



Attorney General Raoul Urges Federal Government To Protect Health And Safety Of Thousands Of Meat And Poultry Workers

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Chicago -- Attorney General Kwame Raoul, as part of a coalition of 20 attorneys general called for the federal government to take immediate action to ensure the health and safety of meat and poultry processing plant employees, who have been deemed essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On April 28, the president issued an executive order invoking the Defense Production Act (DPA) in an attempt to keep meat and poultry processing plants open despite widespread outbreaks of COVID-19 in these facilities. More than 10,000 cases have been tied to the plants, and 45 workers have died. The order purports to force employees to continue working without imposing adequate and enforceable mandates to protect their health and safety.

“This executive order lacks meaningful safety measures and puts workers at processing plants at risk,” Raoul said. “I urge the federal government to take steps to protect these workers and their families and communities.”

[In the letter](#), Raoul and the coalition state that the incidence of COVID-19 infections among meat and poultry industry workers is so severe that many plants are reporting hundreds of workers testing positive for the novel coronavirus. These clusters of infections are also devastating the surrounding communities. The industry, with workplaces already considered among the most dangerous in the country, has continued to operate the plants without instituting adequate health and safety measures.

Raoul and the coalition argue that, despite fast-moving disassembly lines requiring workers to stand shoulder-to-shoulder for hours, efforts to provide personal protective

equipment (PPE) and enforce social distancing measures have been sporadic at best. Some companies also continue to impose punitive measures for employees who fall ill and are unable to work. Rather than slowing line speeds to enable safer working conditions, plants have sought, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has approved, new line speed waivers that force employees to work faster and closer to one another.

The executive order instructs the USDA to ensure processing facilities continue to operate under voluntary guidelines for promoting safe working conditions, but it does not mandate these protective measures or commit the federal government to enforcing them. Raoul and the coalition argue that the federal government must make these health and safety standards stronger, mandatory, and enforceable. Raoul and the coalition urge the federal government to adapt adequate measures including:

- Priority testing for workers in the processing plants.
- Immediate access to adequate PPE.
- Suspension of all line speed waivers, and a halt to approval of any additional waivers.
- Six-foot physical and social distancing where possible, and plexiglass barriers where distancing cannot be achieved.
- Isolation and quarantine of COVID-19 positive workers, with full pay.

Without additional measures to protect these workers, Raoul and the coalition state that the executive order will prolong the spread of illness and death, and imperil its own goal of keeping the plants open. Additionally, the order may compound the harm done by the federal government's failure to provide assistance for COVID-19 testing and PPE by attempting to strip states of their ability to determine when or if these processing plants are safe to continue operating in order to protect the health and safety of their own workers and surrounding communities.

Joining Raoul in today's letter are the attorneys general of California, Colorado, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.