

Testimony for the Joint Committee on Coronavirus Response

Jeff Gritz

March 20, 2020

Co-Chair Roblan, Co-Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Special Joint Committee on Coronavirus Response, submitted on behalf of the Oregon & Southern Idaho District Council of Laborers (LiUNA). LIUNA members conduct highly skilled and physically demanding work in various settings throughout Oregon's construction industry, including building commercial structures, schools and hospitals and also serve in the public sector, providing front-line essential services that help keep our local regions functioning smoothly. As the COVID-19/Coronavirus public health crisis continues to escalate across our communities, it is increasingly apparent that the spread of the virus and related closure actions are likely to have an adverse impact on our state's thriving construction industry as well as result in a substantial strain on vital local services and programs that the public relies on.

Employers, government and policy makers have an urgent responsibility to protect workers in these critical sectors from financial hardship and to help ensure that just policies are in place such that individuals aren't forced to choose between their own economic security and adhering to urgent public health imperatives. Restrictions that our state and localities have imposed to mitigate the spread of the virus have been vitally important to protect community health but are also resulting in adverse impacts on working families. This is, in part, due to workplace policy shortcomings that may leave workers particularly vulnerable in both the construction industry and within local governments, as the economic effects of the virus further intensify in the days to come.

Imperative Construction Industry Concerns

- Large jobs with numerous Craft Laborers and other building trades workers could be disrupted in the near term. It will be important to closely monitor this situation and ensure that these workers have sufficient access to unemployment insurance, particularly under the state's new temporary Unemployment Insurance rules recently released.
- Lack of access to existing paid sick leave benefits within the industry and union construction workers are currently exempted from the state's paid sick leave law.
- Unemployment Insurance benefits running out and the $\frac{2}{3}$ replacement wage being insufficient for the projected amount of time workers could be impacted by COVID-19
- Should workers contract the virus at work, they should be eligible for Workers' Compensation, rules should be updated to reflect COVID-19 infection hazards.
- Downstream disruptions in the construction market when there may be reduced available investment capital, stemming from the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on our economy and/or less impetus for funding development to help spur continuing projects that sustain family wage jobs.
- Disruptions due to public health concerns and related jobsite closures.
- Industry work is by nature intermittent and jobs vary greatly in their duration. Employment can be volatile and easily subject to fluidity in the market.
- Construction workers are paid hourly, typically receive compensation on a weekly-basis and live paycheck to paycheck. Dislocation resulting from the virus spread could quickly cause families to fall behind on paying housing costs, essential utilities and obtaining adequate nutrition.
- Worksites may tend to be fairly exposed to the elements and high volumes of workers can often find themselves working and interacting in close proximity to one another, making social distancing to reduce the rate of infection difficult and enabling environments that may

detrimentally impact ongoing efforts to “flatten the curve” and slow the community spread of the virus.

- Telecommuting is inherently not a feasible option, due to the nature of the work and industry.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) - it is not clear that effective or consistent measures are in place to ensure that construction workers are provided appropriate protective safety equipment to reduce exposure to infection at worksites. Although face masks and other protective items are not uncommon for certain trades workers to wear as per the nature of their jobs, no public health emergency equipment standards appear to now be in place that protect all construction workers.
- There will be a need to protect employers from significantly increased rates and penalties when employees make claims for unemployment due to reduced hours or jobsite closures.

Imperative Local Municipality Worker Concerns

- Many non-essential employees who may be sent home in order to social distance do not perform work that allows for telecommuting, it is critical these workers have access to essential economic supports and/or paid leave programs in the event that they will not receive pay for this time away.
- Numerous workers may be performing temporary, part-time or seasonal roles to support public service needs and thus may lack access to paid sick time or substantial UI benefits, this is why we support a minimum unemployment insurance payment, because the lookback process for these workers will not result in adequate pay.
- Numerous workers serve in roles that maintain regular interaction with the public, necessitating the need for personal protective equipment to be provided to prevent infection.
- Maintaining regular lines of communication between state leaders and local government officials will be essential to best coordinate crisis updates, identify gaps in areas of need being discussed and align shared strategy to support our public sector workforce providing aid during this emergency.
- Some local municipalities are likely to experience more immediate financial hardship to support their workforces and maintain needed services. The state should consider allocating emergency funds directly to local governments to provide relief and help prevent the needs of this crisis from more rapidly compounding, should layoffs occur, and front-line support community services be disrupted at this level.

Proactive & Longer-Term Considerations

- Local public service workers represent a wide array of expertise and skill that could be rapidly repurposed to help meet the urgent needs of our communities and respond to this crisis.
 - This workforce includes professionals trained in first-aid, professional cleaners with training in hazardous material and waste removal, childcare, customer service and intake services as well as supply transportation (CDL drivers).
 - As an alternative to avoid potential layoffs in this time of crisis, state and local governments should consider partnering with this workforce to develop innovative ways in which they could be rapidly retrained and redirected into emergency positions to provide urgently needed aid through this pandemic.
- The state should consider partnering with LiUNA, construction trades union allies and industry groups to evaluate emergency infrastructure needs and the ability to deploy this highly trained workforce for building medical care facilities (temporary or permanent) and other structures, to augment our capacity to both respond to this crisis and ensure patients have needed access to treatment, going forward.

- The state should consider allocating available capital investments to support long-term infrastructure projects to help keep construction trades workers employed and this industry helping to stimulate our economy, as recovery from this crisis ensues.
- Provide emergency support for mortgage, rental and for families to access nutritional assistance.
- Prioritize ways to leverage state and regional transportation project investments to keep construction work moving during a current period of less congested highways and roads.
- Formulating strategic workforce investment and public works programs should be explored as an essential component to aid economic recovery as our state and nation looks to rebuild from this crisis.
 - Consider collaborating with state registered construction apprenticeship programs to scale up and expand pathways for dislocated or displaced workers to access debt-free skilled training toward family-wage employment in this industry.

Thank you for your consideration of these important worker concerns within our industries and your continuing leadership during this urgent time of crisis.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeff Gritz", written in a cursive style.

Jeff Gritz, Business Manager/Secretary Treasurer
Oregon & Southern Idaho District Council of Laborers