

Tuesday, March 17, 2020

Secretary Miller,

Last week, we shared with the Department of Human Services the real health and safety concerns that employees under your jurisdiction face - concerns which are only in the early stages of being addressed and communicated to your employees. But after Governor Wolf's announcement that all "non-essential" services would be shut down, we learned that a number of positions (full-time worker, supervisor and seasonal positions) were changed yesterday to "essential" from "non-essential."

On behalf of our members, I'm deeply disappointed that DHS appears not to have made any reasonable and collaborative effort to assess how workers could be made safe while without impacting the flow of benefits to Pennsylvania's vulnerable citizens.

Instead of a discussion about how staffing levels could be reduced or staggered, we were informed that complement was increased and offices in the most heavily impacted counties were re-opening their doors. Instead of collaborating on creative ways to remove barriers to healthcare and food access, we were told of workers being told to work in conditions that the Center for Disease Control and Department of Health has explicitly advised against. During the Federal Government Shutdown, we worked on precautions to prevent needless benefit closures. Why aren't we discussing this option now?

And with the added knowledge that the Governor's shutdown order has resulted in childcare and schools being closed, I am upset that additional policies for sick and annual leave for DHS workers have not been implemented.

But above all else, I am shocked and appalled that the last-minute reclassification of workers has been made without adherence to both existing CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health's guidelines for social distancing, not to mention provision of protective gear, enhanced facility cleaning plans, clear and preemptive communication, or an up-front labor-management planning process. Workers in County Assistance Offices are rightly concerned that by simply going to work, they may be a source of coronavirus spread. Our traveling workers, such as licensing representatives and inspectors, are rightly concerned that they're being sent into unsafe situations for both themselves and their clients with minimal protection.

SEIU 668

2589 INTERSTATE DRIVE
HARRISBURG, PA 17110-9602
MAIN (717) 657-7677
TOLL FREE (800) 932-0368
FAX (717) 657-7662

PRESIDENT STEVE CATANESE • SECRETARY-TREASURER JOANNE P. SESSA



And if just a handful of workers within our offices, or those required to travel, in different areas of the Commonwealth test positive for the virus, the resulting impact on statewide public services could be catastrophic.

We are worried that our newly essential and historically essential employees are being required to work in an unsafe, unhealthy environment.

These decisions are deeply irresponsible to the employees who serve the public. Our members are on the front-lines of the “new normal” we are confronted with today. They know what this pandemic means, and understand the vital role of their work in the days ahead. But declaring by fiat that they must perform their duties without regard for their health and welfare, nor pandemic mitigation best practices, is reckless.

It was nice to see Deputy Secretary Watson inform all staff by email Tuesday morning that DHS will “work closely with our union partners” to address staff concerns. I’m looking forward to your Department following through on this promise to your staff.

At a bare minimum, I ask that you work with us to rapidly design and implement a sound, safe plan that meets the ongoing recommendations of the medical community and the best data available to protect all DHS employees, so they can continue to keep Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable citizens safe without unnecessarily being forced to risk their lives in the process.

Sincerely,

Steve Catanese,
President, SEIU Local 668