COVID 2022: WHAT WORKERS NEED TO KNOW

Countless frontline workers have become sick or died from exposure to COVID at work since the start of the pandemic. This has especially affected frontline workers, including a disproportionate share of workers of color. It is these workers who frequently face life-threatening hazards while providing medical care, food, shelter and transportation and other essential services we all need. With the Omicron COVID variant spreading and hospitalizations rapidly spiking to record levels, it is critical that we take all necessary steps to protect workers from exposure on the job. Protecting workers is an important way to protect the community—because when COVID-19 spreads in the places where people work, it soon spreads to the places where we live.

Vaccination is important but is not sufficient to keep workers safe. It's necessary to have all possible protective measures in place to protect workers from the spread of the virus.

New COVID guidelines from the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) which recommend that people who are sick or exposed to COVID-19 reduce the number of days to isolate are not protective. Some workers may be required to return to work when they are still infectious or have not had time to recover.

This fact sheet is designed to support workers in taking action through their union and/or collectively with coworkers to assert their rights to safe jobs and the right to rest and recover when needed.

I WAS EXPOSED AT WORK. WHAT DO I DO NOW, WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

What the current CDC guidelines say:
If you are exposed to a person with COVID and are fully vaccinated and boosted, you do not need to quarantine. Instead, wear a well-fitting mask for 10days and get tested after 5days. If symptoms develop and/or you test positive on day 5, you must self-isolate.

If you are exposed to a person with COVID, and you are not fully vaccinated, you should:
- **Stay home.** Quarantine for at least five days, and wear a well-fitted mask if around others at home.
- **Get tested** no sooner than five days after the contact, even if you don't develop symptoms
- **Watch for symptoms** until 10 days after you last had close contact with someone with COVID-19.
- **If you develop symptoms,** isolate immediately and get tested. Stay home until you know the results. Wear a well-fitted mask around others. Take precautions until day 10.
- **Wear a well-fitted mask** for 10 full days any time you are around others inside your home or in public. Do not go places where you are unable to wear a mask. Avoid travel; avoid being around people who are at high risk

What workers should demand:
- Paid time to get tested and sufficient time to stay at home until you are sure your test is negative.
- When possible, workers should get a lab-based PCR test instead of the rapid test kit which is less accurate.
- Testing may be available from your county health department or local government agency. Health insurance companies are **now being required** to pay for COVID tests. Unfortunately the OSHA rule does not require employers to pay for worker testing.

Find out if you are entitled to paid time off under a contract or local or state laws (**List of local/state/county paid sick**; **Emergency covid time off laws** (not comprehensive).

I HAVE COVID, WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

What the CDC guidelines say:

- Stay home for 5 days and **isolate** yourself from others in your home. Wear a well-fitted mask if you must be around others in your home.
- **End isolation after 5 full days** if:
  - you are fever-free for 24 hours and your symptoms are improving.
  - if you did NOT have symptoms
  - after your negative test.
- If you were severely ill with COVID-19, isolate yourself for at least 10 days. **Consult your doctor before ending isolation.**

What workers should demand:

- That workers be allowed to stay home until they have tested negative twice, using the rapid test or the lab-based PCR method AND fully recovered from symptoms AND are feeling well enough to work
- Find out if you are entitled to paid time off under a contract or local or state laws (**List of local/state/county paid sick; Emergency covid time off laws** (not comprehensive)

HOW DO I MAKE MY WORKPLACE SAFER?

Your employer has the legal responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace under the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Act and a contract if you have a union. Employers should have a written plan describing how workers will be protected from the virus.

Lack of enforcement by federal OSHA and many state plan OSHAs' lack of enforcement has created a situation where, in many cases, workers are not protected by our government during the pandemic. Workers and their organizations have the right to develop a strategy and make sure we *are* all protected from COVID-19. This can include direct actions and demands to the employer, public campaigns or strategic filing of well- documented OSHA complaints. While enforcement has not been uniform, a well-documented complaint can lead to remediation of significant workplace hazards.

Learn about the best protective measures for your type of workplace. Below are some general guidelines for safety programs to protect workers:

- **Testing** on a regular basis. It's much preferred that tests be conducted using lab-based PCR, rather than rapid tests, and that they be done frequently (at least twice per week). Under current OSHA regulations, the employer is not required to pay for testing, but tests may be available at low or no cost from public agencies.
- **Better ventilation of indoor spaces.** This often requires adjustment of the HVAC [heating, ventilation and air-conditioning equipment], installation of more protective filters [such as MERV 13 or at least MERV 8], and using HEPA air filters.
- **Fewer people**, **more distance, and physical barriers**.

- **Hand washing and clean surfaces.**
- **Proper personal protective equipment (PPE).** When there is danger of close contact with another person, everyone should be wearing a protective mask known as "N95 respirators" or KN95 masks. Surgical masks are not protective enough and cloth masks are least protective. To avoid some of the fake N95 and KN95 masks that are available on the internet, **HERE** is a list of NIOSH-approved respirators.

Take collective action. Below are a few important steps:

- Get together with coworkers to talk about your shared concerns.
- Learn about your rights—to safe working conditions, to raise health and safety issues with your employer and other protections
- Decide what you want to ask of your employer, using the above demands as a guide.
- Develop an action plan for how to approach the employer and what to do if the employer's response is not helpful