March 19, 2020

By E-Mail

Governor Ned Lamont
Office of Governor Ned Lamont
210 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, CT 06106

Commissioner Kurt Westby
Connecticut Department of Labor
200 Folly Brook Boulevard
Wethersfield, CT 06109

RE: Relief for Immediate Relief for Low-Wage Workers

Dear Governor Lamont and Commissioner Westby,

We represent legal services organizations across the state, who work on issues affecting low-wage workers, many of whom are people of color and immigrants. We are concerned about the immediate and longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on low-wage working class people. As businesses close down their operations, and experience the economic downturn of the pandemic, those impacted the most are workers. Low-wage workers are already living paycheck to paycheck, and now hundreds of individuals are being laid off, their hours are being cut, they do not have paid sick leave, and will likely experience income loss for several months to come.

Collectively, we ask you to take immediate actions to protect low-wage workers during this time, and to implement a long-term plan to respond to the fallout that workers will face for years to come. We believe three separate actions are needed at this time to ensure that all workers impacted by the pandemic get a paycheck:

1) paid emergency leave, to supplement recently enacted federal relief;

2) expanded and more accessible unemployment compensation; and

3) separate funding for individuals who are unable to work due to the pandemic, but who are excluded from UI eligibility.

Paid Emergency Leave

Connecticut should implement at least 30 paid emergency leave days, if not more, for any individual not able to engage in employment who has not received full compensation for that employment if the absence from work was due to any of the following reasons:
a. The individual has a current diagnosis of COVID-19.

b. The individual is under quarantine (including self-imposed quarantine).

c. The individual is engaged in caregiving for an individual who has a current diagnosis of COVID-19 or is under quarantine (including self-imposed quarantine).

d. The individual is engaged in caregiving because of the COVID-19 related closing of a school or other care facility or care program, for a child or other individual unable to provide self-care.

e. Individuals who are more vulnerable to the virus as determined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including the elderly, those with underlying respiratory, immune compromised, or other health conditions that increases the risk of contracting the virus.

This paid emergency leave should be available to any individual regardless of immigration status, as well as contract workers, domestic workers, and individuals working in the “gig economy” such as “transportation network drivers.” Everybody who works for a living in Connecticut faces the same need. The state paid emergency leave should supplement partial payment made to some workers through unemployment benefits, emergency leave under Division C of HR 6201, or other paid leave.

**Unemployment Compensation:**

As low-wage workers across the state experience income loss due to reduced hours, furlough, and lay-offs, Connecticut should expand and expedite its unemployment program to meet the immediate and growing need. In addition to Connecticut’s decision to suspend and relax current work search requirements, the following will also be necessary:

a. Immediately provide additional state funds to the Department of Labor so that its staff can process the unprecedented surge in claims within three days of filing. The funds allocated through Division D of HR 6201 are likely to be too little, too late. More funding and an emergency staffing plan are critical in preparing for a major outbreak. The Department of Labor should staff an emergency unemployment toll-free number where claimants can provide initial information regarding new claims.

b. Instruct Department of Labor staff to grant benefits where an employee attests, either in writing or over the phone that they meet requirements. We ask that the Connecticut Department of Labor relax documentation requirements given the urgency of the situation, the staffing concerns, and given the increased difficulties of providing proof, including the ability of residents to prove that an illness was COVID-19 due to the lack of universal testing.

b. Connecticut should increase UI benefit levels. Workers and families suffering from unemployment or a temporary separation from work resulting from Covid-19 face living
expenses that will often far exceed the amount they are eligible to collect in UI. Thus, Connecticut should pay workers 100% replacement wages up to the current maximum as provided by law, rather than 60%. In addition, Connecticut should apply § 31-231a(a) to all workers eligible for benefits, which would create a higher benefit for many low-wage workers by granting benefits in the amount of the highest single quarter of a workers wages, rather than an average of previous quarters.

**Separate Funding for Workers Currently Ineligible for Other Benefits:**

There are many low-wage workers who will be ineligible for unemployment compensation and other benefits due to federal requirements. For example, workers without social security numbers and contract workers are excluded from unemployment compensation. Connecticut should provide funding and create financial relief and replacement wages for these workers who experience income loss due to the pandemic, but who are otherwise ineligible under current laws for unemployment compensation, paid sick leave, or other monetary benefits. Such a proposal has been drafted in New Jersey and other states. New Jersey’s proposal should be considered, and is available here: [https://townsquare.media/site/385/files/2020/03/A3846.pdf](https://townsquare.media/site/385/files/2020/03/A3846.pdf)

As we continue to see the toll the pandemic will take on the lives of low-wage workers, we ask the State of Connecticut to take seriously all of these considerations in order to protect the most vulnerable amongst us. We look forward to working with you in creating broad-scale relief for workers at a time where the inequalities amongst us are even more pronounced.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Yours,

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