

Covid-19 (UnitedStates) - It's a little late': US orders healthcare worker protections after thousands die

Saturday 12 June 2021, by [JEWETT Christina](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2021).

US labor department officials on Thursday announced a temporary emergency [standard](#) to protect healthcare workers, saying they face "grave danger" in the workplace from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The new standard would require employers to remove workers who have Covid-19 from the workplace, notify workers of Covid exposure at work and strengthen requirements for employers to report worker deaths or hospitalizations to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Osha).

"These are the workers who continue to go into work day in and day out to take care of us, to save our lives," said Jim Frederick, acting assistant secretary of labor for occupational safety and health. "And we must make sure we do everything in our power to return the favor to protect them."

[The new rules are](#) set to take effect immediately after publication in the Federal Register and are expected to affect about 10.3 million healthcare workers nationwide.

The government's statement of reasons for the new [rules cites](#) the work of KHN and the Guardian in tallying [more than 3,600](#) healthcare worker Covid deaths [through 8 April](#). Journalists documented far more deaths than the limited count by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which through May tallied 1,611 deaths on case-reporting forms that were often incomplete.

The [Lost on the Frontline](#) project documented [early calls](#) for better respiratory protection for healthcare workers than loose-fitting face masks, noted serious complaints to Osha from hospital workers that [went unaddressed](#) and revealed repeated employer failures [to report dozens](#) of worker deaths. It also found that healthcare employers were [often remiss](#) in notifying workers about exposure to the coronavirus on the job.

The new standard would address some of those problems.

The rules require workers to wear N95 or reusable respirators when in contact with people with either suspected or confirmed Covid. They strengthen employer record-keeping requirements, saying employers must document all worker Covid cases (regardless of whether they were deemed work-related) and report work-related deaths even if they occur more than 30 days after exposure.

There is a lot to like about the new rule – except for the timing, according to Barbara Rosen, vice-president of the Health Professionals and Allied Employees union in New Jersey.

"It's a little late," she said. "If we had had this in place at the beginning, it would have saved a lot of lives and a lot of suffering that has gone on with healthcare workers and probably patients in hospitals because of the spread."

Kristin Carbone said the measure came too late for her mother, Barbara Birchenough, 65, a New Jersey hospital nurse who had asked family members to gather gardening gloves and trash bags to serve as makeshift personal protective equipment before she fell ill and later died on 15 April 2020. Still, she said, it was a necessary step.

“If there is a silver lining,” she said, “I’m glad that out of this tragedy come positives for the people that are left behind.”

Christina Jewett, *Kaiser Health News*

P.S.

- The Guardian. Fri 11 Jun 2021 11.00 BST:
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