



Testimony for House Interim Committee on Business and Labor
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May 27, 2020

Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of SEIU Oregon's State Council. The State Council represents the interest of members of SEIU Locals 49 and 503 - more than 85,000 Oregonians who provide valuable services in state and local government, non-profit agencies and care facilities, healthcare, security, custodial and service industries.

These Oregon workers are on the frontlines caring for our communities and helping to mitigate the effects of and fight against COVID-19. In doing so, they are facing an unprecedented workplace safety crisis. To ensure the safety of our workforce and the public as we reopen and return to work, we need to be confident that everyone has equal access to basic personal and economic protections, including confidence in the safety protocols being taken at work, training, testing, treatment, and core economic support. And we must work together to ensure Oregon's response is applied equally to every Oregonian regardless of how old they are, the color of their skin, where they were born, or how much money they make.

Personal Protective Equipment

Since the beginning of this crisis, access to personal protective equipment (PPE) has been a challenge for Oregon's frontline workers, especially those working in a hospital setting, long term care, providing in home care, and interacting directly with the public. While we have made some progress in this area, more needs to be done to ensure a process for strong, meaningful, and transparent oversight of PPE use and reuse as hospitals resume nonurgent care and other sectors of the workforce return to work.

For example, hospitals have been encouraged to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for use and reuse of PPE. Antidotely, we have heard from members working in large hospitals that the limits of these guidelines are being pushed to include extended use of a single mask or other piece of PPE for the entire duration of their shift, including caring for multiple patients receiving different treatments of care. As a state, we must have a meaningful plan to intervene and ensure this is not common or accepted practice.

Oregon's expectation for adequate PPE for hospital workers, long term care workers, and in home care workers should be a new mask for each patient, home visit, and work activities to support their client's daily living, like grocery shopping.

Workplace Safety

As the state begins the process of reopening, it is important that, where possible, employers continue to encourage employees to telecommute and establish proper social distancing measures where telecommuting isn't possible.

Reopening sectors of our economy does not mean relaxing current remote work and social distancing measures in the workplaces. Rather, we should continue to push to improve these practices. Employers, including public employers, should continue to explore innovative ways to allow workers to safely and securely work from home for the foreseeable future.

Similarly, workers who provide critical services to Oregonians in need and therefore, interact in person with the public must be protected as they do so. That means the individuals like those working at the Department of Human Services administering SNAP benefits and inspecting nursing homes, work Oregonians are relying on now more than ever, need assurances that social distancing will be practiced in their workplace. They, and other workers like them, need assurances that they will be provided with masks, hand sanitizer and expectations will be set to ensure that members of the public who enter their workplace will be asked to wear a mask and supplied with one if they do not have their own.

We have to implement consistent and reliable workplace policies, like mask policies, social distancing and sanitation, to ensure there is not an outbreak in worksite or state building where the public is often present. Such an outbreak would cause harm to the workers exposed and the vital services they're providing for Oregonians during this time of need. Imagine if an unemployment call center suddenly has to shut down?

Building janitorial workers are essential in keeping spaces clean and healthy, permitting others to safely deliver services and do their work. Janitorial staff will need updated procedures, staffing levels, and training to safeguard public and employee trust. Janitors working in larger buildings downtown Portland reported their employer's adaptation to COVID-19 was limited to circulating information in English, which Spanish-speaking janitors could not understand, and switching to a new cleaning chemical, without substantive training on its use.

Training

Working during a pandemic means establishing new and enhanced standards for workers and the public they interact with. This requires an investment in training. Investments in training with labor standards should be made to ensure workers have the tools to adapt to safely working in a post-COVID environment and that Oregon has the workforce we need to respond and recover from this crisis and prevent future ones.

For example, all long-term care workers, hospital workers, and janitors should receive paid standardized training to recognize, prevent, and reduce risk of spreading infectious disease.

Testing

Ensuring a safer workplace during the pandemic means increased access to testing. This is another area where good progress has been made, but more work needs to be done. There should be broad access to testing and workers who are at high risk of exposure on the job should be tested regularly at no cost.

While the state has built a coverage policy, gaps still exist. Participating insurance carriers are participating on an opt-in basis, which we applaud. Where legal, the state should require carriers to cover the cost of COVID-19 tests when administered in line with CDC guidelines, as well as immunizations (once available). In the case of ERISA covered plans, the state should encourage carriers' continued participation. The state should maintain a list of carriers and employers who opt-in and those who opt-out.

Job Security and Paid Time

Job security is a critical component necessary to ensure the safety of workers and the public. Without appropriate job protections and economic support, workers will be put in the untenable position of having to choose between their health and their family's economic security, and in many cases the health of patients or members of the public they serve.

In order to ensure workplace safety, we have to be able to provide protected, paid time off to workers as we increase contact tracing and testing. Workers cannot be put into a situation where they test positive for COVID-19 or are asked to quarantine without access to paid and protected sick time. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), which extended paid sick leave and family and medical leave for employees of businesses with fewer than 500 employees, with a notably exemption for some of the most at risk - health care providers, leaves too many Oregonians without access to 80 hours of the paid and protected leave a worker would need to safely quarantine if exposed or recover.

SEIU looks forward to continuing to work with you and the Governor's team to better understand exactly who falls in these gaps and how we can ensure protected paid leave for those who need it through a strategic investment of Oregon's Coronavirus Relief Funds.

We believe you have an opportunity to leverage public grants, loans, and dollars to incentivize worker protections, quality benefits, hiring back displaced workers, and housing supports, and we encourage you to do so.

For too long our economy has left frontline workers behind. The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the structural cracks in our system that working people fall through. As we work to center working people in response to this crisis, we must also fight to ensure we build a plan for workplace safety and recovery that fundamentally restructures our economy to be more equitable and fair.

Now is the time for big and bold investments and strategic changes in a COVID-19 response and recovery that will rebuild our economy to work for working families.