

Food Workers Should Be Considered First Responders During a Pandemic

Our country's grocery, retail, pharmacy, and food processing workers are working tirelessly during this outbreak to ensure families get the food and supplies they need. We need these workers to stay healthy more than ever before and protecting them is essential to our communities and the food supply.

Policymakers should designate grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing workers as first responders to support the workers who are keeping food on the tables during this crisis.

Who are food workers?

- Grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing workers are on the front line of the COVID-19 epidemic. Workers up and down the food chain have been required to work in order to ensure our homes have adequate food, supplies, and prescription drugs during this crisis. In doing so, many food workers have already been exposed or will become exposed as this virus continues to spread.
- Grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing employees have been working extended hours to restock shelves, opening early to allow seniors, disabled, and at-risk individuals to shop at a dedicated hour, and dealing with panic-buying customers who often take their frustrations out on employees. They are working long hours under extremely difficult, stressful, and often hazardous conditions to make sure the public has access to food, prescriptions, and medical supplies.
- Like health care workers, grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing workers are "essential workers" on the front lines of this battle. They deserve not only our gratitude but adequate protection and provision for their health, safety and financial security.

What does first responder status mean?

- Grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing workers who must work during this epidemic should be given "first responder status" which would make them eligible for free childcare while working, free coverage for all coronavirus treatments, tests, medicines, and personal protective equipment.
- First responder status allows workers to temporarily have access to additional state benefits. These benefits come at a pivotal time as our members are working to sustain the food supply when demand is high, and schools are closed. Like the rest of us, grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing workers have children who are no longer attending school and are themselves at risk of getting sick.

Food workers should get the benefits of first responder status regardless of how they are designated.

- As front-line workers, grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing workers who must work during the pandemic should be eligible for:
 - free childcare while working,
 - free health care coverage for all coronavirus treatments, tests, and medicines
 - Paid leave for a broad set of reasons for themselves and for caregiving, and
 - free personal protective equipment.

- **Food workers are essential.** America's food workers are on the front lines of the pandemic and play a critical role not just in the economy but in the healthy functioning and survival of our society.
- **Employer by employer is not enough.** UFCW International and UFCW Locals have been negotiating with employers across the country to increase benefits for grocery workers who are working to provide necessary food and supplies to their communities during the coronavirus pandemic. UFCW and Safeway [announced](#) that Safeway would provide a \$2 per hour increase in pay for its grocery workers; Stater Bros. Markets in California is implementing a \$2 per hour pay raise and Schnucks, Dierbergs, and Straubs, have agreed to waive all co-pays for coronavirus testing, maintain pay for those who become sick, and expand access to telemedicine with zero out-of-pocket costs.
- These employer by employer efforts are not enough and millions of grocery store, pharmacy, and food processing workers will be left out if a national first responder designation is not implemented.
- **States are doing it.** [Minnesota](#), [Michigan](#), and [Vermont](#) have designated grocery workers as "first responders," similar to health care workers and other essential personnel, which will give them access to free childcare.
- **Food workers are on the front line.** Like other first responders, food workers are on the front lines of this crisis and have been exposed to health hazards, but this is not what they signed up for. Policymakers must designate grocery, pharmacy, and food processing workers as first responders for their health, safety and financial security.