

BROOKINGS

The Avenue

Grocery workers are keeping Americans alive during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here's what they need.

Molly Kinder Wednesday, March 25, 2020

From left: Lisa Harris, Amber Stevens, Matt Milzman, and Courtney Meadows

As worried Americans pack supermarket aisles in anticipation of quarantines and shelter-in-place orders, grocery workers like Courtney Meadows are working at a frantic pace to keep Americans fed and alive, and risking their own health in the process.

Meadows, a cashier at Kroger in Beckley, W.Va., said her store is the busiest she has seen it in 10 years on the job. “I have worked through snow scares, a blizzard, two derechos, holidays, anything that can impact a grocery store,” she told me. “This is the absolute worst I have seen it. It is a sea of people everywhere.”

Over the last week, I traveled to supermarkets across the Washington, D.C. region and interviewed workers from Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia and the District to hear—in their words—how COVID-19 is impacting them. These crowded stores I visited had few visible safeguards or protections for workers.

“We aren’t staying six feet away from the customers,” said Michelle Lee, a Safeway cashier in Alexandria, Va. “When we ring them up, they are like two feet away from us. We check out 200 customers a day. A doctor can wear a mask and protective gear. We don’t have all of that.”

Amber Stevens, a cashier at Shoppers in Prince George’s County, Md., expressed concern over social distancing as well. “I do still have a job to go to, but it isn’t helping me with social distancing because I am hands-on with customers,” she told me. “That is the scary part. Dealing with money, having to be so close to people.”

More than their own health, the grocery store employees I interviewed expressed the most concern about the safety of those around them: their loved ones at home, their elderly customers, their colleagues with underlying health conditions, and their neighbors in crowded apartment buildings. Several workers welled up with emotion as they described how hard it is to be unable to care for older relatives during the pandemic.

“All of that worry plus the stress of double the number of customers we normally have,” said Lisa Harris, a cashier at Kroger in Richmond, Va. “This isn’t just for one day. It is for weeks.”

As grocery workers put their lives on the line—often for low wages and few benefits—it is imperative that employers, policymakers, and even customers act with urgency to protect, support, and compensate them.

Employers must keep grocery workers healthy

Employers need to implement immediate steps to reduce grocery workers’ exposure to COVID-19. First, employers should expand access to personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks and gloves and end any restrictions on workers wearing them. While supplies of protective masks and gloves are extremely limited across the country, employers and policymakers should prioritize PPE for grocery workers as they become available. Employers should provide adequate cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer, regular opportunities for workers to wash their hands, and frequent equipment cleaning.

Second, stores should shorten hours and limit the number of customers at any given time. While several stores—including Trader Joe's, Walmart, and Safeway—have limited store hours and introduced “senior only” hours, most stores are not following the CDC’s guidance of limiting gatherings to 50 people. Even tighter restrictions may be needed to keep workers safe as the virus spreads; for instance, some stores in China are checking customers’ temperatures before they enter the store.

Third, grocery stores should implement additional measures to protect workers and enforce safe spacing of customers. Albertsons, which owns Safeway and 19 other grocery chains, was the first major company to announce they will install plexiglass “sneeze-guard” barriers at checkouts in its 2,200 stores over the next two weeks. Walmart and Kroger have made similar commitments, and other grocery stores should follow.

Even in the absence of specific CDC guidelines for grocery workers, employers should act boldly and creatively to modify stores to keep workers safe, continuously adapt to evolving best practices, and respond to safety priorities identified by unions like the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), which represents over 1.2 million workers.

Increase compensation and offer hazard pay

The coronavirus pandemic has put a harsh spotlight on the low wages that grocery workers earn for their life-saving work. At Kroger, the country’s second-largest grocery chain with 453,000 workers, the average hourly wage of cashiers is just \$9.94 per hour, according to estimates on Indeed.com.

Lisa Harris, a Kroger cashier, described the financial hardships she and her low-wage colleagues face: “I have coworkers who stand all day serving people, and then have to go pay for their own groceries with food stamps. I am very lucky that my boyfriend works in pizza because that is our survival food. If we can’t afford to buy food, he brings home a pizza.”

Even in “normal” times, grocery workers—like other service and low-wage workers—deserve better wages. In these extreme times, adequately compensating them is even more imperative. As grocery sales soar and their stock prices rise, employers should provide additional compensation and hazard pay to their workers on the front line.

“I think that some pay increase would be wonderful,” Kroger cashier Courtney Meadows told me. “I don’t think they understand the toll that comes through in our lives. They don’t see it. They don’t see the panic on people’s faces.”

In response to the pandemic, the two largest grocery employers, Kroger and Walmart, have offered workers one-time bonuses of \$300. Responding to pressure from the UFCW, Safeway and Shoppers are now offering an additional \$2 per hour of hazard pay, while Whole Foods and Target are also raising pay \$2 per hour.

These pay increases are an important start, but they don’t go far enough. The raises should be permanent, and enough to provide a family-sustaining wage to workers.

Ensure access to health insurance and extend paid sick leave

Now more than ever, paid sick leave and health insurance are critical for grocery workers. Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of grocery workers didn’t receive paid sick leave from their employers. Responding to public outrage and pressure from employees and unions, most large employers now have updated their sick leave policy to respond to COVID-19. However, their policies don’t go far enough: They are temporary, focus narrowly on COVID-19, and are insufficient to meet the needs of workers.

Companies including Safeway, Kroger, and Walmart are now offering 14 days paid sick leave for workers with a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis. But COVID-19 tests are in extremely short supply and many workers with suspected cases will be unable to get

tested. Employers should modify paid leave policies to allow flexibility for ill workers to access the benefits even without a confirmed test, at least until testing is more widely available.

Policies should cover paid leave for grocery workers to care for their immediate family members or people they live with if they become ill. Employers should also compensate workers for any coronavirus-related medical bills that are not covered by their health insurance.

Employers should provide extra support to grocery workers who are especially high-risk, such as older workers and the immunocompromised. The most vulnerable workers may need to simply stay home during the pandemic and not work for weeks or months. Employers should do their part to ensure those workers have extended paid leave or other forms of adequate compensation and benefits, including health insurance.

Customers can help keep grocery workers safe

A major concern for the workers I interviewed was the actions of individual customers that could jeopardize their health. Many workers noted that customers continue to come to their store even when they are sick.

“Some customers will come through the line and cough or sneeze in their hand,” said Safeway cashier Michelle Lee. “If you are sick, you should stay home or cough in their elbow.”

Customers should do their part by keeping a safe distance from workers at checkout and throughout the store, practicing proper hygiene when coughing or sneezing, and staying home when ill.

Right now, grocery workers are emergency personnel

On March 15, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz made grocery store employees and food distribution personnel eligible for free child care by designating them as emergency workers. Four days later, Vermont's Department of Public Safety added grocery workers to its list of essential personnel, giving them free child care at school-based centers set up by the state.

Other states should follow the lead of Minnesota and Vermont and designate grocery workers as emergency personnel, granting them the same protections and benefits as first responders and health workers.

“If we had an opportunity to get free child care, people like me could go in,” Matt Milzman, a 29-year-old Safeway cashier in Washington, D.C. and father of two small children, told me. “They need all the people they can. I am low risk and healthy. I would much rather me work than someone who is older with a million health problems.”

Grocery workers are among the true heroes of the pandemic, providing basic necessities to keep Americans alive, but also human comfort for their customers during an anxious time.

“I choose to be happy and positive,” cashier Courtney Meadows told me. “If you can talk and make someone laugh, that might be the only positive thing in their life that day. That is what I choose to do.”

We owe them not only our gratitude, but the protection, support, and compensation they deserve.