



MAINE AFL-CIO

A Union of Unions Standing for Maine Workers

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Testimony of Maine AFL-CIO Legislative & Political Director, Adam Goode, in Support of L.D. 1436, "An Act To Protect Certain Essential Workers from Infectious Disease"

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor & Housing, my name is Adam Goode. I'm the Legislative and Political Director of the Maine AFL-CIO. We represent 40,000 working people in the state of Maine. We work to improve the lives and working conditions of our members and all working people. We testify in support of LD 1436.

It is obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread economic hardship, loss of life and health and deep impacts on every type of worker. Despite this universal hardship, it is also obvious that the opportunity to avoid exposure to the virus and to avoid bringing it home to one's family is not a privilege all workers enjoy. If you are an essential worker, a low-income worker, black or brown¹ or work in the service sector², you are far less likely to be able to work at home and avoid the virus than other workers.

Simply put, not everyone can work from home. LD 1436 is one tool to address this fundamental inequity in the workplace. In order to ensure the safest working conditions possible, this bill requires employers that hire workers in medical and correctional settings or hire firefighters and emergency medical services staff to provide personal protective equipment to those workers.

While many workers in these professions were able to eventually gain access to personal protective equipment, it was a major struggle. In many workplaces, the need for personal protective equipment was only acknowledged after workers made clear demands and after public sympathy for essential workers grew. A basic requirement, as outlined in LD 1436, to require employers to stockpile 3 months of N95 respirators, air purifying respirators, surgical masks, gowns, eye protection and shoe coverings should be the bare minimum preparation done by employers as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for safe workplaces when a future pandemic occurs.

This bill is designed to cover the most essential of workers – the people we expect to go into harms way during a crisis. In order to meet their role of providing public safety in a crisis, employers should be prepared to provide appropriate personal protective equipment for their workers. There was a clear problem with workplace safety this time last year. According to data from OSHA, from April 20, 2020 to August 20, 2020, total COVID-19 workplace safety complaints rose over 350 percent.³

Someday we will see another pandemic. It would be tragic if we did not learn lessons from this experience. Failure of employers to provide essential workers with appropriate personal protective equipment resulted in deadly and devastating consequences for working people and their family members. These consequences were even worse for workers who are not white. Never again should essential workers be without personal protective equipment.

¹<https://www.epi.org/blog/black-and-hispanic-workers-are-much-less-likely-to-be-able-to-work-from-home/>

²<https://www.bls.gov/cps/effects-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic.htm#table1>

³<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/09/03/essential-workers-during-covid-19-at-risk-and-lacking-union-representation/>

⁴<https://www.safetyandhealthmagazine.com/articles/print/20464-new-california-law-requires-certain-hospitals-to-create-maintain-ppe-stockpile>

LD 1436 is based on a successful effort in California to pass legislation requiring hospitals to maintain a three-month supply of personal protective equipment.⁴ Maine should adopt a similar approach in order to ensure accountability on the part of employers when it comes of providing personal protective equipment.