

# These federal workers deal with the public. They've been exposed to the coronavirus.



A Transportation Security Administration officer wears a protective mask while working this month at Oakland International Airport in California. (Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

By

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When Alexander Spain, a supervisor with the Transportation Security Administration, was told Tuesday to self-quarantine and not report to work at San Jose International Airport, he was not surprised.

A screener he supervises, who checks IDs and boarding passes, had been sick for weeks and then tested positive for the [coronavirus](#). Spain, 58, was told to remain at home but said he was given no instructions for how to self-quarantine. So Spain said he “went out to grab food twice. I stopped at a Chinese food restaurant and got some quick bites from 7-Eleven.”

On Thursday, the day he was scheduled to return to work, Spain called his supervisors in the morning, asking how to get tested for the virus. “They acted like I was speaking French,” he said in an interview.

Spain's experience mirrors what federal workers across the country who deal with the public are saying about the lack of direction, protocols and protective gear they need from their agencies. They fear these failures may cause them to become ill and spread the virus not only in the United States but across the globe.

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The federal government has hundreds of thousands of workers who come in daily contact with the public — workplace inspectors, mail carriers, hospital workers, park rangers, passport processors, Social Security representatives, museum workers. Workers and union representatives from six different agencies — including the Social Security Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau — said in interviews, emails and text messages with The Washington Post that Spain's experience is not unique. They or their co-workers also have been exposed to the virus and say their supervisors are not giving proper guidance or support.

The American Federation of Government Employees, which represents 700,000 federal employees, has criticized the Trump administration.

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“Agencies are not communicating with their workforces with enough information or to a degree that will allow them to protect themselves or the public in a timely manner to contain the spread of this virus,” union president Everett Kelley said recently during testimony before Congress.

The Trump administration has not publicly addressed the unions' concerns. The White House's coronavirus task force did not respond to requests for comment.

[\*When should I call in sick? A Q and A for federal employees about the coronavirus\*](#)

The federal government is not keeping a tally of the number of workers who have tested positive for the virus, nor does it have an estimate of how many federal workers have been exposed to the coronavirus, like Spain, the TSA supervisor. At least three other TSA screeners in the San Jose airport have tested positive for the virus.

Spain's quarantine was short because the infected security screener's last day at work — when Spain would have been last exposed — was two weeks ago. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends a self-quarantine of 14 days in such circumstances. Spain, who did not have symptoms as of Friday, said he will not return to work until he gets tested, something the Navy veteran is now seeking through the Department of Veterans Affairs. TSA representatives did not respond to requests for comment.

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## **Wash hands, wear mask**

Other workers are complaining about being exposed to the virus at work and finding out about it from colleagues, not their managers.

Jason Phillips, a technician who performs X-rays and CT scans at a Veterans Affairs hospital in Portland, Ore., filed a [whistleblower complaint](#) with the Office of Special Counsel on Thursday after he worked with a patient who later tested positive for the coronavirus.

Phillips said he helped the patient on and off a gurney and also helped him on and off of a CT scanner table. Phillips was wearing gloves, but no mask, and was with the patient for about 15 minutes, the sort of exposure that health officials say places people at heightened risk of infection.

[Senators criticize Trump administration's guidance for federal workers on coronavirus](#)

“I learned he had coronavirus through a text message from a worker, not a supervisor, so I was panicking,” Phillips said in an interview, adding that he alerted his supervisors the next day. “They told me to come to work like normal. Wash my hands, wear a mask.”

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Instead, Phillips, 47, contacted the Washington State Department of Health and the CDC, which told him to self-quarantine.

By then, Phillips had exposed his wife, their four children and his father-in-law. They are all now secluded in their home in Washougal, Wash. Phillips said he filed the whistleblower complaint because he was not notified by supervisors of the sick patient, but also because he said his supervisor tried to coach him to change his story about not wearing a mask and about the length of time he was exposed to the patient.

Daniel Herrigstad, a spokesman for the VA Portland Health Care System, said in a statement: “These are serious allegations and the department will look into them right away.”

Social Security Administration workers in Casa Grande, Ariz., wonder if they have been infected with the coronavirus.

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On Monday, a colleague who returned from a cruise over the weekend reported to work “hacking and coughing” but remained on the job throughout the workday, said Ralph DeJulius, national president for the union that represents SSA workers.

On Tuesday, the worker called in sick. Coronavirus was suspected. Panic spread.

Information about the worker’s health, and what the rest of the office staff should do in response, has not been shared with the sick workers’ colleagues, DeJulius said.

On any given workday, about 200 people come through that field office — one of about 160 across the country — with most of them particularly vulnerable to the virus. They are often seeking benefits because they are either elderly, disabled or both.

Nicole Tiggemann, a spokeswoman for the Social Security Administration, declined to comment on the ill employee but said in a statement: “We are implementing additional steps to protect our employees who may be most vulnerable to COVID-19” through expanded telework, social distancing and other measures.

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DeJulius said guidance has been vague. Workers are told to not report to work if they are sick, but the SSA did not outline which symptoms should be of concern until Friday. “We’ve been asking the administration for information about what is going on in that office — it’s been nothing but crickets,” DeJulius said.

### **Short on hand sanitizer**

TSA workers have similar complaints. A notice to TSA employees, obtained by The Washington Post, directs workers to stay home if they are ill.

However, the memo does not say what symptoms should prompt a worker to stay home. The notice also directed workers to wash their hands with warm soap and water if hand sanitizer and alcohol wipes are not available — something screeners can't do without leaving their work station.

“They are running out of hand sanitizer and alcohol wipes at some of the larger airports,” said Hydrick Thomas, president of the union representing TSA workers. “They don't have the right sized gloves at others. They are too big for some people and they are rolling off of their hands. It's unacceptable.” The TSA did not respond to calls and emails seeking comment.

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[Coronavirus may have a seasonal cycle but that doesn't mean it will go away this summer](#)

Some federal workers said that in the absence of clear safety protocols, they are proposing their own to their supervisors, but those requests are often ignored or have been rejected, they said.

In addition to the 160 Social Security field offices, the Social Security Administration has another 163 offices with hearing rooms, where sick and disabled people appeared before administrative law judges who rule on their requests for federal benefits.

Judge Melissa McIntosh, who works in Tampa and is also union president for the judges, said people are showing up in hearing offices and courtrooms across the country with respiratory problems and fevers. In a Feb. 27 email, McIntosh asked SSA officials to give judges the authority to ask those who show up with these symptoms to consider doing the hearing over the telephone. A week later, an associate commissioner rejected her request, saying only SSA management can make such a suggestion, according to an email obtained by The Post. SSA officials did not provide further comment.

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“They show up sick because it can take months to get a hearing. Sometimes [they are] in the waiting room with other people for hours,” McIntosh said in an interview. “We would simply like the ability to give them the option so they don't get other people sick, including us. It is stunning SSA refuses to respond to its judges and simply implement our common-sense suggestions.”

*Alice Crites, Julie Tate, Shayna Jacobs, Devlin Barrett, Andrew Freedman and Eric Yoder contributed to this report.*

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