



Statement of Alexis Rean Walker, Secretary/Treasurer, HPAE
NJ WEC/Jersey Renews
20 August 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Alexis Rean-Walker, Secretary/Treasurer of HPAE – the state’s largest union of healthcare workers – representing 14,000 nurses and health care workers.

I am pleased to join NJ WEC, State legislators and allies to speak today about the need for greater funding for New Jersey’s Department of Health.

In A Time Of A World Pandemic, New Jersey Cannot Afford To Ignore These Concerns.

We can all agree that New Jersey and the entire country were completely unprepared to handle any type of pandemic. The lack of planning – nationally, within the State, and within healthcare facilities – thrust healthcare workers into a nightmare they could not escape.

During this pandemic those that should have been caring about the safety and health of healthcare workers, including employers, abandoned them in the time of their greatest need.

They not just ignored standards, but The American Hospital Association (AHA) actively lobbied against the implementation of an emergency temporary OSHA standard that would have protected healthcare workers during the pandemic.¹

Throughout this pandemic millions of pieces of PPE,² were distributed across the state, yet there was no transparency as to how these supplies were distributed among our state’s healthcare facilities.

This lack of transparency allows healthcare facilities to maintain a veneer of continued shortages, putting healthcare workers at grave risk when they are denied proper PPE.

Kaiser Health News and *The Guardian’s* investigations found that 922 healthcare workers in the U.S. have died due to COVID-19 and many hundreds, if not thousands, more have been sickened.³

¹ Emily Kopp. “Hospitals want to kill a policy shielding nurses from COVID-19 because there aren’t enough masks.” Roll Call, 13 March 2020, <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/03/13/hospitals-want-to-kill-a-policy-shielding-nurses-from-covid-19-because-there-arent-enough-masks/>

² Post by Governor Murphy on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/governorphilmurphy/posts/new-new-jersey-office-of-emergency-management-has-now-distributed-more-than-426-/2786873064772029/>

HPAE's own research has found that 1-in-5 of our members responding to our survey reported becoming ill from the virus.⁴ Of those that responded to our survey, 51 percent said they had to provide direct COVID-19 patient care without the proper PPE.⁵

It Is Imperative That PPE Is Provided And That There Is Transparency In The Supply Chain. It Is Literally A Matter Of Life And Death To Healthcare Workers.

New Jersey's DOH needs and deserves adequate funding so it can carry out its mission of hospital safety for patients and workers as well as increase its roll in public health after years of having its budget and staff gutted. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that public health has been woefully ignored as we were lulled into the complacency of "it can't happen here."

HPAE calls on Governor Murphy and lawmakers to fund NJ Department of Health so they have the capacity to provide oversight and enforce standards including the ability to:

- Establish and maintain a Pandemic **Preparedness** Play Book across the state, including coordinating efforts with Homeland Security, healthcare facilities, laboratories, and PPE distributors to ensure uniformity, widespread testing, contact tracing, and surveillance.
- Ensure healthcare facilities implement recommendations in OSHA's pandemic guidance documents, including infection control best practices and establish risk management systems to ensure worker protection.
- Improve communication and coordination between New Jersey Departments of Health, Labor, and OSHA to share information about needed oversight and enforcement of safety standards.
- Ensure that OSHA Pandemic Disaster Planning recommendations and appropriate safety training are effective, complete, and up to date for all healthcare workers.
- Ensure a system is implemented that requires Transparency and Accountability in PPE Supply stockpiles and distribution.

NJ can and must do more to Protect ALL healthcare workers – nurses, CNAs, technical staff and service workers - by enforcing the same standards and protections for the safety of all.

³ *Lost on the Front Lines*. The Guardian and Kaiser Health News, 11 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2020/aug/11/lost-on-the-frontline-covid-19-coronavirus-us-healthcare-workers-deaths-database>

⁴ HPAE. *Exposed & At-Risk*. July 2020, <https://www.hpae.org/campaigns/exposure-report/>

⁵ *Supra*.

HPAE Is Calling for A Return To Safe Practices And A Strengthening Of State Oversight Of Healthcare Facilities To Ensure Healthcare Worker Safety And Ultimately The Safety Of Patient Care.

Thank you for your time today.