

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney Hearing on “No Worker Left Behind: Supporting Essential Workers” June 10, 2020

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for being here today.

Before we turn to today’s important topic, I want to address the murder of George Floyd and other unpunished cases of police brutality that have disgusted our nation and propelled so many of us into the streets to stand with our neighbors, and communities of color, that are routinely and systematically abused by our current criminal justice system.

This Committee—and the House as a whole—is committed to swiftly enacting profound reforms to punish police misconduct, holding police departments accountable to civilian oversight, and eliminating the financing of police militarization.

We will all have more to say in the coming days, but as my friend, Virginia Delegate Jennifer Carroll Foy, said last week, “my protest is my statement.” And so it is for me, even as we prepare our legislative solutions.

With that said, the topic of today’s hearing is essential workers.

Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, we are all acutely aware of the threats posed to our health and safety. But we do not all face the risks of the crisis equally.

Grocery store workers. Food processing employees. Public transportation operators. Nurses and doctors. Hospital support staff. Nursing home employees. First responders. Janitors and custodians. Mail carriers. Delivery workers.

In New York City alone, at least 123 workers at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority have died from coronavirus.

The people doing these jobs have taken on the extraordinary burden of maintaining essential services in dangerous and uncertain circumstances. They are essential to keeping the nation running.

That is why we recognize them as essential workers. They are heroes and heroines.

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Our hearing today focuses on the responsibility that our federal government has to protect and support them now and in the future.

Like the heroes of 9/11, the essential workers of today have been called upon to serve their country at a time of need—a need that places them and their families at heightened risk of injury or death.

I believe we have an obligation to ensure that if they or their families become ill, there are financial resources provided for them.

That is why, following the successful model of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, I introduced H.R. 6909, the Pandemic Heroes Compensation Act, on a bipartisan basis with Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler and Congressman Peter King. Several Members of this Committee have signed on in support as well.

I hope that the proposal will earn the same level of bipartisan support as the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund that Congress voted to make permanent last year with overwhelming support.

While the jobs deemed essential during the pandemic are indispensable to the functioning of our communities, there are a few other characteristics that essential workers share.

They are more likely to be paid lower wages. They are less likely to have employment benefits like paid sick leave, or the option of teleworking—which means they're being forced into unsafe working conditions.

Still, our country asks them to go to work every day. They will need financial help when they or their families get sick. They will also need financial help if they have to stop working to care for a sick family member. They should not have to bear the burden of these costs alone, especially when many are already at risk of economic instability.

This burden does not fall on all communities equally. Black and Latino workers make up a majority of the workforce considered essential. Communities of color have been disproportionately harmed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Due to systemic problems in our country, these workers have long been paid less in wages on average than their white counterparts. They deserve our support.

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A mere thank you is not enough. We need to do more to support the heroes of this pandemic. It is the federal government's responsibility now, just as it was after 9/11, to provide help to essential workers who are stepping up to help all of the rest of us during this crisis.