulnerable.

In crises, there are always helpers and heroes. I am eternally grateful to my members—and so many others—who have been both. Their selfless acts and collective heroism leave us with a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid.



Registered nurses at New York University Langone Hospital urging the public to follow stay-at-home orders.

MEET OUR HEROES



Photo: courtesy Jose DeJesus

"Taking care of COVID-19 patients is exhausting, but the nurses aren't calling out sick. We are here because of our oath and our calling. It's frustrating and scary, but we take care of each other in the midst of this madness."

—Jose DeJesus, registered nurse, Health Professionals and Allied Employees (New Jersey)



Photo: courtesy Yolanda Fisher

"With so many of the stores being empty and parents who can't afford to go out and stock up on food, if we didn't do this, there are kids who would go hungry. I don't want any child to go hungry while schools are closed."

—Yolanda Fisher, food service manager, Alliance/AFT (Dallas)

"The AFT and First Book's very generous book donation benefited our community. Seeing the smiling faces of the parents and students getting these good quality books brightened my day. Even the parents were anxious to start reading them."

—Kim Pendry, Title I math teacher and member of AFT-McDowell County (West Virginia)



Photo: courtesy Kim Pendry



Photo: courtesy Michael Shunney

As of April 8, industrial technology teacher and West Warwick Teachers' Alliance (Rhode Island) member Michael Shunney, his students and a team of helpers using 3D printers have created, assembled and distributed 573 face shields that went to: nurses and doctors, EMTs and firefighters, police officers, visiting nurses and healthcare professionals, and West Warwick Public Schools employees serving breakfast and lunch for students at three district schools and two mobile sites.



Photo: courtesy Jill Cohenhour

"Our clinical laboratory specialists who are now running statewide testing of COVID-19 had practiced their pandemic response, together with state and federal labs, to prepare for just such a crisis. The preparedness of these valuable union public employees is an asset to Montana."

—Jill Cohenhour, Montana Federation of Public Employees

TELLING OUR STORY

News stories all across the media show the AFT's deep involvement in the public discourse on the coronavirus, but we also have our own news and personal stories from AFT members on www.VoicesFromTheFrontline.org.

LEARN MORE

American Federation of Teachers aft.org/coronavirus

The AFT's resources cover everything from face masks to free food for students. It also includes webinars about how to convert classes to remote learning, and opportunities to influence coronavirus policy in Congress.

Share My Lesson

sharemylesson.com/coronavirus/remote

The AFT's Share My Lesson helps educators and parents access free resources, lesson plans and ideas on distance learning for all grades and content areas. It also has suggestions for reaching students with disabilities and English language learners, and for dealing with stress and mental health issues during this time.

AFT Academics

aftacademics.org/covid-19

Solidarity Academy webinars give higher education members information and provide a forum for discussion on issues affecting higher ed employees during the coronavirus pandemic. These include how to quickly convert classes to high-quality remote learning, how the coronavirus is affecting adjunct and con-

tingent faculty, and how the pandemic is affecting international students.

Forgive My Student Debt

www.forgivemystudentdebt.org/covid-19

Forgive My Student Debt provides up-to-date information to manage student loan debt during the pandemic, including advice from the AFT and our partners about new federal provisions affecting federal student loans. AFT members can also sign up with Summer, the AFT's trusted partner for student loan management.

First Book

firstbook.org/coronavirus

First Book is a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that all children in need have their own books. While schools are closed, it has focused on reducing inequities in learning opportunities by distributing 8 million books to children who don't have reliable access to online learning.

Wide Open School

WideOpenSchool.org

Wide Open School is a free collection of online learning experiences and activities for kids, curated by the editors at Common Sense and organized

by grade band and subject. Everything on Wide Open School centers on the schedule, which is programmed each "school" day for each grade band.

Colorín Colorado

ColorinColorado.org/coronavirus

It's important to create bonds to support both students and their families throughout the pandemic, especially for students who are learning English. Colorín Colorado is co-produced by the PBS station WETA and the AFT, and it serves educators and families of English language learners in grades preK–12.

Project Parachute

www.eleos.health/parachute

Healthcare workers across the country face unprecedented challenges as they deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Project Parachute is a network of licensed therapists, in cooperation with Eleos Health, that is matching frontline healthcare professionals with licensed therapists to provide pro bono therapy.

Turnaround for Children

www.turnaroundusa.org/coronavirus

Even at a distance during the pandemic, we need to maintain connections to

our family, friends, teachers and peers. This curated list has resources for any adult who has a trusting, supportive relationship with a child—and for young people themselves.

American Psychological Association

www.apa.org/topics/covid-19

The American Psychological Association's website is continually updated for psychologists, healthcare workers and the public. Resources include telehealth policies in all 50 states;; ways to manage COVID-19 concerns for people with obsessive-compulsive disorder; and more.

National PTA

www.pta.org/home/family-resources/coronavirus-information

The National PTA's priority during this crisis is to help keep people safe and healthy while meeting the educational, social and emotional needs of all students, educators and families. It has compiled resources to support families and teachers who are navigating working, teaching and learning at home.