

COVID-19 – Important Updates for AFSCME Members in State Government

April 9, 2020

Without any doubt the coronavirus pandemic is the most profound threat to the health and well-being of all Americans—and, in fact, to all people worldwide—that we have seen in our lifetimes. Even as the virus continues to exact its harsh toll, millions of essential employees remain on the job, working tirelessly every day—tens of thousands of state of Illinois employees among them. Our communities count on us!

Throughout this time AFSCME has also been working without stop to safeguard the health and rights of union members. Council 31 staff and local union leaders have been meeting with CMS, state agency leadership and management at the worksites to advance policies that allow the greatest possible number of employees to work from home and assure the safest possible conditions for those who remain on the job.

We have secured implementation of a broad range of measures to prevent the spread of the virus. These safety protocols and personal protective equipment needs vary by agency, so please be sure to check with your local union for additional information.

AFSCME is also pressing for statewide policies that expand leave rights and protect economic security as we cope with the unprecedented nature of this pandemic. We want to do everything possible to avoid furloughs or layoffs in state government. In addition, we have been working with the Pritzker Administration in an effort to develop policies that ensure that anyone who becomes sick with COVID-19 or must care for someone with the virus will remain in pay status and will not have to use his/her own benefit time. [Click here to read a summary of some of these changes made thus far.](#) In addition, we have secured agreements that employees will be able to cancel any planned vacation, sick, or other scheduled time off if they so choose.

Our union has also worked with CMS and other agencies to develop clear protocols for notifying employees if a co-worker (or inmates, veterans, or other residents of state facilities) tests positive for COVID-19; for ensuring that anyone directly exposed self-quarantines; and for making sure that the work location involved is thoroughly disinfected.

But there are still problems that remain—and we’re continuing to press for further changes to address them.

One high priority: Council 31 is currently seeking to have special consideration given to employees who are **pregnant** or whose physicians have directed them not to report to work because they have **“underlying conditions”** as identified by the CDC.

In addition, we have been urging the Administration to address a critical issue affecting many employees: How can parents who must report to the worksite assure care for children who are at home because of child care center and school closures?

We had hoped that a new federal law—the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA)—would help. It establishes a temporary emergency family leave benefit of up to twelve weeks leave at 2/3 pay for employees whose children are at home as a result of a COVID-19 precaution.

Unfortunately, the US Department of Labor, which is headed up by a fiercely anti-worker appointee, was charged with developing the regulations for implementation of this act. The Act allows employers to choose to exclude health care providers and emergency responders from coverage under the Act. The DOL guidance for employees who can be excluded pursuant to that provision is extraordinarily broad. [Click here to see who employers can exclude from coverage per the DOL.](#)

AFSCME immediately contacted CMS to urge that NO state employees be excluded. However, the CMS Director issued a notice to employees that the Administration *did* intend to exclude some numbers of employees. Council 31 swiftly responded with a letter stating the union's position that no employees should be excluded. [Click here to read this letter.](#)

In subsequent discussions, CMS informed the Union that the Administration does not believe it can safely continue operations at any **24-hour facilities** if all employees are allowed to access the expansive leave provisions of the FFCRA. The result, they say, would be that the remaining employees would be required to work untenable amounts of overtime.

AFSCME members understand the urgency of maintaining safe conditions in all state facilities. However, the Union does not believe it is fair to deny expanded leave opportunities to such a large number of employees.

We are continuing to press the Administration to find a more equitable path forward—one that recognizes the dedication of employees currently serving on the frontlines of this pandemic every day. We will keep you apprised of any further developments in this regard.

Finally, just a few important reminders.

- **The AFSCME COVID-19 Information Line** is open to help address coronavirus questions and concerns. You can call 1-800-899-9728 at any time to leave a voice message and we'll get back to you as quickly as possible.
- If you weren't called to join the recent **AFSCME Telephone Town Hall**, it may be that we don't have your correct contact information on file. [You can click here to update your information and give us permission to text you too.](#)
- Nothing is more important than the actions each of us can and must take every day: If you are working at home, stay at home. Do not go out except for essential errands. If you are reporting to a worksite, do not come to work if you are sick. Make sure to wash your hands thoroughly and regularly. If you have the symptoms of COVID-19, consult a medical professional immediately. If you test positive for COVID-19, notify your supervisor right away so appropriate measures can be taken to protect your co-workers.
- **You can find further information at AFSCME31.org/COVID19.**

State employees—along with the millions of other public service workers on the job in our state and across the country—are on the frontlines of the epic battle to halt the spread of this ferocious virus. **Your union will continue to have your back every single day—working together in the fight for your safety and your rights.**

In unity,

Roberta Lynch
Executive Director

