

April 28, 2020

Honorable Pete Ricketts
Office of Governor Ricketts
P.O. Box 94848
Lincoln, NE 68509-4848

RE: Continued food production requires critical COVID-19 protections for meat and poultry workers. Community, worker, and public health groups highlight missing protections, offer assistance.

Dear Governor Ricketts,

As community, worker, and public health representatives deeply connected with Nebraska workers and communities across the state, we urge you to address key missing COVID-19 protections for Nebraska's meat and poultry workers – in order to ensure continued food production and to protect working Nebraskans and whole communities.

Maintaining food production requires 6-foot distancing, consistent paid sick leave, and other critical protections to keep workers and communities safe. A failure to institute these protections threatens our food production and our families and communities – as we can see from the current trend of nationwide plant outbreaks and closures.

We're hearing concerns from workers across Nebraska that they are still working shoulder to shoulder and without sufficient protections. The clock is ticking to institute physical distancing practices on the processing floor in all plants. **This is a critical risk for Nebraska's workforce health, community health, and food production.**

We have decades of experience with public health, meat and poultry workplace safety, and diverse Nebraska communities. Our family members, friends, and colleagues work in the plants and in community public health, and we would like to provide you with these perspectives to help find solutions that prioritize worker safety and community health, and keep our food supply running during this pandemic.

These are key protections that should be implemented consistently across plants without delay:

1. **Most importantly, 6-foot distancing between workers on the processing floor**, not only in lunch and break areas (by reducing the numbers of workers per shift, slowing the line, increasing the number of shifts, and/or other means).
2. **Paid sick leave, job protection, and shutdown pay** so people can afford to stay home and monitor symptoms or care for family with symptoms.
3. **Appropriate protective equipment is provided**, including masks.
4. **Frequent cleaning** of worksites.
5. **Transparency** about cases connected to the workplace and **information** to employees in the languages most prevalent in each worksite.
6. **More inspections** to ensure worker safety and compliance with best practices.
7. **Worker and community health representation** on weekly industry best practice conversations with our state government.

While we understand that there are a few, very specific work positions where 6-foot physical distancing is not possible, there are hundreds of people working elbow to elbow at tables and workstations where 6-foot distancing is absolutely possible and yet has not been implemented. This is a significant vector for our communities and a critical risk for food production.

Here are examples of what we're hearing from numerous communities:

- "We're working elbow to elbow, that's why we're getting infected."
- "What purpose does distancing serve as you check-in if when you punch in you're working elbow to elbow?"
- "[JBS] supervisors are telling people that even if they are positive they can go to work, to keep it on the DL. And to not say anything or they will get fired. An employee [said] her father works there and he was positive and they told him to come to work."
- "We don't have a choice. I don't want to go, but I have to go. I have to feed my family."
- "Managers tell us after receiving a positive COVID-19 case that we can just keep working and should keep working if we want to keep our job."
- "We've been told we're going to get fired if we complain of unsanitary or unsafe conditions."
- "A worker was pulled out with symptoms and sent home to quarantine or be tested and the company did not notify the workers around him to quarantine. Obviously, by the time he gets tested, the ones that were working around him will have continued to keep spreading."
- "Tyson started their precautions late and they are still obligating workers to go to work regardless if they are ill, especially now that they are short in some of their lines."
- "We hope that they take action on the matter and stop looking aside as if nothing happened, and that they start looking at all the murky things that happen in the plant."

Governor Ricketts, we can find a better way. We would very much like to help provide you with information and perspectives that can help create solutions to protect our community health and maintain our food production by keeping critical workers safe.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Nebraska
Center for Rural Affairs
Centro Hispano (Columbus)
Coalition for a Strong Nebraska
East Central District Health Department
Heartland Workers Center
Immigrant Legal Center
Multicultural Coalition (Grand Island)
Nebraska Appleseed
Nebraska Latino American Commission
Omaha Together One Community
Peace with Justice Ministries, Great Plains United Methodists
Solidarity with Packing Plant Workers
Trinidad Center (Lexington)
UFCW Local 293
Unity in Action (South Sioux City)
YWCA of Grand Island

Cc: Nebraska Department of Labor