

BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN
12TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
APPROPRIATIONS

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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April 17, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader, U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

At the start of this pandemic the country rallied around and celebrated the sacrifices of “essential workers,” those employees whose service was essential to ensuring that we would survive this unprecedented crisis. As the reality the impact of COVID-19 made itself clear, the face of the “essential worker” evolved. We now see, and should always have known, that essential workers are not just medical professionals, police and first responders but also the janitorial staff cleaning hospitals, the grocery store employees filling our pantries, the public transit workers taking nurses to their shifts, the sanitation workers keeping our cities clean. They are warehouse workers, nursing home staff, food service employees and delivery personnel. As sociologist Arne Kallenberg recently stated, “jobs that people formerly considered not very valuable—grocery clerks, janitors, delivery people, and truck drivers—are now essential to our survival.”

They are everyone expected to show up for their shifts, with little credit and even fewer protections, and I urge you to ensure that further legislation makes it clear that these workers are essential and need safeguards.

Our collective lived experiences during this crisis demonstrates that the sacrifices of these individuals, often working invisible jobs, have helped to save lives, frequently costing them their own. Given the ultimate sacrifice that so many of these hard-working individuals have paid it is critical that we address workers’ rights and worker protections in the next relief package.

First, I urge you to consider elevated compensation for this broader category of essential workers in the midst of a national emergency. This “hazard pay” should compensate workers for jobs which enable the country to function yet increases the risk of the worker in the midst of the pandemic. In the subsequent legislation introduced to protect the economic future of the country it is morally imperative that we also ensure that there is funding to protect all essential workers in every sector. Calling workers “heroes” is not a substitute adequate compensation and health protections.

Secondly, given the unique dangers of this crisis, I urge you to institute health and safety standards for the facilities in which these individuals work. The Department of Labor must adopt strict protocols that include increased cleaning and sanitizing of all essential workplaces when a worker tests positive for coronavirus. We must also mandate paid leave for employees whose facilities are forced to close, as well as two weeks paid leave for employees exposed to the virus to allow for appropriate self-isolation along government guidelines.

Finally, we need to ensure workers who bring awareness to breakdowns in basic protections don’t experience retaliation. While all facilities should be following CDC, OSHA and state department of health guidelines, we know that will not always be the case. In light of recent actions taken against workers who have blown the whistle on unsafe conditions, I urge you to include concrete protections from retaliation by employers in further relief packages. No worker who makes a good faith effort to protect themselves or their peers from unsafe conditions or unnecessary risk of exposure should lose their job, especially in these uncertain times.

We've neglected these workers for far too long, despite the outsized role they've always played in keeping our country running. This pandemic has changed the world, and it is time for us to change the way we view the roles these Americans play. Essential workers should be treated like they're essential, they should be paid like they are essential, and they should be protected like they are essential, not just today as they help us weather this crisis, but when the storm passes and the spotlight is no longer on them.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bonnie Watson Coleman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

BONNIE WATSON COLEMAN
Member of Congress