



FRIDAY ALERT



Alliance for Retired Americans

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Alliance Mourns the Death of Ruben Burks

Members of the Alliance for Retired Americans are joined together in mourning the passing of founding Alliance Secretary-Treasurer **Ruben Burks**. He died on Monday, April 6 at the age of 86 in his hometown of Flint, Michigan.



Mr. Burks became the first Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance following a long history of unionism in the United Auto Workers and fighting for social justice. He served in that position from 2001-2015.

In 1955 he began working as an assembler at the former General Motors Fisher Body Plant 2 in Flint and joined UAW Local 598. From that position he rose through the ranks of the local, serving in various leadership posts, including shop committeeperson and executive board member.

He was a leader in the early days of the civil rights movement and [a pioneer in the UAW](#), becoming the highest ranking African-American officer in the union when he was elected Secretary-Treasurer in 1998.

Ruben Burks in Las Vegas, Nevada, 2010

“Even in retirement Ruben continued fighting for social and economic justice for the people of his beloved community of Flint,” said **Joseph Peters, Jr.**, Alliance Secretary-Treasurer and longtime UAW colleague. “He was a gentleman, mentor and above all, a friend. Of all his accomplishments, he will best be remembered for his warm and welcoming smile. It truly reflected what was in his heart. Rest in peace, my brother.”

Wisconsin Illustrates Need to Expand Absentee Voting and Vote by Mail

On Tuesday, Wisconsin voters faced [enormous obstacles](#) just trying to cast a ballot in the state’s primary election amid the coronavirus pandemic. Both absentee and in-person voting

were problematic as the state became a test case for a national battle over voting rights this fall.



Voters in Wisconsin waiting in line to vote Tuesday

Due to the pandemic, more than one million people requested absentee ballots, a record high. The volume overwhelmed county election boards and frustrated many voters who say they never received a ballot or received one late. A new state law requiring absentee ballots to be witnessed was another barrier particularly for seniors or anyone living alone who had to break the health guidance and leave their home to find someone to witness their ballot. The Wisconsin Alliance and several individual members, joined by the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin and the Fair Elections Center as counsel, filed a federal lawsuit challenging this provision. The lawsuit was partially successful in District Court giving relief to isolated voters, but that decision was overturned by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals.

Election day brought even more challenges. Governor **Tony Evers** issued an order postponing the election until June, but the Republican National Committee appealed to the [Supreme Court](#), which ruled that the election must occur as scheduled and that the deadline for submitting absentee ballots could not be extended. Thousands of poll workers had refused to put their health in danger and the number of polling places was vastly reduced. In Milwaukee, for example, only 5 of 180 polling sites were open.

"The court rulings defied common sense," said **Marlene Ott**, President of the Wisconsin Alliance for Retired Americans. "Thousands of Wisconsin seniors who live alone had an unnecessary and unfair choice to make. They either violated the governor's stay-at-home

order and left their homes to find a witness -- or knew their ballot will not be counted. This was not democracy in action.”

Voting rights advocates have been redoubling their efforts to ensure that people can vote safely and easily this fall. Meanwhile [President Trump and the Republican National Committee are launching a multi-million dollar campaign to block these changes](#) in several states in November.

[Please sign the Alliance’s petition to expand vote by mail to all 50 states.](#)

Payroll Tax Cut Scheme is a Severe Threat to Social Security

On Wednesday [President Trump said he supported a permanent cut in the payroll tax](#) which funds Social Security and Medicare, stating that even without the coronavirus pandemic and economic crisis he would call for this cut. Senate Republicans have also suggested a payroll tax cut be part of any future economic stimulus package.

With record levels of unemployment, cutting Social Security and Medicare’s funding would extend the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic on these vital social insurance programs for decades.

“Advocating for a payroll tax is the latest evidence that the president has no intention of keeping his 2016 campaign promise of [‘no cuts’ to Social Security and Medicare](#),” said **Richard Fiesta**, Executive Director of the Alliance, in a [statement](#). “The pandemic has disrupted all our lives and put the health of millions at risk. We will fight tooth and nail any attempt to use this crisis as a way to dismantle the retirement security of our earned benefits.”

The Alliance and the AFL-CIO Hold Teletown Hall on Coronavirus for Retirees



Dr. Albert

On Wednesday, the Alliance held a teletownhall on the coronavirus and COVID-19 with more than 13,000 retirees participating from across the country. AFL-CIO President **Richard Trumka**, Alliance President **Robert Roach, Jr.**, and **Dr. Steven Albert** of the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, a nationally recognized expert on aging and community health, spoke. Executive Director Fiesta also spoke and was the moderator.

President Trumka said that the AFL-CIO is fighting to fix what fell through the cracks with the last coronavirus stimulus package, including health care for everyone on the front lines, more money for state and local governments, and making pension protections a priority.

Dr. Albert updated retirees about what the scientific community knows about the novel coronavirus and answered retirees' questions. Dr. Albert encouraged retirees to avoid public spaces, to take advantage of senior hours or curbside pickup, to use cloth face masks and to wash hands frequently -- and to be wary of information about unproven prevention or cures.

President Roach also emphasized the need to protect pensions, adding, "Every day at the Alliance and with the AFL-CIO, we fight for the health and well being of all retirees. Right now that means making sure people have access to affordable, quality health care and ensuring the unique needs of retirees are taken into consideration when the government creates laws to provide relief."

Social Security Advisory Board Urges Action Amid Pandemic

On Monday, the Social Security Advisory Board sent a [letter](#) to **Andrew Saul**, Commissioner of the Social Security Administration (SSA), urging the agency to make sure Supplemental Security Income (SSI) beneficiaries receive their stimulus payments quickly and automatically, rather than having to fill out special forms.

The Board's mission is to provide the President, Congress, and the Commissioner with bipartisan guidance on how these programs can best provide economic security.

The Board is also asking the Commissioner to continue new representative payee reviews and other operational capabilities. Representative payees are appointed when a beneficiary cannot manage his or her benefits. SSA has decided to suspend these reviews, even though they are required by law.

"The Social Security Advisory Board is looking out for the millions of Americans who receive SSI benefits, to ensure they do not have to jump through unnecessary hoops to collect the money they need to survive," said **President Roach**. "The SSA should follow its recommendations to help as many people as possible as quickly as possible."