



## FOOD PROCESSING WORKERS SHOULD BE PROTECTED DURING THE PANDEMIC

Our country's food processing workers are working tirelessly during this outbreak to ensure families get the meat and poultry they need. We need these workers to stay healthy more than ever and protecting them is essential to our communities and the food supply.

Governors should require food slaughter and processing businesses to implement social distancing protocols in the plants without eliminating any positions to protect the health of the workers who are keeping food on the tables during this crisis.

Governors can protect food processing workers using their health code enforcement powers. Social distancing requirements at food processing facilities will ensure the safety of the food for consumers and workers.

### Who are food processing workers?

- **Food processing workers are the men and women who slaughter, process, package and transport our meat and poultry.** Food processing workers continue to work during this crisis to ensure our homes have adequate food. In doing so, many food workers have already been exposed or will become exposed to the coronavirus.
- **Like health care workers, food processing workers are “essential workers” on the front lines of this battle.** They deserve not only our gratitude, but adequate protection and provision for their health, safety, and financial security.
- **Food processing is already dangerous work.** Food processing workers are working long hours under extremely difficult, stressful, and often hazardous conditions to make sure the public has access to food. Meat and poultry slaughter and processing workers face many job risks that can lead to severe injury, illness, and even death.<sup>1</sup>
  - Poultry workers face harsh working conditions. Every day over 250,000 poultry processing workers stand shoulder to shoulder on both sides of long conveyor belts and use scissors and knives to make thousands of forceful cuts as the chickens move down the line. They work in cold, damp, extremely loud conditions, and are often sprayed with the same acidic chemicals that are sprayed over the meat. Industry statistics show poultry workers are at twice the risk of being injured on the job, suffer illnesses at a rate that is seven times as high, and have among the highest number of amputations compared to other workers.<sup>2</sup>
  - Meatpacking workers in hog slaughter plants work in cold, wet, noisy, and slippery conditions making tens of thousands of forceful repetitive motions on each shift. They work with dangerous hooks, knives, and large saws to cut and break down the hogs. Research shows that the fast pace in pork plants, coupled with the forceful and repetitive nature of most of the jobs, leads to high rates of musculoskeletal disorders

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nelp.org/content/uploads/OSHA-Severe-Injury-Data-2015-2016.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/osh/os/ostb4358.pdf> and <https://www.nelp.org/publication/osha-severe-injury-data-from-29-states/>



and other serious injuries—such as lacerations.<sup>3</sup> Meatpacking workers are injured at 2.4 times the rate of other industries and they face illness rates at 17 times the rate of other industries.<sup>4</sup>

## What does social distancing mean?

- **Social distancing means keeping a distance of 6 feet between you and the other person, where possible.** When not possible, enhanced PPE protection or physical barriers must be put in place.
- Because maintaining the food supply is essential to our national security, food processing workers have been designated essential workers and told to keep working during this crisis.
- Like other essential businesses, food processing establishments should be required to implement strategies to reduce employee COVID-19 exposure, including procedures to ensure both employees and customers remain at least six feet apart at all times.<sup>5</sup>
- **Employers who implement social distancing must do so without firing any workers.** Food processing employers should be required to maintain their payroll while implementing social distancing during this emergency.

## Why we need social distancing in food processing?

- **Consumers could get sick.** Even at current line speeds it is difficult for federal inspectors and quality control workers to properly check meat for contamination that could make consumers sick. In order for workers and inspectors to be 6 feet apart, the line needs to be slowed down.
- **Food processing workers are essential.** America's food workers are on the front lines of the pandemic and play a critical role not just in the economy but in the healthy functioning and survival of our society.
- **Employer by employer is not enough.** The UFCW International and UFCW Local Unions have been negotiating with employers across the country to increase benefits for food workers who are working to provide necessary food and supplies to their communities during the coronavirus pandemic.
  - UFCW secured higher pay and [essential benefits for 60,000 workers](#) across the country in agreement with Cargill, Hormel, JBS, Pilgrim's Pride, Conagra Foods, Seaboard, Olymel, Smuckers, National Beef, Pepsi, Kraft Heinz, Campbell's Soup, Danone, and Maple Leaf Foods. The boost to pay and benefits represents a strong investment in the workers who are essential to protecting the U.S. food supply chain during the coronavirus outbreak.
  - These employer by employer efforts are not enough and millions of food processing workers will be put at risk if social distancing is not implemented.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/hazards\\_solutions.html](https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/meatpacking/hazards_solutions.html); <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/poultry/pdfs/letterapril72014.pdf>; Kyeremateng-Amoah E, Nowell J, et al. Laceration injuries and infections among workers in poultry processing and pork meatpacking industries. *Am J Ind Med.* 2014. 57:669-682. Lander L, Sorock G. A case-crossover study of laceration injuries in pork processing. *Occup Environ Med.* 2012. 69:410-416.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/iif/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-01/under-siege-from-virus-meat-workers-want-more-safety-measures>



## **Food workers are on the front line.**

- **Like other first responders, food workers are on the front lines of this crisis and have been exposed to health hazards, but this is not what they signed up for.** Policymakers must require food processing workers to practice social distancing for their own health and safety.
- **For the sake of the health of hard-working families who process our food and the safety of the food we eat, UFCW supports social distancing and slower line speeds at pork, poultry, and beef plants without eliminating any positions.**

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*The UFCW is the largest private sector union in the United States, representing 1.3 million professionals and their families in grocery stores, meatpacking, food processing, retail shops, and other industries. Our members help put food on our nation's tables and serve customers in all 50 states, Canada, and Puerto Rico. [www.ufcw.org](http://www.ufcw.org)*