



**House Committee on Oversight and Reform**  
**No Worker Left Behind: Supporting Essential Workers**  
June 10, 2020  
12:00 PM, Video Conference

Purpose

*The purpose of this hearing was to examine the health and economic burdens shouldered by essential workers and their loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Members Present

Chairman Maloney, Ranking Member Hice, Representatives Gomez, Norton, Gosar, Lynch, Higgins, Connolly, Massie, Wasserman-Shultz, Grothman, Sarbanes, Comer, Lawrence, Gibbs, Speier, Roy, Plaskett, Miller, Pressley, Green, Tlaib, Porter, and Keller

Witnesses

**John Costa**, International President, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)

**Anthony Perrone**, International President, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union

**Bonnie Castillo**, Executive Director, National Nurses United, California Nurses Association, and National Nurses Organizing Committee

**Eneida Becote**, Wife of Edward Becote, essential worker who died from COVID-19

**Clint Odom**, Senior Vice President for Policy and Advocacy, Executive Director, Washington Bureau, National Urban League

**Avik Roy**, President, Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity

Opening Statements

**(0:25) Chairman Maloney** said that not everyone faces the same risk of contracting COVID-19. Frontline workers are at a higher risk for getting sick when compared to other ‘non-essential’ workers. The federal government has a responsibility to protect these workers and prepare them to respond to future public health emergencies. Congress must ensure that financial resources are available in the event that an essential worker or family member gets sick. Essential workers are more likely to be paid lower wages and less likely to have employment benefits like paid sick leave and teleworking. Still, they are asked to go to work every day. These workers will need significant financial help in the future. Many of these workers are already at risk of economic instability. Furthermore, individuals of color are more likely to work these essential front line jobs. A thank you is not enough. The federal government needs to provide help to essential workers.

**(7:00) Ranking Member Hice** said that now is the time to extend gratitude and thanks to all essential workers on the front lines. It is disturbing that during these challenging times, the American left is trying to defund the police. While it remains true that we must right the wrongs in this country, vilifying police officers will not lead to progress. Police officers are essential front line workers who put themselves in harm’s way every day. Over 100 police officers across the nation have died as a result of COVID-19. It is important to remember that the goal of the shutdown was to flatten the curve and prevent the healthcare system from being overwhelmed. These goals have been achieved. It is true that the Trump Administration is making the nation

more safe and more prepared than ever. The loss of economic activity will have ripple effects that last for a significant amount of time.

### Testimony

**(17:05) Ms. Becote** said that her husband passed away after contracting COVID-19 while working at a hospital. In just a matter of days, her husband's health rapidly declined. This did not give her family the appropriate amount of time to plan and grieve. Ms. Becote is now left on her own to support her family both emotionally and financially. Victims of COVID-19 must be supported during these difficult times. The burden that family members bare will have ripple effects through the economy. Furthermore, there needs to be greater access to testing. Her husband was only able to get tested once his symptoms were severe enough to place him in the ICU.

**(22:10) Mr. Costa** said that the ATU strongly supports the Pandemic Heroes Compensation Act (H.R. 6909). The ATU is the largest transit union in the nation. Members of the ATU have not had the luxury of working from home. They are on the front lines every day and have faced high rates of infection and death. The union is concerned that as the economy opens, the risk will only get worse. There is a significant need for more personal protective equipment (PPE) as workers do not have adequate access to masks and other protective equipment. The ATU believes that they cannot count on the government to fulfill their needs and have started to create their own protective equipment. The committee needs to make a serious commitment to protect all front line workers.

**(25:55) Mr. Perrone** said that food workers have had to bear a large burden during this pandemic. Every day, food workers put their lives at risk. It is not about political party for food workers, it is simply about getting the job done. Without essential food 'workers, all Americans would struggle to put food on the table. If they truly are essential, they must be treated as such. While financial compensation cannot bring back those who have been lost, it is an essential first step. America's food supply will never be secured until America's food workers are protected. As long as the virus has not stopped, hero pay should not stop either. Congress must ensure that all working people who are sick or are responsible for the care taking of others must have job protections and paid sick leave. Finally, there must be strong retaliation protections for workers.

**(32:20) Ms. Castillo** said that National Nurses United is the largest nurses' union in the US. Across the country, nurses have been denied the protections they need to protect themselves against contracting COVID-19. The result is a high infection and death rate among nurses. Nurses have been forced to fight with their own hospital administration in order to have access to the appropriate PPE. Much of the PPE that is available for nurses is inadequate and actually increases the risk of transmission. There are no OSHA standards that enforce workplace protections in hospitals during a pandemic; this must change. Furthermore, there is no national medical supply chain that is transparent and efficient. This must also change. Finally, the strategic national stockpile is remarkably under supplied. The United States needs to find a way to fill this stockpile with the adequate level of supplies. It is critical that Congress passes legislation that would protect nurses and front line workers.

**(38:00) Mr. Odom** said that people of color are over represented in the front line essential workforce. The labor provided by people of color insulates other workers from danger and protects the health of the economy. However, despite the value provided by these essential workers, they are not paid anywhere near the right amount. In fact, these jobs are more likely to pay less than other jobs and be categorized as a ‘low-wage’ job. This places an increased burden on black households. Many of these households live below the poverty line. These workers are less likely to have employment benefits. This is especially devastating during a global health crisis. The cost of healthcare is simply far too high. Congress should pass the HEROES Act.

**(43:50) Mr. Roy** said that so many deaths occurred when individuals were transferred from a hospital to a nursing home. A significant number of COVID-19 deaths take place in nursing homes. It does not make sense to send infected individuals into nursing homes. This only makes the entire nursing home situation worse. Furthermore, many people have died as a result of economic disruptions caused by a one size fits all style economic shutdown. These damages have been felt the greatest in communities of color. Unemployment rates are much higher in communities of color. The government-mandated shutdown has only widened the disparities between white and black communities.

#### Questions and Answers

**(49:00) Rep. Gomez** asked if any essential workers have passed away from COVID-19. **All witnesses** said yes. **Rep. Gomez** asked what the economic burden looks like for communities of color during this pandemic. **Mr. Odom** said that it is a disaster. There are many households where many workers live under the same roof. This means that when one worker gets sick, the whole household has to quarantine. **Rep. Gomez** asked if nurses have death benefits. **Ms. Castillo** said no. **Rep. Gomez** asked if transit workers have death benefits. **Mr. Costa** said no.

**(55:00) Ranking Member Hice** asked if action can be taken to hold China accountable. **Mr. Roy** said that he does not know what tools are available to hold China financially accountable. **Ranking Member Hice** asked if China is attempting to steal sensitive medical research from the US. **Mr. Roy** said that he has confidence in the R&D infrastructure in the United States.

**(1:00:32) Rep. Norton** asked about the impact of the virus on bus and train drivers. **Mr. Costa** said that bus drivers are slightly more exposed than train drivers. There needs to be a better filtered system in both transportation vessels. **Rep. Norton** asked if more needs to be done to protect transit workers. **Mr. Costa** said yes.

**(1:07:15) Rep. Gosar** asked what long-term impacts exist as a result of an economic shut down. **Mr. Roy** said there will be an increase in deaths, illness and an overburdened health system. **Rep. Gosar** asked if veterans will be put at risk. **Mr. Roy** said yes. **Rep. Gosar** asked if public officials should be held accountable for the spread misinformation. **Mr. Roy** said yes.

**(1:18:48) Rep. Higgins** asked if there has ever been such a massive demand for PPE. **Ms. Castillo** said that she has never seen this level of demand. **Rep. Higgins** asked about the implications of economic distress among the elderly population. **Mr. Roy** said there are huge implications. There needs to be more support for nursing homes in general.

**(1:25:00) Rep. Connolly** asked if the President encourages people to not wear a mask by himself not wearing a mask. **Mr. Perrone** said that it would be helpful if the President wore a mask during public appearances.

**(1:31:05) Rep. Massie** asked why workers in a meat packing plant are at an increased risk for contracting COVID-19. **Mr. Perrone** said that it has to do with the air volume and humidity. **Rep. Massie** asked if meat workers have enough PPE. **Mr. Perrone** said no, many of these workers have to layer their PPE.

**(1:37:26) Rep. Wasserman-Shultz** asked if nurses who work at the VA have access to PPE. **Ms. Castillo** said that PPE at the VA has been woefully inadequate. **Rep. Wasserman-Shultz** asked if it is a good idea that the President will not use the Defense Production Act to its full capacity. **Ms. Castillo** said no. This has resulted in more death. **Rep. Wasserman-Shultz** asked if Ms. Becote has access to PPE at the hospital. **Ms. Becote** said that she was not considered a priority and did not have PPE initially.

**(1:43:30) Rep. Grothman** asked what can be done to open up hospitals. **Ms. Castillo** said that it is better to prepare and prevent rather than react. There are some hospitals that can begin to start non-elective surgeries and maternal care. If hospitals had more PPE, it would be easier to reopen. **Rep. Grothman** asked if there is too much fiscal spending that will inflate the debt. **Mr. Roy** said that it is a tradeoff. Many businesses will go out of business and they require financial assistance.

**(1:49:40) Rep. Sarbanes** asked what the economic impact has been on transit workers. **Mr. Costa** said that the CARES Act helped a lot to keep the transit systems running. Overall, about 10% of transit jobs have been lost.

**(1:56:30) Rep. Comer** asked how incentives should be designed to encourage people to go back to work. **Mr. Roy** said the additional \$600 a week discourages individuals from returning to work. This is a flawed incentive.

**(2:02:52) Rep. Lawrence** asked what Congress needs to do to address the deep disparities between white communities and communities of color. **Mr. Odom** said that testing in low-income communities needs to increase. In addition, contact tracing in these communities also needs to improve. Finally, there needs to be financial assistance given to minority owned businesses. **Rep. Lawrence** asked how Congress can help companies meet the PPE requirement. **Mr. Odom** said the Defense Production Act needs to be leveraged. There currently is not enough manufacturing happening. **Mr. Perrone** said that PPE needs to be added to the Defense Production Act.

**(2:11:50) Rep. Gibbs** asked if there is evidence to suggest that single use PPE can be sanitized and used again. **Ms. Castillo** said no. The sanitization process compromises the integrity of the product.

**(2:17:20) Rep. Speier** asked if the National Nurses Union has an estimate on the amount of PPE needed. **Ms. Castillo** said no. However, it is known that reusing PPE is not appropriate. Furthermore, it is estimated that the US is not manufacturing adequate levels of PPE.

**(2:24:00) Rep. Roy** asked if it is true that a majority of deaths have occurred in nursing homes. **Mr. Roy** said yes. **Rep. Roy** asked if it is true that a majority of deaths occurred in individuals 65 and older. **Mr. Roy** said yes. **Rep. Roy** asked if elderly people are at a higher risk of flu-caused mortality than younger people. **Mr. Roy** said yes. **Rep. Roy** asked if minority owned businesses are placed at an increased risk for financial burden. **Mr. Roy** said yes.

**(2:29:15) Rep. Plaskett** asked how workers have helped to maintain food supplies. **Mr. Perrone** said that his workers are responsible for stocking shelves and ensuring that the food supply chain is stable. There have been issues, but most of the workers are still on the front line. Without them, there would not be enough food. **Rep. Plaskett** asked how a sudden halt in transportation would impact the ability to fight the virus. **Mr. Costa** said that there would be ripple effects through the economy. It would exacerbate chronic health conditions. **Rep. Plaskett** asked if the death toll would be higher if nurses could not provide such a large share of care. **Ms. Castillo** said yes. **Rep. Plaskett** asked if non-medical employees are essential within a hospital. **Ms. Castillo** said yes.

**(2:34:50) Rep. Miller** asked if decontamination processes are a satisfactory solution until PPE manufacturing can be scaled up. **Ms. Castillo** said no. The structure of the PPE becomes compromised. **Rep. Miller** asked if local economies that are opening up are experiencing success. **Mr. Roy** said yes. Economies are opening up but there has not been a sharp incline in cases.

**(2:40:50) Rep. Pressley** asked how the lack of paid sick leave has impacted communities of color. **Mr. Odom** said that this is creating a crisis. Women of color have to constantly put themselves and their families at risk.

**(2:51:00) Rep. Tlaib** asked what opening the economy means. **Mr. Costa** said that he thinks about the front line workers and how more individuals are going to die.

**(2:59:00) Rep. Porter** asked what kinds of PPE nurses need. **Ms. Castillo** said that nurses need head to toe covering as well as a respirator mask. **Rep. Porter** asked what the implications are of reusing PPE. **Ms. Castillo** said reusing the masks compromises the fit of the mask. **Rep. Porter** asked how often N95 masks are decontaminated. **Ms. Castillo** said that it is dependent on the facility. Close to 30% of nurses have been asked to reuse a mask.

**(3:05:00) Rep. Keller** asked if the economy continues to reopen, will job numbers improve. **Mr. Roy** said yes. **Rep. Keller** asked what strategies can be used to support education efforts. **Mr. Roy** said opening up schools will help children and family members.