



Members of the Frontline Worker Pay Working Group,

My name is Sarah Wittenberg and I am a case manager at the Minnesota Correctional Facility at Lino Lakes.

Working in a correctional facility is a dangerous job. It was a dangerous job pre-COVID-19. Now you add everyone's emotions around COVID, more job responsibilities, isolating and masking and these facilities are like tinder boxes that could all blow up.

Or your life could explode, as mine did, when I got COVID-19 on the job. My life will never be the same. I am 44 years old and I had a heart attack and now only part of my heart works. I have trouble reading because the letters and numbers are all jumbled. My brain isn't functioning the same – my doctor told me, "Thank goodness you were bright because now you're average." Once minor tasks like grocery shopping or helping my kids with homework are now confusing.

I began working at the Lino Lakes facility in 2003. My dad was in law enforcement and growing up I had no interest in the corrections field, but here I am and I am loving it. I majored in psychology in college. Initially, I came to Lino Lakes as a therapist to help offenders figure out how to stop doing what they were doing. I was later promoted to case manager.

I am diabetic and pride myself on managing my disease. When the pandemic hit I was allowed to work from home for three months. I worked with my colleagues and developed a work plan. Though I could have stayed out on COVID-19 leave all summer, I have always worked and insisted on returning and being part of the team. I became the "mask reinforcer." It was very frustrating that there were no consequences for those not wearing masks; and these offenders were in the quarantine unit.

I tested positive for COVID-19 at my regular test on December 2. I had to find a way to isolate my kids, but still take care of them, and had to be out from work for 20 days. I didn't know many people who had gotten COVID-19. I was very frustrated. I'm the one who shouldn't have even been at work and I'm the one who got COVID. I lost my sense of taste and smell, and I couldn't walk very far. My heart rate, normally in the 60s, was in the 130s.

Once I went back to work I noticed my breathing was still difficult. I went back for a few days and then my doctor filled out paperwork saying I couldn't walk more than 75 yards. My office said they couldn't accommodate me, so I filled out ADA paperwork and our facility denied it.

I was sent home for a month. I was having breathing problems, my heart was racing and I started to have chest pains. Then I began forgetting things. I couldn't come up with answers quickly – "Mom, what's another word for cat?" – I just couldn't remember.

Even though I was having these symptoms, I wanted to go back to work.

I was admitted to the hospital where doctors did all kinds of tests, including an echocardiogram where they found out part of my heart was not moving. When I had a MRI my heart stopped working and had to take a drug immediately to reverse it. They called my husband into the room and told him there was something seriously wrong with my heart and they could either do bypass surgery or put in a stent. I now have a stent. Doctors told me the stress of the COVID-19 virus gave me a heart attack back in December and my body repaired itself on its own.

I began seeing a neuropsychologist because I couldn't read – all I could see were jumbled letters and numbers. They wanted to rule out any other issues like Alzheimer's, dementia, schizophrenia and so forth. All was clear other than my processing was slow and although I am left-handed, my left is no longer dominant.

I have severe anxiety. I can drive during the day but not at night – I get anxious driving at night with other people. I close my eyes if I'm a passenger in a car. I now am able to do exercises every day and can walk a mile. But still every time I stand up, I get dizzy and my blood pressure drops. I'm also nauseous and can't eat a lot. My doctor said all of the test results are showing my pulse doesn't go below 90 even when I'm sleeping.

I am on eight different medications because of this. I was working from home and I was doing a good job and helping people. Then I had to go back to the facility.

I had a heart attack at 44 – I am one of the healthiest people I know. There is so much I can't do anymore. It has impacted my kids. This has been very hard on my family. My husband is more stressed. He has to take time off work to drive me to doctor appointments. He is scared. I physically look fine but when I couldn't breathe, you could see the fear.

I've had to change who I am as a person. My daughter now sees a therapist. When I end up in the hospital, the girls are terrified. My youngest daughter calls me all the time when she's away. I know she is checking on me. I'd forgotten my phone one day at home, and she'd asked her sister to drive around and look for me.

I am not emotionally there. I do have less patience. This isn't worth the stress – let it go. Maybe I need antidepressants – maybe I just need to grieve the loss of who I was.

I saw my doctor earlier this month and she determined I was not well enough to go back to work. He increased my medications and added another drug for fatigue. I will be out until at least my next medical appointment in early October. I am trying to be positive. I am starting to remember tasks. I'm good at making lists. To help new staff I would make check lists of what they needed to do daily, weekly and monthly. When I go back, I'll have to use those lists to help myself.

I want to make a difference. All of the people doing the work for me are my heroes. My doctors, my nurses, other caregivers. I am so lucky. I wouldn't have made the improvements I have without them.

I want to work. My whole life has changed. My heart is permanently damaged – I have a stent. I now make lists – I think it's cheating but my therapist says it's surviving. I may not be able to work, and that is difficult because that is what my life has been. I am one of the lucky ones and I still have a long way to go.

My colleagues are also my heroes. DOC employees risk their lives every day going into a correctional facility. We have all been through a trying year. Whether they got COVID-19 as I did and had their lives changed, or they had to fill in for those of us who were out with COVID, we stepped up to keep Minnesotans safe. We appreciate this taskforce thinking of us and so many others who worked through this pandemic when considering frontline worker pay.

**Sarah Wittenberg, Case Manager**  
**Minn. Correctional Facility, Lino Lakes**  
**MAPE Member**