

Recent COVID-19 conditions from Nebraskans working in meat and poultry plants

Updated: Monday, January 11, 2021

Worker story:

“It’s not safe to walk in the lobby.... In the cafeteria, we stand elbow to elbow because there’s no room. [At] the break time we have just 15 min. We take 5 min to take off our [work clothes] and run, and we come together 200 people at the same time. There’s no distancing. And we don’t have a chance to wash our hands, to eat our food. That’s why I’ve been affected. I’ve been sick. Not just me. And the worst part, a [coworker] friend of mine, he died from Coronavirus. At the beginning the company tried to do something. But now it’s different. They don’t really care about it.

The people are crowded together all the time: in groups coming in to work and out, and in the areas where we are working.

A lot of people are sick. I know the Coronavirus is not a joke. And our bosses, they try all the time to intimidate us.... Now I think, what if I die? I have kids. I want the company to do something. They have to separate the groups during breaks...clean the locker rooms more, and the bathrooms. And use better masks. The kind of masks we use, they’re not very good. So please, senators, help us. Do something.”

Worker story:

“I’m a covid-19 survivor. I’m here to tell you how my employer’s delayed response led to more than 700 people infected at the plant. As a result of this, covid-19 has been highly active in my community since the first spike in March.

My struggle and that of many workers began when my employer kept secret the numbers of infections at the plant.... We saw how countless numbers of people were disappearing daily....The delay in receiving PPE and lack of social distancing resulted in the massive outbreak. Many people died, including 7 of my own coworkers.

Disability benefits were delayed for months and as a consequence I didn’t have income until I returned to work. Company nurses pressured us to return to work as quickly as possible and before we were fully recovered.

Line speeds have been significantly increased.... Meanwhile we continue to work understaffed.

I feel lucky to be alive even though I continue to have health issues...and trouble breathing. I feel tired, I feel sick, and I feel used. I have been with the company for [many years] and I feel betrayed. Today, senators, I ask you to pass enforceable safety measures for me and my coworkers to be able to perform our job with dignity.”

Worker story:

“We’ve lost 6 people. [One] gentleman, they made him come to work and tested him...He had COVID symptoms....they have the quick 15 min test - which is completely

unreliable. He tested negative. They made him go to work and 2 days later he died of COVID. That was right before Thanksgiving.

They've put up the plastic dividers -- which do nothing -- because...the way the lines are set up, you're right up against the line, so when you breathe the breath is in front of the dividers anyway, and the blowers blow it right up and down the line in front of everybody else.....So that's just to make them look better. It does nothing to protect us. We're still shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow and the breath is still going in front of all of us.

The cafeteria, it's terrible. You have a 15 minute break...and then you have to try to get all your equipment off and get up there, which takes anywhere from 3 to five minutes. Then you have to hurry up and eat, you have to hurry up and go to bathroom, and get back *and* get all your equipment on before the meat gets to you again..... You're running the whole time, so you can't social distance - it's impossible. We don't have enough bathrooms for everybody. And so everybody's in there in lines....

It just to me shows their cruelty and their neglect to their employees. They really mistreat people...they try to hide it. And they think they can...intimidate them and bully them into doing whatever. And it's not right. And it needs to change. We need laws in place to protect the people.”

Worker story:

“The COVID problem is now. You can't maintain any distancing. In the bathroom, there are only 5 bathrooms for women, 3 of them are always broken down and the lines are very long. Many [people] have husbands, children, or other family members working in other departments. They contract [COVID] on the kill floor and then they take it to other departments. This is where you're seeing the biggest problem.

There's another area where...workers there work *really* close to each other, one next to the other, and don't have enough protection to not get infected.

The cafeteria...is very small for far too many people. It has barriers but they are broken and they don't fix them.

I am a survivor of COVID and thank God I am here, but I would hope people knew that even though you had COVID once you can still get it again.”