

April 20, 2020 Press Conference Statement by Christine Neumann-Ortiz, Executive Director Voces de la Frontera, on the needs of Essential Workers during the pandemic.

This is a critical moment for everyone in this country.

The pandemic is proof of how interconnected we are as a society and the importance of policies that ensure the wellbeing of all. The virus doesn't discriminate based on immigration status or other distinctions, and neither should relief efforts.

While Trump pushes to have people go back to work, the fact is that for millions of low income and immigrant workers the economy didn't close, and they've been forced to work and risk exposure without compensation and without proper safety.

Before we begin re-opening business, we must ensure that essential workers and their families are safe at their jobs, are treated fairly if they are sick, or need to self-quarantine if they or someone at their worksite catches the virus.

That's why in recent weeks Voces de la Frontera has been fighting to ensure proper on-site practices and appropriate treatment for those who are feeling of getting sick or have had someone in their workplace infected.

Earlier this month, we were contacted by workers from two meatpacking plants in Green Bay: JBS Packerland and American Foods. When they contacted us, the virus was already in both their families.

We wrote to both companies on April 13, elevating the concerns and needs of workers at both plants, which were similar:

1. Provide masks for all workers
2. Ensure that there is 6 feet of distance in all departments and production lines
3. Check the temperature of all workers coming into the plant, not at random
4. Inform co-workers when there is a positive case of coronavirus, so that co-workers can self-quarantine for 14 days and protect their families to ensure they are not sick or exposing others.
5. Testing for all workers exposed to someone at work immediately no later than 5 days from today's date, to avoid infecting others.
6. Ensure paid sick says for those that are sick, those that have tested positive for COVID-19 or are forced to self-quarantine. Workers should not fear losing points leading to termination or not having enough accrued paid time off to comply with the emergency health restrictions to contain the spread of the coronavirus and save lives.

We wrote to both companies as well Governor Evers, Lt. Governor Barnes, the Wisconsin Secretary of Health Andrea Palm, the OSHA Appleton Area Office, the State Attorney General Josh Kaul, Green Bay Mayor Eric Genrich and we reached out to UFCW 1413 that is the union that represents workers at JBS Packerland. Voces also filed a complaint with the OSHA regional office on the behalf of workers at both companies.

These employer specific letters followed an open letter sent to Gov. Evers, and Senate Majority leader Fitzgerald and Assembly majority speaker Voss, elevating the needs of workers during this pandemic.

On behalf of working families, we seek a coordinated statewide system for occupational safety and health enforcement; access for workers to workers compensation when they contract COVID-19; paid sick leave for those afflicted; and enforcement of the closure of non-essential businesses to protect workers against exposure. The establishment of a bilingual hotline for workers or their representatives to call in and seek additional clarification on the "Safer at Home" order, and enforce its provisions against non-essential businesses, so that workers who wish to shelter at home may do so without fear of retaliation or loss of employment.

In cases of essential workers, when a worker is sick, workers should be protected from being threatened with dismissal if they try to stay home in accordance with state and federal pandemic guidelines.

Copies of those letters are available on our web site: vdlf.org.

We were able to have a follow-up meeting with the Governor's office on April 17.

And yesterday JBS Packerland and the United Food and Commercial Workers announced an agreement for an enhanced protection package for about 1,000 workers.

We applaud that progress by the UFCW and JBS Packerland, while at the same time emphasizing that the necessary current health protocols of physical distancing of 6 feet and other measures need to be implemented immediately. We cannot wait for new materials to separate workers on the lines to arrive before taking immediate action to protect the lives of workers and their families. For example, slowing down production to create more physical distance on production lines.

Voces is not just an immigrant rights organization, but also represents working people of all backgrounds-black, brown, white, Asian, indigenous.

On behalf of all these people and their families we are continuing to press for fair treatment of all workers in this time of pandemic.

We urge workers who don't feel safe at work to speak out at their worksite, contact their union, if they have one, or contact Voces de la Frontera in order to join the struggle to protect the health and lives of essential workers and their families during this covid19 pandemic.

At today's press conference we'll hear from four people with intimate knowledge of the situation.

Raquel Alvarado who works at American Foods and has tested positive for the virus.

Dora Flores who is the daughter of a worker at JBS who has the virus and is in critical condition.

Jake Bailey, Production and Packing House Director for United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1473.

Ramon Argandona, a hospital worker, Voces board member, and representative of the Service Employees International Union.

After they've made their statements, we'll take questions from the press.