



March 1, 2021

Senator Ben Hansen, Chairperson  
Business & Labor Committee  
State Capitol, Lincoln, NE 68508

***RE: Support for LB 241***

Dear Chairperson Hansen and committee members,

My name is James Goddard and I am the Senior Director of Programs for Nebraska Appleseed. Nebraska Appleseed is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans. We have more than 20 years' experience with meatpacking worker safety. Our staff and many statewide partners work regularly with people in meatpacking and poultry plants across the state, and workers continue to report **very recent and widespread examples of dangerous COVID conditions in meat and poultry plants**, including dangerous crowding, pressure to work while sick, poor quality and insufficient masks, and companies' failure to screen and quarantine. These examples come from many different plants managed by different companies across the state - Tyson, Smithfield, JBS, Costco, Cargill, WholeStone, and others.

I'd like to start with brief direct descriptions from workers to give you an immediate sense of what it feels like right now in the plants. These are very recent examples from the last couple months. This is what workers want you to know:

**The first:** "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... I've been affected. I've been sick....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...And our bosses, they try all the time to intimidate us...I want the company to do something. They have to separate the groups...And use better masks. The kind of masks we use, they're not very good. So please, senators, help us. Do something."

**Second description:** "We've lost 6 people. [One] gentleman...had COVID symptoms, they made him come to work and tested him...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."

Others describe: "Company nurses pressured us to return to work as quickly as possible and before we were fully recovered." And over and over we hear: "Managers tell us after receiving a positive COVID-19 case that we can just keep working and should keep working if we want to keep our job."

Workers in multiple plants have also **recently** reported that management has required them to come back to work **immediately after** they test positive for COVID **to be re-tested** by the company, putting everyone at risk in the process.

The meatpacking and poultry industry has a decades-long record of alarmingly high injury rates and dangerous work speeds that cause permanently disabling injuries for Nebraskans who are our family members and neighbors. That work design was already causing dual public health hazards of crippling injuries for workers and food safety risks for consumers. Now, during COVID-19, it has put our food system in jeopardy and has been a central vector for rural community outbreaks.

**The pandemic is not over.** As one worker put it, “The COVID problem is now.” Even as vaccine rollout proceeds, public health experts caution we will need continued protections for some time.<sup>1</sup>

Clear, enforceable protections that keep workers safe are positive for wider communities, farmers, and consumers. **Protect Nebraskans and communities by passing LB 241 without delay.**

Sincerely,



James A. Goddard  
Senior Director of Programs, Nebraska Appleseed

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<sup>1</sup> [“The coronavirus is here to stay - here’s what that means,”](#) *Nature*, Feb. 16, 2021.