

March 20th, 2020

Members of the U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative,

The nation is now on the precipice of disaster within our health care system. As the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak grows exponentially, our health care system is struggling under the weight of the pandemic. We write to you today to implore you to take urgent action to ensure that nurses, other health care workers, first responders, and other at-risk workers are immediately guaranteed the workplace protections they need to safely care for patients during the COVID-19 outbreak. Because this coronavirus does not respect state lines, we strongly believe that private and public sector workers at high risk of exposure must be protected regardless of whether they live in a state with federal OSHA jurisdiction. The effective slowing and containing of the spread of COVID-19 depends on these workers being protected.

Right now, the health and safety of frontline workers across the country is being jeopardized because they do not have the personal protective equipment (PPE) that is a significant and necessary part of preventing exposure to the virus. When health care workers are exposed to the virus, their families, their patients, and the larger community are put at greater risk of infection. It also means skilled care givers should be forced to quarantine, taking them away from the bedside. Many workers are currently being told to continue working, even if they have been exposed to the virus. Ensuring that nurses and other health care workers have the correct PPE is a fundamental part of slowing the spread of the outbreak.

Unions are receiving numerous reports from our members across the country of dangerous working conditions, including:

- Hospital management withholding access to PPE from nurses and health care workers who are caring for confirmed or potential COVID-19 patients.
- Hospital management telling nurses and other health care workers they are not allowed to use N95 respirators or other respirators when caring for potential or confirmed COVID-19 patients.
- Hospital management threatening disciplinary action when nurses and other health care workers wear respirators or masks at work.
- Hospital management directing workers to reuse N95 respirators and surgical masks during their shift, or over the course of multiple shifts.
- Hospital management directing workers to use expired N95 respirators and other expired equipment.

All of these actions are endangering nurses and other health care workers, their patients, their families, and their communities. These actions are irresponsible, and the federal government must intervene immediately in order to protect our health care workforce and contain the outbreak.

We urge Congress to immediately mandate that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to protect health care workers and other at-risk workers from COVID-19 infection. It is also critical that Congress does not allow the hospital and healthcare industry to avoid enforcement of this standard.

We applaud Chairman Bobby Scott for introducing H.R. 6139, the COVID-19 Health Care Worker Protection Act. We urge that this bill in its entirety be included in the third package being considered by Congress. We reject any changes in the language of this bill (as introduced on March 9th, 2020) that would allow the hospital industry to avoid enforcement of the standard.

Sincerely,

Bonnie Castillo,
Executive Director, National Nurses United

Richard L. Trumka
President, AFL-CIO

Paul Shearon
President, International Federation of
Professional and Technical Engineers

Melissa Matos
National Health & Safety Director,
Communications Workers of America (CWA)

Maureen May, RN
President, Pennsylvania Association of Staff
Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP)

United Food and Commercial Workers
International Union

Randi Weingarten
President, American Federation of Teachers

International Union of Bricklayers and Allied
Craftworkers

Thomas Conway
International President, United Steelworkers
(USW)

National Education Association

International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Robert Martinez, Jr.
President, International Association of
Machinists and Aerospace Workers

International Union, United Automobile,
Aerospace & Agricultural Implement Workers of
America (UAW)