



Pandemic's hidden heroes face constant risk

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David Groves

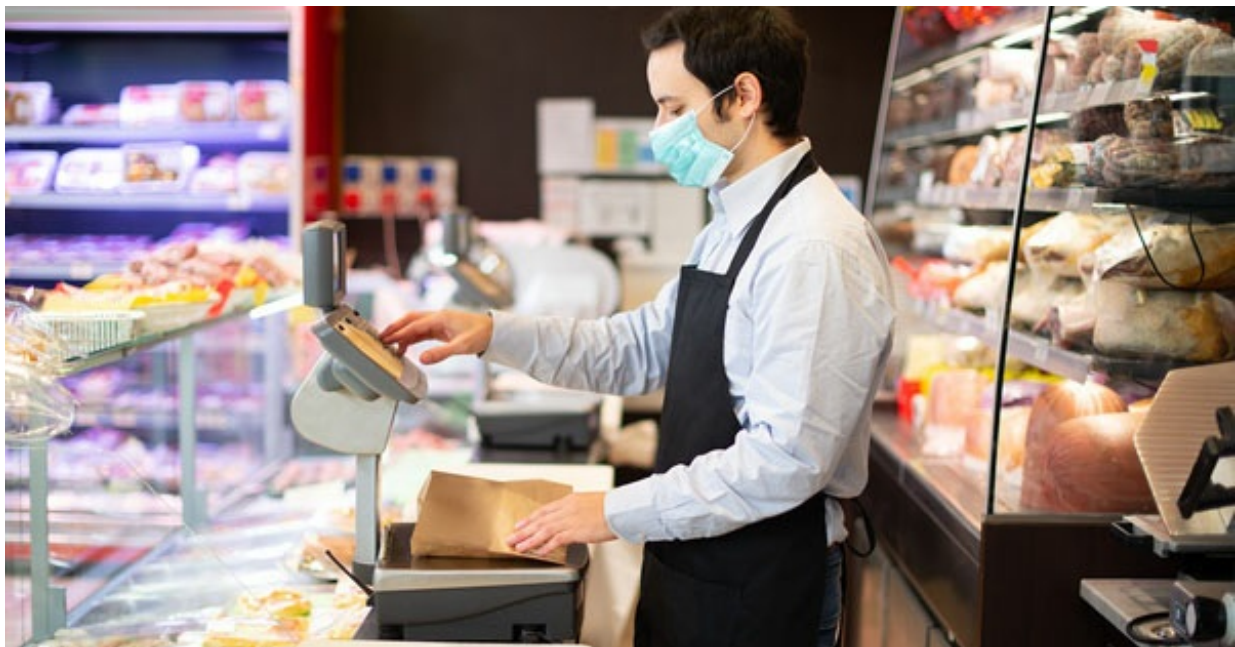
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Grocery, farm workers are among many essential workers we must keep safe

By SEN. KAREN KEISER and REP. MIKE SELLS

(April 21, 2020) — Ever since the coronavirus pandemic hit our shores, the safest course has been to stay home and stay away from others. Unfortunately, not everyone can do that.

The sacrifices of medical professionals and first responders, for whom there is never such a thing as time off during a crisis, are easily recognized by a properly grateful public. But equally courageous are the hidden heroes of the pandemic — the agricultural workers and grocery store employees without whom we would have no food or other essential items.



That cashier ringing up our purchases at the supermarket? She's stuck there for a full shift, day after day. While we can limit our outings to once-a-week trips for essentials only, and maintain safe distances from those around us when we do, she's denied those options. The physical constraints of the checkout stand keep her closer than the recommended six feet to the nonstop stream of customers who slowly pass through her line. It's not much better for her coworkers, who keep the shelves stocked and clean up the spill on aisle 12, or for others whose work cannot be performed online or has not been suspended altogether.

Fortunately, many large supermarkets have worked collaboratively with their employees to adopt practices to reduce their exposure and recognize the risks they face by providing hazard pay. These businesses are calling for all supermarkets to adopt these practices as well, an action we commend. Any employer whose workers' duties put them at risk of exposure should be rethinking their operations for ways to reduce those risks.



Workplace safety guidance

If you're an employee who thinks you're being required to work under unsafe or unreasonable circumstances because of the pandemic, go here:

coronavirus.wa.gov/business-workers/workplace-safety-guidance. You'll find guidance on workplace conditions, filing a complaint with the state Department of Labor & Industries, and many related concerns.

Meanwhile, thousands of other essential workers remain in vulnerable positions during this pandemic and, unlike many of the grocery workers, have no union to advocate for improved safety standards. Whether they work at the gas station, the drugstore, the hardware store or even liquor or marijuana retailers, these employees report every day to workplaces with higher odds of exposure to an on-the-job coronavirus hazard.



Another large group of hidden heroes in this crisis are the agricultural workers who guide our food from the field to the store — and who continue their critical work despite the threat of exposure to coronavirus. With the safety of agricultural workers emerging as a growing concern, we are coordinating with the governor’s office and with representatives of agricultural employers and employees to improve safeguards for these vital workers at the front line of our food chain — and the pandemic.

These workers aren’t the only hidden heroes providing essential services these days, but they are some of the most obvious as we limit our tasks to the very most essential. Whether we get to keep calling all of them heroes, or are forced to grieve for some of them as victims, depends on safe practices and good fortune. As the pandemic progresses, we dearly hope all of them will remain heroes — and not become victims.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary responses, and the coronavirus crisis has been nothing if not extraordinary. So, too, has been the daily performance and sacrifice of these workers. As we acknowledge their invaluable work in this time of historic crisis, we must similarly prioritize their need for health and safety.

Sen. Karen Keiser (D-Des Moines) chairs the Senate Commerce & Labor Committee and Rep. Mike Sells (D-Everett) chairs the House Labor & Workplace Standards Committee.



Rep. Mike Sells



Sen. Karen Keiser