

SPECIAL REPORT:
The Cost of Republican Inaction,
Volume 2.

Actions Speak Louder than Words

Essential Workers Deserve More Than a Thank You



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DPCC

DEMOCRATIC POLICY & COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE
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Executive Summary

Essential workers are treating our sick, keeping our streets clean and safe, providing food for our tables, stocking the shelves at our grocery stores and pharmacies, caring for our children and seniors, delivering essential supplies and medications, and so much more.

As we continue to fight COVID-19 in our communities, essential workers – more than 40 percent of whom are people of color – are going above and beyond to ensure that our most basic needs are met. These workers have had our backs – we must ensure that we have theirs.

These workers deserve more than a “thank you” — they deserve action.

President Trump and Mitch McConnell are refusing to provide essential workers the hazard pay they have earned and the safe workplaces they deserve.

The importance of workplace safety standards and protections will only grow as states begin to reopen their economies and more people head back to work.

Senate Democrats have responded by proposing the **HEROES Fund** on April 7. The House of Representatives also took action by passing a HEROES fund on May 15. It would provide premium pay to essential front-line workers in recognition of the great personal sacrifices they have made to keep the country running and as an incentive to stay on the job. And Democrats are leading the fight to ensure that workers are safe on the job with enforceable workplace standards and adequate supplies of protective equipment to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 and protect our communities.

Essential workers are showing up for us every day. It's time for Republicans to join us in showing up for them. The Senate should immediately pass legislation to provide the premium pay and workplace safety protections our essential workers deserve.

What is “Essential Work”?

Over 30 million U.S. workers are employed in sectors that are essential during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ These fields include health care, behavioral health, transportation, emergency response, senior care, child protection, farming, food inspection, package and mail delivery, and so much more. Even before the coronavirus was declared a pandemic, these workers helped to ensure that Americans had essential goods and services every day.

Our essential workers are consistently underpaid and overworked. For example, while grocery stores and convenience stores have been deemed essential businesses that are allowed to stay open, nearly one-third of the employees who restock empty shelves and ensure we all can put food on the table are low-wage workers.²

A study³ by the Center for Economic Policy and Research found that:

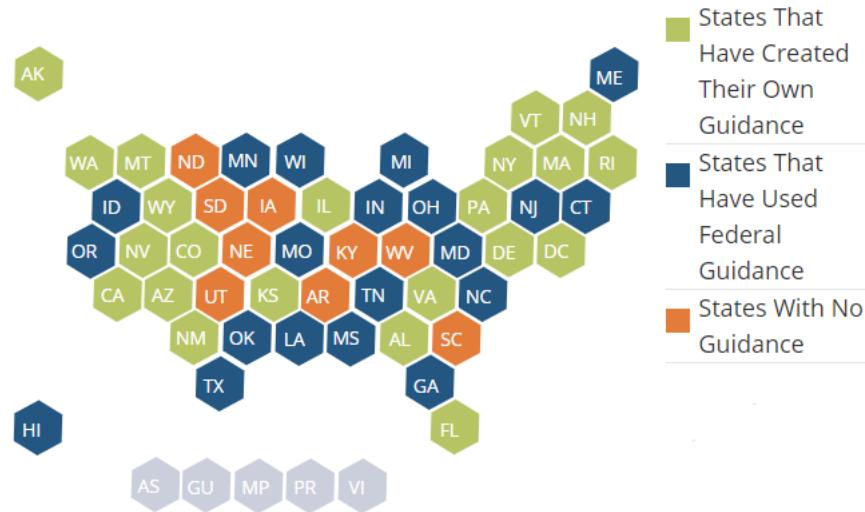
- **Essential workers are disproportionately women.** While about one-half of all workers are women, **nearly two-thirds** (64.4 percent) of frontline workers are women.
- **People of color are overrepresented in many essential industries.** Based on the occupations in the study, **41.2 percent** of frontline workers are black, Hispanic, Asian-American/Pacific Islander, or some category other than white.
- **Essential workers have increased family obligations during the pandemic.** More than one-third of frontline workers (35.9 percent) have a minor child at home. With most schools and daycares closed during the pandemic, these essential workers face the extra costs and difficulties of finding childcare options while continuing to go to work every day to keep us safe and keep basic services going in our communities.

This means that women, people of color, and caregivers are bearing a disproportionate share of the health risk and potential illness burden to keep our communities functional during this crisis.

Click [HERE](#) to see the demographics of essential workers in your state

After state stay-at-home orders went into effect, 42 states issued some form of guidance on what sectors were considered “essential.” Of those 42 states, 20 states deferred to the federal definitions developed by the [U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency \(CISA\)](#).⁴

Click [here](#) to see state by state guidelines on essential workers:



In addition to the varying definitions of essential work, workplace safety requirements also vary by industry and by state. This has resulted in a patchwork of policies, leaving essential workers vulnerable to unsafe workplaces.

Figure 1 COVID-19-Related Workplace Safety Procedures (by industry)

Share of workers who reported that their workplace implemented enhanced cleaning or protective measures in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

	Cleaning	Gloves Available	Gloves Required	Masks Available	Masks Required
Big-box superstore	67%	46%	12%	16%	6%
Department store	48%	41%	10%	15%	3%
Retail store	69%	57%	12%	24%	6%
Grocery Store	68%	55%	12%	24%	7%
Restaurant	58%	59%	29%	9%	4%
Fast food	58%	55%	30%	4%	4%
Coffee shop	63%	57%	33%	5%	4%
Hotel or motel	48%	72%	32%	40%	10%
Warehouse	41%	49%	10%	17%	5%
Fulfillment center	67%	56%	7%	14%	12%
Delivery vehicle	26%	30%	5%	10%	5%
Convenience store or gas station	59%	29%	0%	5%	2%
Drugstore or pharmacy	75%	65%	13%	35%	15%

Data collected in March and April 2020

Source: [Vox](#)

Here is How COVID-19 Has Impacted

Some Essential Sectors:

Health Care Workers

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting enormous strain on our frontline health care workers. The experiences of nurses, doctors, pharmacists, home health aides, mental health workers, and other health care providers across the country paint a harrowing picture of their daily fight to keep people across the country safe and healthy. Roughly 16.7 million health care workers in the United States are considered essential and make up about a third of the essential workforce.⁵

In the health care field, women make up the majority of essential workers (76 percent).⁶ Additionally, health care workers are among the most at-risk groups during the pandemic, as they spend hours in close contact with COVID-19 patients, often without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).⁷ As of June 8, COVID-19 infected over 71,768 health care workers and killed 375. The true number is estimated to be much higher, as healthcare personnel status was only available for 21 percent of coronavirus cases and 56.5 percent of recorded deaths.⁸

Additionally, as of May 12, 84 percent of U.S. nurses had not been tested.⁹

In addition to the risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19 as a result of exposure to their patients, health care workers are also at increased risk for other illnesses and stressors. Before the pandemic, nurses, doctors, and other health care providers reported higher rates of depression, burnout, and suicide compared to the rest of the population.¹⁰ Now these essential workers face unprecedented patient counts, longer hours, a scarcity of supplies, and other pandemic-related stressors that take a massive toll on their mental health.¹¹ Experts believe that health care workers are at an extremely high risk of developing a behavioral health condition or having a pre-existing behavioral health condition worsen under the strain of the COVID-19 response.¹²

Outside the Hospitals

COVID-19 is exacerbating existing strains on health care providers outside of the hospital setting as well. For example, behavioral health clinics are struggling to keep their doors open, with two out of three centers reporting that they can only survive financially for three months or less under current conditions.¹³ Community health centers also face increased financial need and funding insecurity. Their workers' stress is compounded by job insecurity.

Additionally, prior to COVID-19, job turnover in nursing homes was extremely high compared to other health care professions due to low salaries and intense working conditions. These workers, the majority of whom are women of color, are now on the front lines of the pandemic providing care for older residents. A third of deaths in the U.S. have been nursing home residents or workers.¹⁴

A cadre of home health professionals help ensure that over 2.5 million older adults and people with disabilities live at home and safely self-isolate. This workforce, which provides skilled nursing care and daily living services, is critical to keeping people out of congregate settings during the pandemic – settings that have experienced among the highest rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths.¹⁵ Home care workers are among the lowest paid, and women of color also make up the largest percentage of the workforce.¹⁶

REMEMBERING DR. JAMES A. MAHONEY

Dr. James A. Mahoney, who passed away from COVID-19, served as a physician in the intensive care unit at the University Medical Center in Downtown Brooklyn SUNY Downstate Medical Center for nearly four decades, caring for patients through the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the crack epidemic, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and Hurricane Sandy. He skipped early retirement to treat patients in his neighborhood during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Mahoney was an inspiration to all he worked with, especially residents and patients of color.



Source: [New York Times](#)

Lack of Personal Protective Equipment

Experts also worry about the lack of PPE and poor dissemination of information. [A report](#) on the lack of PPE for health care providers published by the HHS Office of Inspector General in March said that, “fear and uncertainty were taking an emotional toll on staff, both professionally and personally.” Hospital employees, from cafeteria staff to health care providers, have also raised concerns about the lack of notification of exposure to the virus.¹⁷ Uncertainty around exposure may lead to increased stress for employees who do not work directly with COVID-19 patients and may be unaware of whether they have come into contact with infected individuals.

Other essential health care workers like custodial staff or food service employees are also at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19, yet are often forced to go without the PPE they need to stay safe.¹⁸ Their wages are often less than other medical professionals, and they may not have access to paid leave or other benefits. However, hospitals depend on these workers to keep operations running so doctors and nurses can effectively treat patients.

Retail Goods and Service Workers

The ongoing spread of COVID-19 has forced governors and local leaders to shutter non-essential businesses. However, convenience stores, gas stations, and grocery stores have stayed open to provide the public with food, medicine, fuel, and other necessities. The workers who restock empty shelves, operate the cash register, and interact with customers every day have become heroes to us all.

However, many of the workers who have put their lives on the line so we can put gas in our cars and food on the dinner table struggle to do the same for themselves and their families. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research, approximately one-third of all supermarket and convenience store workers are low-wage workers.¹⁹

At the start of this pandemic, many employers, including large chains like Kroger, Target, Walmart, CVS, Whole Foods, Starbucks, and Costco, announced they would provide temporary raises to employees forced to stay on job. While these bonuses are welcomed, many were far too small and employers have ended or are ready to end these monetary bonuses, leaving the nearly 7 million workers in grocery, convenience, and drug stores without premium pay throughout the duration of the public health emergency.²⁰

KRISTINE HOLTHAM, KROGER EMPLOYEE

In addition to a lack of premium pay, frontline workers in grocery, convenience, and drug stores are at the whims of their employers, who have not been federally required to implement social distancing measures or provide PPE, or implement other safety measures. Grocery store workers are also at the mercy of customers who may choose not to wear masks, which are known to decrease the chances of person-to-person transmission of COVID-19. The lack of clear and enforceable workplace standards has led to unnecessary loss of life. According to the United Food and Commercial Workers union, COVID-19 has infected 10,000 of its members and claimed the lives of at least 68.²¹

The Trump Administration should value the contributions of these frontline workers in grocery stores. However, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which has the authority to issue emergency workplace standards to combat the spread of COVID-19, has failed in its basic duty to protect workers.

First Responders

Law Enforcement

Across the country, local and state law enforcement officers are at high risk of exposure to coronavirus. Evidence so far suggests that police officers and those they arrest are far more likely to test positive for coronavirus than the general population.²²

In New York City, which has had the most COVID-19 cases in the country, over 1,000 New York City Police Department personnel have tested positive for the coronavirus, according to the New York Times. As of April 2, there were



Kristine Holtham, a Kroger employee in Michigan, recently urged a customer at her store to wear a face mask, reminding him it was for her health and protection as well as his. The customer replied, "I don't give a damn about your health." The incident highlights how workers like her are undervalued and the health and safety issues they face doing their job every day in the midst of this pandemic.

Source: [Detroit Free Press](#)

approximately 55,000 NYPD employees and over 17 percent of the workforce was out sick at the time. As of May 24, the NYPD announced 43 officers had died from COVID-19.²³ In New Jersey, over 160 law enforcement officers have tested positive for COVID-19, and another 1,272 are quarantined.²⁴

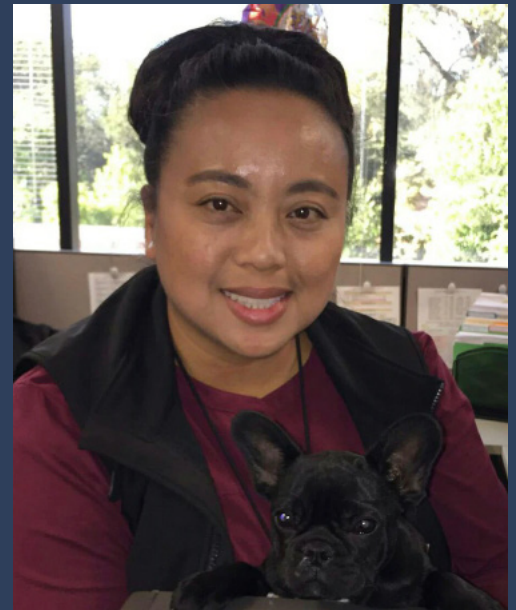
Similarly, Illinois and Michigan are both facing a rise in COVID-19 cases among law enforcement, which are currently most concentrated around large metropolitan cities such as Chicago and Detroit. Over 60 members of the Chicago Police Department have tested positive for COVID-19. In March, over 800 Chicago Police Department employees called out sick on a single day.²⁵ As of May 24, Detroit's mayor announced there were 233 members of the police department in quarantine.²⁶

Many officers are worried about whether they will be able to draw workers' compensation benefits if they get sick, since the coronavirus is not listed in the summary of covered conditions. The need to enforce social distancing is one of the many ways the coronavirus pandemic has changed some aspects of policing over the past few months, compelling officers to drop their routines and find new ways to protect the public and themselves.

Firefighters and EMS Workers

Many firefighters are at the forefront of efforts to help people who may have been exposed to the coronavirus. They are also experiencing the same shortages of PPE that have strained health care facilities across the U.S. As of June 9th, the International Association of Firefighters had 19,500 members self-report exposure to coronavirus.²⁷ The Oakland Fire Department in California has had to tailor their protocol in order to keep themselves and others safe and to conserve PPE. For example, only one firefighter

REMEMBERING MARYLOU ARMER



Marylou Armer, a career police detective in Santa Rosa, California who investigated child sexual assault cases and assisted young survivors, started having flu-like symptoms, including fever, body aches, and chills, around March 9. She wasn't tested for COVID-19 until March 23 and only after being denied three times. She died on March 31 and was honored with a mile-long procession of law enforcement vehicles.

Source: [Washington Post](#)

in latex gloves, a respirator mask, and a surgical gown can enter a residence at a time.²⁸ Emergency medical services (EMS) workers, commonly known as paramedics, have also been exposed to coronavirus as 911 calls have increased. In New York City, the 911 system usually receives approximately 4,000 EMS calls a day. In March, calls to dispatchers almost doubled, a volume not seen since September 11, 2001.²⁹ Paramedics would typically transport anyone with a minor injury to the hospital, but during the coronavirus pandemic, they have encouraged non-critically ill people to stay home. This has forced EMS workers to make impossible decisions regarding who is in enough distress to warrant risking a trip to the emergency room and who is not.

Corrections Officers

Corrections officers also face unique challenges among the law enforcement community in protecting themselves, their families, and the inmates they monitor from the spread of the coronavirus. Crowded conditions and lack of thorough sanitation heightens the risk of coronavirus transmission in correctional facilities, making it all the more important to prevent its introduction.

By early May, more than 5,000 corrections officers had already tested positive for the virus. Correctional officer unions have attributed that to a lack of PPE and access to tests.³⁰ Staff shortages, which were rampant at prisons even before the pandemic, have been greatly exacerbated by efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. That, in turn, increases the risk posed both to other corrections officers who remain on site and to the inmates housed at understaffed facilities.³¹ Corrections officers and inmates alike depend on PPE, support for staffing programs, and improved conditions in prisons to prevent outbreaks from taking hold.

Transit Workers

Public transit workers including bus drivers, subway operators, and support staff perform a fundamental service for their communities – operating transportation systems that get people to work, to medical appointments, and to the grocery store. During the pandemic, many of the nation’s estimated 430,000 transit workers³² have stayed on the job to ensure that other frontline workers can get to their jobs too.

Transit workers are critical to the movement of people throughout our communities, but due to the nature of their work, these dedicated public servants are at serious risk of contracting COVID-19. A typical bus driver comes into contact with a number of riders over the course of a normal workweek, with each interaction increasing their likelihood of contracting COVID-19 and spreading the virus to family members at home. Furthermore, inadequate social distancing on buses, trains, and subways has

put transit workers in difficult positions. Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends maintaining at least 6 feet distance when possible to stop the spread of COVID-19³³, transportation service cuts are making social distancing almost impossible. According to a recent survey³⁴ conducted by Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), 80 percent of union local leaders said that service cuts can increase overcrowding and heighten the risk of infections to workers and the riding public.

In the same survey, nearly two-thirds of ATU local leaders reported that their employer had no pandemic preparedness plan in place prior to the onset of COVID-19, and half of respondents say bus operators are not provided masks and gloves. Among those transit systems that are providing PPE, many don't have enough. This lack of protection for public transit workers has led to the loss of life. In New York City, at least 123 transit workers have lost their lives due to COVID-19.³⁵

Even in the face of these dangers and challenges, hundreds of thousands of transit workers are ready and willing to get Americans to work as the economy begins to open up. Despite all these risks, only 12 percent of transit employers are offering any form of premium pay even though 20 percent of transit workers are struggling to meet their basic needs.³⁶

Postal and Delivery Workers

As of June 8, some 5,600 Postal Service employees were under quarantine from COVID-19. About 900 of the currently quarantined employees had tested positive for the virus, and another 400 were presumed to be positive. Another 2,100 employees who tested

REMEMBERING JASON HARGROVE



On March 20, 2020, Jason Hargrove, a 50-year-old bus driver in Detroit, posted a Facebook Live video highlighting many of these challenges faced by workers on the frontlines. Eleven days later, Hargrove died of complications of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. Hargrove left behind a wife and six children.

Source: [New York Times](#)

positive in the past have recovered and returned to work. Tragically, 67 employees have passed away from the virus.³⁷

While dealing with a higher risk for exposure, Amazon, DHS, FedEx, Purolator, UPS, USPS and other shipping employees are also facing a huge increase in workload as many people turn to ordering items online as an alternative to buying essential supplies like cleaning products, medicines, and food in person. USPS package volume increased 12 percent from the beginning of January to the end of March as many Americans were staying at home. USPS workers are also responsible for making sure the IRS's paper stimulus checks are delivered. This in turn means longer hours with increased demand and fewer staff, as some employees are in quarantine or caring for children who would normally attend school or child care during the day.^{38,39}

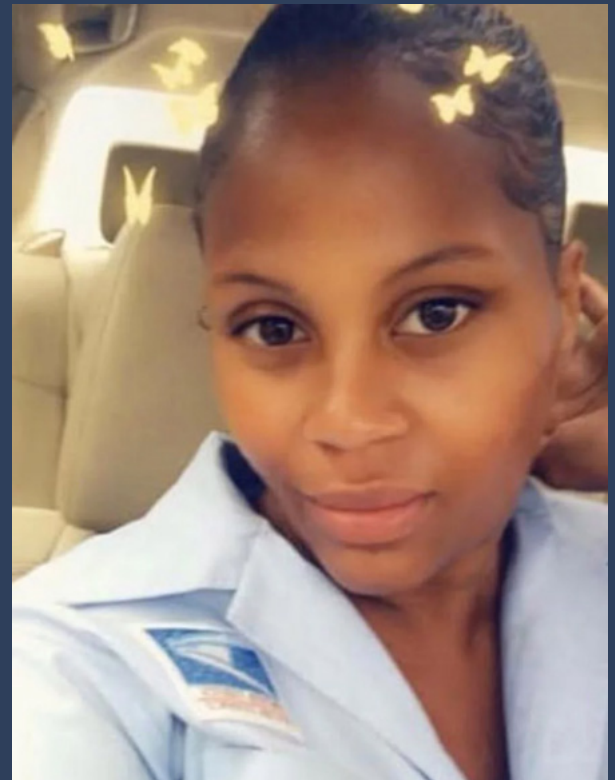
Agriculture and Food Supply

Meatpacking and Food Processing Plants

All across America, COVID-19 outbreaks are occurring at meatpacking and food processing plants, where essential food supply chain employees often work in close quarters. These outbreak clusters are exacerbated by a lack of testing and inadequate PPE. More than 24,000 meat processing plant employees and more than 1,600 food processing plant employees have tested positive for COVID-19⁴⁰; at least 90 of these essential workers have died. This has shuttered or limited capacity at numerous meatpacking plants as both infected employees and those afraid of getting infected do not go to work.

The impacts of these outbreaks are rippling throughout communities, affecting public health

REMEMBERING UNIQUE CLAY



Unique Clay, 31, a mother of three and postal service worker of two years, died on May 5, 2020. She had given birth the week before. She was tested for COVID-19 in her delivery room at the University of Chicago Medical Center. Her results came back positive, but she returned home with her newborn. Within a week, she was having trouble breathing and asked her 11-year-old to get her inhaler. Clay died before her daughter could get it to her. It is still unclear how she was exposed to COVID-19.

Source: [CBS Chicago](#)

and local economies. The increasing number of infections within these facilities has likely contributed to the spread of COVID-19 within the larger communities. It has also had devastating impacts on rural economies. For example, when meatpacking plants close, these communities lose jobs and producers can be left with limited or no options for where to send their market-ready animals.

Farm Workers

America's food supply depends on the work of approximately 2.4 million farm workers.⁴¹ Farm work can include backbreaking labor to pick the fruits and vegetables that Americans consume. While some crops are able to be harvested mechanically, many crops still must be harvested by hand. These workers have been designated as essential workers; however, they lack the protections necessary to safeguard their health during this pandemic.

While many farmers have taken steps to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19, farm workers are particularly at risk due to factors like close housing quarters, carpooling, traveling around the country for work, and using shared farm equipment. In addition, a lack of PPE increases the risk of exposure and spread of COVID-19, as well as puts farm workers at risk when applying pesticides.

Food Assistance

Frontline workers also include those who are packaging and preparing food for hungry Americans. Workers in food banks and schools have been working around the clock to ensure that children, families, and individuals have access to nutritious food. Food banks across the country have been experiencing a 70 percent increase in visitors, with some food banks seeing as much as a 600 percent increase.⁴² Many also are facing reduced donations from private sources and fewer volunteers.

Almost 30 million children rely upon school meals for nutrition each year⁴³, and with schools closed, many students are at risk of food insecurity, which impacts their ability to learn and grow. School districts are continuing to serve meals and are stretching their budgets and putting the health of their employees at risk in order to feed children under these challenging circumstances.



Senate Democrats are Committed to Honoring Our Heroes with More Than Just Applause

Essential workers deserve increased wages that reflect the sacrifices they and their families have been making. While they have been working for us, they still need to put food on their own tables and roofs over the heads of their own families.

Instead of putting workers first, Mitch McConnell and Senate Republicans' top priority is protecting big business interests by pushing liability shields that strip workers of their rights and critical safety protections.



COVID-19 HEROES Fund

Congressional Democrats have are fighting for a **COVID-19 Heroes Fund** to provide pandemic premium pay to reward essential workers. This fund would provide a **\$10,000 premium pay increase for essential frontline workers.**

The “Heroes Fund” would federally fund premium pay to help support frontline workers, including health care professionals, workers at grocery stores, home care workers, first responders, pharmacists, postal workers, and other essential workers.

The COVID-19 Every Worker Protection Act

The **COVID-19 Every Worker Protection Act (S.3677)**, sponsored by Senator Tammy Baldwin would direct the Department of Labor to fulfill its basic duty to protect workers by issuing an Emergency Temporary Standard (ETS) within 7 days of enactment to protect health care and other employees from exposure to the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, followed by a final rule. The bill also includes anti-retaliation language to protect workers from retaliation for reporting infection control problems to their employer, public entities, or on social media, and protects workers from retaliation for using their own PPE if the employer is not providing it.

Before issuing an emergency standard, the COVID-19 Every Worker Protection Act would require DOL to consult with the CDC, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, employer organizations, unions, and professional associations to ensure that standards are based on sound science and meet the needs of workers.

Additionally, this bill recognizes the ongoing shortages of PPE and would provide OSHA with discretion to not issue citations to hospitals and other covered employers who fail to provide the necessary PPE if they show that they are making good faith efforts to secure the equipment and are implementing alternative protective measures.

The Pandemic Heroes Compensation Act

The **Pandemic Heroes Compensation Act (S.3755)**, sponsored by Senator Tammy Duckworth would create a new fund to provide compensation for injuries to any individual, or their families, who were deemed an essential worker, required to leave their home to perform services and became ill or died as a result of the deadly coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Modeled after the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund (VCM), this bill would provide support to essential workers affected by COVID-19 across the country by providing critical financial assistance to help them with medical costs, loss of employment, loss of business, replacement services, and burial costs.

The Pandemic Responder Service Award Act

The **Pandemic Responder Service Award Act (S.3763)**, sponsored by Senator Bob Casey would give healthcare workers on the front lines of this pandemic, including in-home and behavioral healthcare workers, an annual award of up to 100 percent of the cost of in-state tuition at a public university (\$10,000 in 2020) for four years.

This money could be used to pursue a college degree or recognized credential and pay off existing student loan debt. Awards can also be used to invest in a business start-up, buying a home, or boost retirement accounts. Recipients could withdraw as much as \$1,000 per year for emergency purposes, and the money could also be transferred to a children's savings accounts for direct dependents of pandemic responders for the purposes of college savings or long term asset building.

***It's time to let America's essential workers
know we have their backs!***

Endnotes

- 1 <https://cepr.net/a-basic-demographic-profile-of-workers-in-frontline-industries/>
- 2 <https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-Frontline-Workers.pdf>
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