

Ryan Ellison
before
Minnesota Frontline Worker Pay Working Group
Minnesota Legislature
August 17, 2021

Chairman Winkler, Members, and Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the need to provide premium pay for essential workers. My name is Ryan Ellison; I am a proud UFCW Local 1189 steward and have worked at the Oak Park Heights Kowalski's as a Deli Clerk for the last 4 years.

I became a steward before the pandemic because I wanted to make sure that my fellow workers would be treated fairly. That job became more difficult when the pandemic hit and regardless of access to quality PPE or necessary safety measures my members had no choice but to come into work. Fortunately, at the start of the pandemic, I was able to arrange a meeting with the store manager and the operations director to discuss how we could best keep everyone safe and make sure that COVID-19 safety measures were transparent. Together, we were able to create protections that included cleaning and sanitation procedures, shields at cash registers, and mask policies for workers and customers even before the state mandate was put in place.

Unfortunately, as the pandemic got worse, I felt that I could not do enough to protect my co-workers, as they were forced to work through unforeseen hardships. One of my best friends is immune compromised, but she had to work the entire time, because she couldn't afford not to. With every shift she risked her life to help keep her community fed. These dangerous working conditions caused many people to leave the work force. One woman in my department is the caregiver for her grandmother, she first took a temporarily leave of absence to make sure that she could not put her grandmother at risk. She has not been able to return to work.

The dangers of COVID-19 have reduced workforces, putting more and more pressure on those left to pick up the slack. In my department alone we went from having fourteen workers to ten, and it has grown more difficult for those of us who have stayed. We are expected to maintain the same quality with fewer workers, forcing us to work harder and work longer hours. With the short staffing, many of us do not take our vacation leave, because we do not want our coworkers to face the undue burden of being down an additional person. Before the pandemic, three people would work to close the deli department. Now that same amount of work is put on two people at most. We must take care of cutting product, maintaining equipment, cleaning and sanitizing, and providing friendly customer service. We do everything we can to safely produce the same great quality that our customers expect within the same limit of time, but it is difficult and psychologically draining.

I worry every day about the mental health of my fellow workers. They are some of my best friends to whom I listen and whose needs I try to meet. Our job description notes that it is our responsibility to help customers with their needs to the best of our ability. Nowhere did it say in that job description that we are to function with normality during a global crisis. None of us signed up for this and being asked to continue working during a pandemic has taken a fierce emotional toll. The number of workers in the store *that I know of* who see a therapist doubled over the past two years. One of my co-workers—one of

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my friends—has had two suicide attempts due to the stress of the pandemic. I, myself, must take psychiatric medication to get through the day. It is my job to make sure that all the work gets done, but it has also become my responsibility to make sure that my co-workers survive. We did not sign up for this.

Grocery stores are part of the day-to-day life for Minnesotans, and we have been proud to make sure that such foundational services are provided. The pandemic has placed an undue burden on our mental health and has created workplace challenges that we've never seen before, nor could we have possibly been ready to take on. We have suffered through constant exposure, not knowing if someone has COVID-19, or is even vaccinated. I am asking you to please acknowledge these risks, acknowledge the sacrifices we made, and continue to make and provide premium pay for grocery store and other essential workers.