

From SEBAC Leadership:

Latest on State Government Response to COVID-19 -- 3.15.2019

Union leaders have been combining efforts to make sure that the perspectives of frontline workers are being heard as the State's response to COVID-19 evolves. During the crisis we have asked for a daily point of contact between a designated union leader for each bargaining unit, and a designated management representative so there will be continuous sharing of information.

We are urging the State to move further and faster in its COVID-19 response, both for state employees, and the public, and to be a true model workplace for other employers in the state, and for the public we serve. In this regard, we have several things to report. We have also attached a shorter outline of our core principles just before the most recent documents from the Administration. These are the latest two documents from OPM/OFA concerning COVID-19's impact on state employees. They are directly applicable to employees in the executive branch, but we understand that other state employers (Judicial, Higher Ed, and Criminal Justice) are largely following. We are providing Administration documents not because we agree with everything in them – indeed you will see below that we have some significant concerns especially with the latest document. We are attaching them simply to make it easier for members to access them along with this report.

- (1) Before we get to our most significant concerns about the response so far, we want to acknowledge what the Administration has done right. That is, the Lamont Administration's decision to allow **workers affected by home quarantine of themselves or their family, or school or transportation closures** to remain at home or on paid leave without reducing their accruals. In that regard:
 - a. We are seeking and hope to shortly receive clarification that if the CDC 14-day guidance is lengthened, or the schools' closures extended, we will continue that practice.
 - b. We are seeking and hope to shortly receive clarification that while these workers may be asked to perform work at home if their work lends itself to this possibility, this will be on the honor system in recognition that during the crisis, the home working environment may contain many distractions and obstacles to working.
 - c. We are seeking clarification that workers who may have symptoms but are physically able to work will not need to use their sick time but will be treated like others who are quarantined. Otherwise those workers may have a disincentive to self-report their symptoms.

- (2) However, there are currently **three major flaws in the Administration’s identification of workers who should be informed they do not need to report to work** at state locations:
- a. We are pressing for **immediate accommodation** of those at particular risk due to age or medical condition. Currently it appears that those workers are being told to report to work as usual. We think that is very wrong, and they should be told they may remain home and telework.
 - b. Employees who have had **contact with individuals who are being quarantined** due to exposure are being told they must report to work. They too should be told they may remain home and telework.
 - c. There is no clear statement that **workers who have been exposed to COVID-19 – whether by travel or any other way** – should call their provider and self-quarantine. It is important to everyone’s health that workers understand that fact and understand they will therefore be paid while they self-quarantine, subject to the same work at home provisions as the others in this category.
- (3) With respect to **workers not needing to be at home because of quarantine, or transportation or school closures**, we are seeking immediate implementation of the governor’s statements that “workers who can work from home should.”
- a. We are pressing for the **greatest possible flexibility** for workers to work at home. We want a clear understanding on a bargaining unit by bargaining unit basis on how this will be implemented quickly and fairly.
 - b. For those workers who do or must work at the workplace we are pressing for **clear safe workplace standards and practices**, some of which have already been implemented and some which we hope are implemented shortly. These standards will vary to take into account the particular needs of bargaining units and workplaces, but include:
 - i. Investigate closure of large buildings where possible through the maximum use of telework and/or relocation to smaller facilities
 - ii. No large meetings (already implemented).
 - iii. Proper visitation restrictions (meaning public spaces are open only for those with a business purpose).
 - iv. Emphasize virtual communication (being implemented).
 - v. Disinfecting standards assuring the most constant possible clearing of work or common areas– including proper staffing to perform the work.
 - vi. Appropriate workplace protections for all workers making work areas “COVID safe” to the greatest possible extent.
 - vii. Provide additional protections for those who have jobs made hazardous by COVID-19 risk.

- viii. Clear and effective communications about which employees will be deemed “level one” meaning need to be a work because of the nature of their duties during the crisis.
 - c. The daily contact between designated union and management representatives per bargaining unit should be used to assure rapid resolution of issues with respect to any of the above.
- (4) We share a joint interest in **protecting the critical public services** our members provide. Within this context, and consistent with the Best Practices Principles above, we have urged the following:
 - a. Maintain services to the most reasonable and safest extent possible
 - b. Greatest possible online access
 - c. Prioritize:
 - i. Protecting the public from spread
 - ii. Meeting essential needs
 - iii. Preventing harm that could be caused by service disruptions
 - d. Postpone:
 - i. Non time-sensitive initiatives
 - ii. Any changes increasing exposure
- (5) We are also pressing for **legislative and administrative action** to help make Connecticut a leader in protecting working families during this crisis:
 - a. Expand sick pay and leave requirements for all of Connecticut’s workers at least during the crisis and perhaps beyond.
 - b. Expand the amount and length of unemployment insurance during the crisis.
 - c. Adopt Airborne Pathogen workplace standards under Connecticut Occupational Health and Safety Laws which would be binding on all public employers and provide guidance for private employers (only Federal OSHA can create a standard that binds private employers, and the Trump Administration continues to resist that).

We face a public health challenge unlike any we have encountered in recent memory. The solidarity and dedication of our membership gives us the confidence that we will face it well, and come out stronger than we went in, although we know it will not be without disruption and suffering. We hope that the immediate and focused application of the above principles will aid all of us in protecting our dedicated membership and the public they serve. **We will keep members informed as things evolve and change and urge all members to reach out to union representatives and leads with their views, ideas and concerns as we move through this crisis and forward to better days.**

Principles of a Just State in Crisis

- General
 - Best Practices Model for Private Sector
 - Best Practices Model for the Rest of Public Sector
 - Constant Interaction between Unions and Management
- Best Practices
 - Provide Safe Workspaces
 - No large meetings
 - Proper visitation restrictions
 - Emphasize virtual communication
 - Disinfecting standards – including staffing
 - Appropriate workplace protections for all workers
 - Provide additional protections for those who have jobs made hazardous by COVID-19 risk.
 - Voluntary Staggered Work Schedules where applicable
 - Greatest Flexibility for work at home
 - Accommodate for those at risk due to age or physical condition
 - Paid leave not counted against accruals for quarantine
 - If recommendation goes beyond 2 weeks, extend
 - Paid leave not counted against accruals for being “ill” but able to work
 - Telework an expectation to the extent feasible, but with honor system recognizing many potential issues at home
 - Leave for school closings
 - Appropriate and mutually discussed Level 1, adds and subtracts
- Public Service Principles
 - Maintain services to the extent possible
 - Greatest possible online access
 - Prioritize
 - Protecting the public from spread
 - Meeting Essential Needs
 - Preventing Harm
 - Postpone
 - Non time-sensitive initiatives
 - Any changes increasing exposure
- Legislate & Administrative
 - Leave protections no consequences
 - Sick Pay – no consequences
 - Unemployment Insurance
 - State OSHA Standard & Guidance
 - State Support for Other Public Employers