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Labor & Public Employees Committee
Insurance & Real Estate Committee

Informational Hearing:
Establishing a Workers' Compensation Presumption for COVID-19
June 17, 2020

Good morning members of the Labor and Insurance Committees. My name is Denise Rogers and I am essential worker. I showed up and did my job, but now I'm going through the worst time of my life and I need your help.

As an employee of Propark, I drive a shuttlebus, bringing healthcare workers to Yale New Haven and Saint Raphael's Hospitals. I am a member of UFCW Local 371.

When the coronavirus began to rear its ugly head, my employer did not provide personal protective equipment or enhance safety measures to protect me and my co-workers. I brought my own disinfectant wipes and Lysol spray. But it wasn't enough.

Hundreds of passengers – doctors and nurses taking care of COVID-19 patients – were in close proximity to me every day. The shuttlebus only has one door and it is located directly opposite the driver. I did not have a Plexiglas shield or any other barrier to protect me. I did not have a mask. It's no surprise that my co-workers and I got sick. As an asthmatic, I had an underlying illness that made my case particularly dangerous.

I was experiencing symptoms on March 17th. I went to the emergency room two days later, but was sent home because doctors thought I had asthma-related pneumonia. A week later, on March 26, I was struggling to breathe and went to the hospital by ambulance. That is when I was tested and diagnosed with COVID-19. I was in critical condition for two weeks before being released. Several weeks later, I am still having shortness of breath. My stamina has been severely compromised and I am still trying to get my strength back. I feel like I've been in a war zone. This virus takes so much out of you physically. I am still under a doctor's care and I don't know when I'll be able to go back to work.

My last paycheck was March 17th. I am out of sick time. I am out of vacation time. I have applied for workers' compensation, but my employer denied my claim, saying that my job, transporting healthcare workers, would not cause me to contract COVID-19. They are wrong. Because I can't tell them exactly who transmitted the virus to me, they denied my claim. I have filed an appeal with my union's help and am waiting for a hearing. In the meantime, I still have no income.

You might think that my story is an unfortunate one, and you'd be right, but there's more.

My husband, Howard, an employee at CtTransit in New Haven, also contracted COVID-19 on the job. He was cleaning buses. He was also admitted to the hospital in critical condition and spent 48 days on a ventilator. He fought hard, but he ultimately lost his battle with the virus. He passed away four weeks ago. He sacrificed his life as an essential worker.

I have applied for survivor benefits, but my application has not been approved.

Without worker's compensation, I am facing significant medical bills. My hospital bill was \$180,000 and I have a \$500 deductible. I also have co-pays for medications and doctor visits. But the bigger problem is that my health insurance was provided by my husband's employer, CtTransit. With him gone, I cannot afford the \$800 COBRA premium I would have to pay to keep my insurance. Without worker's compensation benefits to provide for my care, I am going to have to apply for HUSKY.

I don't know how I'm going to pay my bills. I don't know when I'm going to be able to return to work. I don't know if I'm going to have long-term lung damage or blood clots. I have been stretched emotionally and financially. I don't know what is going to happen to me.

I didn't go to work thinking I was going to get COVID-19. No essential worker woke up the morning they got sick and thought it would happen. We are being penalized for something over which we have no control. We did the best we could. We did our jobs.

What is most painful is that my employer still hasn't contacted me, even after my husband died, to see how I am doing. My life matters. Our lives matter.

Not only have I had to fight for my life, I'm still fighting for something I deserve, that I've earned – workers' compensation benefits.

I begged Governor Lamont for his help and urged him to order a workers' compensation presumption for COVID-19. He thinks workers like me have time to wait for our appeals to be considered. He has failed us. I am going to be dealing with the financial consequences of getting sick on the job for years to come. This is not how essential workers should be treated.

Thank you and I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.