



Memo to the Field: COVID-19 and Frontline Employees

COVID-19 is a far-reaching crisis impacting various aspects of life in America. It has been creating novel challenges for homeless services systems. As a part of our efforts to support the field, the National Alliance to End Homelessness and the National Homelessness Law Center (in conjunction with its pro bono partner Fried Frank) came together to explore laws and policies that are particularly relevant at this time. The current memo provides an overview of issues related to frontline employees.

A Workforce on the Brink?

In shelters and street outreach programs across the country, frontline workers continue to serve people experiencing homelessness, despite stay-at-home orders and recommendations. These employees are in facilities and unsheltered locations that require ongoing contact with people during a pandemic. They provide essential work that ensures access to necessities and keeps systems functioning.

Despite the employees' importance, there are signs that this workforce is under stress. Often low-paid, many workers ordinarily struggle to make ends meet. COVID-19 is complicating matters. According to [Alliance surveys of Continuum of Care \(CoC\) representatives](#), workers have faced shortages of PPE, increased stress, increased responsibilities amidst worker shortages, decreased morale, and fears of contracting the virus. Indeed, employees have contracted the virus during shelter outbreaks in cities such as [Nashville, TN](#) and [Worcester, MA](#).

There is a need to prioritize, value, and protect workers. The Alliance has developed materials focused on practical [ways to support them](#). What follows are laws and policies that also support these goals.

Paid Leave

Paid leave is critical for workers who live paycheck-to-paycheck. Paid leave would allow one who tests positive or is symptomatic to afford to stay home and recover. Leave policies also help prevent the spread of the virus to clients and other employees.

Through the [COVID-related Tax Relief Act of 2020](#), the federal government is offering a reimbursable tax credit to employers who voluntarily offer two weeks of paid sick leave at full pay to their workers. It extends to employees who are 1) quarantined after testing positive or 2) experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and seeking a diagnosis. However, this credit expires on March 31, 2021. Current provisions replace a mandatory requirement to provide paid leave which expired at the end of 2020.

Some states already have relevant laws that can be used as templates. For example, [California](#) extends paid leave for up to 80 hours for some employees impacted by the pandemic. If they are not already doing so, employers always have the option of using their resources to establish paid leave policies of their own.

Addressing Health Needs

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) [has provided guidance](#) on creating the healthiest possible working conditions for frontline workers. This includes minimizing face-to-face contact and maintaining social distances of at least six feet. It also requires having sufficient supplies such as face masks and cleaning products.

Further, the CDC has labeled homeless services staff and outreach teams as [“essential workers.”](#) Thus, they could be prioritized in vaccine distribution plans. Systems can reach out to state and local health departments to urge such a classification.

Significantly, protecting the health of employees helps to protect the health of the clients they serve.

Workers' Compensation

Employees who are injured or made ill on the job may be eligible for workers' compensation. It can cover medical costs, replacement wages, burial costs, and death benefits. Primarily determined by state governments, workers' compensation policies vary according to where you live.

Securing compensation for infectious diseases can be difficult—primarily because of the challenge of connecting the virus to workplaces as opposed to other places where people spend their time. However, some states (e.g., [California](#), [Florida](#), and [New York](#)) have passed legislation or issued executive orders specifically focused on employees impacted by COVID-19.

It is essential to research your state's laws to determine whether they extend to both COVID-19 patients and homeless services' workers. If your state is considering/reconsidering such policies, members of the homeless services world should urge their workers' inclusion.

Hazard Pay

The [CDC recommends social distancing](#), or staying at least six feet away from other people. This is often difficult for people who work in congregate settings or who serve the public. Frontline homeless services employees fall into both these risk-associated categories.

Indeed, [CoC leaders report](#) that many of these workers fear contracting the virus at work. Some have resigned for this reason. And, in general, frontline worker shortages have been common during the pandemic. Hazard pay can be useful in addressing these challenges while respecting the risks taken by workers.

Some CoCs have already been [providing additional compensation](#) to workers in the form of hazard pay or incentives (e.g., bonuses for good attendance). More CoCs should consider this approach. Further, to address the needs of “essential workers,” Congress has considered [hazard pay legislation](#) and states like Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Virginia have implemented some version of this idea. The homeless services world must work to ensure that its frontline employees are included as “essential workers” in policies evolving at all levels of government.

Conclusion

Workers are critical to the functioning of social services. Without them, shelters, hotel/motel programs, street outreach, and other services simply cannot continue to meet vulnerable people’s basic needs. Thus, these employees must be protected and supported.

Paid leave, safe working conditions, and compensation for those who either become ill or who are at-risk are critical. They are sometimes tricky avenues to pursue. However, remaining CARES Act funds and future government stimulus resources could help support them. And there are still further ways to show employees that they are valued. This work must continue, grow, and be shared.