

ESSENTIAL *Warehouse* WORKERS

BRIEFING BOOK



BUSINESS UNUSUAL

ADDRESSING ESSENTIAL WORKERS' NEEDS
DURING & AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

a Collaboration Between
the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics &
the University of Colorado Boulder MENV

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ESSENTIAL WAREHOUSE WORKERS

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ESSENTIAL Warehouse WORKERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Warehouses and warehouse workers are absolutely crucial mechanisms to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. While millions of Americans obey stay-at-home orders or choose to shelter in place, demand for doorstep delivery for both essential and nonessential goods is sharply rising. This demand spike puts massive pressure on warehouse workers to maintain inventory and efficiently distribute goods to citizens who are unable or unwilling to leave their homes. To meet the evolving material and food needs of a nation in crisis, warehouse workers must continue and even expand their nearly invisible labor.

This briefing book related to essential warehouse workers provides the following information:

Work & Risks in the Warehousing Sector

Workers face a series of risks to health and wellbeing related to the efficiency goals of warehouses. The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated demand for efficient movement of goods, exacerbating pressure on warehouse workers to maintain inventory and staff.

Routine Risks Specific to Warehouse Workers

The risks workers face range from on-the-job perils to beyond-the-job challenges. Whether at work or not, these workers lack access to a social or economic safety net -- and their baseline vulnerabilities are exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-Related Risks Regarding Warehouse Workers

Many warehousing companies do not provide guaranteed paid leave without previously accrued paid time off (PTO) or a positive COVID-19 test. Workers who cannot afford to miss work may still attend their shifts even if they feel ill, cannot access a test, and/or are waiting for test results. The lack of a safety net has put warehouse workers at high-risk for COVID-19 infection and related behavioral/mental health concerns.

Practical Impacts of Warehouse Worker Vulnerability

People who are desperate for work in this time of massive unemployment may be taken advantage of by warehousing companies that are large enough to evade accountability. Without a public watchdog entity or robust whistleblower protections, the only actions that may get the attention of large companies is significant customer loss or massive worker walkouts. If consumers who are reliant on doorstep delivery cannot access food or other essential goods via such services due to workforce depletion -- or if they hesitate to use these services because of concerns about corporate and employment practices -- it may become more difficult to sustain physical distancing and to minimize crowding in retail outlets.

Broader Reasons to Address the Risks to Essential Warehouse Workers

Beyond the pragmatic and health reasons for addressing the risks these workers face, there is also the need to treat these workers with a high priority placed on safety, security, well-being, social integration, and dignity.

Key Facts about Warehouse Workers

What we know about these workers, with important data about what they bring to the workplace.

Ways to Protect Warehouse Workers and the Supply of Food and Other Essential Goods

Eight steps that can be taken to insure that these workers and our supply of food and other essential goods are better protected.

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<https://bioethics.jhu.edu/essential>

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Essential Warehouse Workers

Barbara Chandler, a 40 year old Amazon warehouse worker, felt feverish and decided to get tested for COVID-19 as soon as she could. As she waited for the test results, she felt compelled to keep working. Barbara knew she could be exposing her co-workers, but she had three children to support. Besides, Amazon would only give her paid leave if she tested positive for COVID-19.

Barbara's fellow supervisor told her she looked sick and she needed to go home. When she was diagnosed with COVID-19, she relayed the result to three supervisors. A few hours later, she got a call from HR. "HR just told me that I should keep it quiet," Barbara says. "That's all they told me."¹



Henry Sentoso, a 63-year-old warehouse worker, had applied for dozens of other jobs amid the COVID-19 pandemic, but few places were hiring in the midst of a historic recession. Eventually, he took one of the 175,000 positions created by Amazon for warehouse and delivery workers. Henry started to feel sick over the weekend, but still went to work for four more days before his wife tested positive for COVID-19. He needed the cash. At his age, he just wanted a way to settle down for retirement. By the early morning of April 12 -- his 27th wedding anniversary -- Henry was dead.²

¹ Dzieza, J. (2020). *Warehouse workers are forcing Amazon to take COVID-19 seriously*. [online] The Verge. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/10/21216172/amazon-coronavirus-protests-response-safety-jfk8-fired-covid-19>.

² Los Angeles Times. (2020). *He was part of Amazon's coronavirus hiring spree. Two weeks later he was dead*. [online] Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-05-27/la-fi-tn-amazon-worker-dead-hiring-wave> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

Overview

The political, economic, and technological regimes in the last several decades have accelerated to an intensively globalized economy, creating dependence within supply chains on expanded and efficient storage for transport of goods. The rise of Internet commerce has advanced the development of a world marketplace and provided consumers with an easy way to access goods without leaving their homes. These goods travel across the globe, making intermittent stops at storage facilities that employ hundreds of thousands of workers. In the last decade, the number of warehouse employees doubled from 633,700 in March of 2010 to 1,125,000 in March 2020.³

Warehouses hide in plain sight -- in urban and rural places. Inside each, human beings buzz around in an organized chaos, enabling millions of packages to make their way to consumers' doorsteps. The work involved is physically demanding. Employees are often on their feet for 12 hour shifts, walking a total of 15-20 miles through a 25 acre warehouse⁴ in order to stock, sort and distribute millions of items including food, clothing, equipment and countless other items.

This movement of goods all the way to consumers' homes has become more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden need to maintain physical distance. As at-risk populations must stay home and the general public contributes to flattening the curve by doing the same, the need to access necessities -- especially via e-commerce -- has persisted and in some ways, increased. Demand for doorstep delivery of both necessary and discretionary goods is sharply rising, putting massive pressure on warehouse workers to maintain inventory and staff to efficiently distribute resources to citizens who are unable or unwilling to leave their homes. [Some delivery centers estimate they are processing 10% to 40% more packages than usual for the time of year](#), volumes akin to demands during the holiday season.⁵ Grocery delivery is a major part of this demand, as consumers now use e-commerce to access food. Orders for Amazon groceries, for example, have been 50 times higher than normal.⁶ To meet the food demands for a nation in crisis, warehouse workers are needed now more than ever to complete the nearly invisible work required to supply food and other essential and nonessential items to consumers' doorsteps.

Because warehouse work does not require extensive training, this workforce is largely viewed as fungible and replaceable. For example, despite the fact that the pandemic has driven down worker attendance in Amazon warehouses 30%,⁷ the tech-and-retail giant is hiring essential workers *en masse*. In March and April, Amazon hired at least 175,000 new warehouse and delivery employees to cope with the surge in demand.⁸ Additional hires are helping Amazon handle nonessential merchandise orders, which accounts for 58% of sales.^{9,10} Demand pressures may cause

³ Bls.gov. (2018). *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. [online] Available at: <https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet>.

⁴ Spitznagel, E. (2019). *Inside the hellish workday of an Amazon warehouse employee*. [online] New York Post. Available at: <https://nypost.com/2019/07/13/inside-the-hellish-workday-of-an-amazon-warehouse-employee/>.

⁵ Herrera, D.M. and S. (2020). Amazon Struggles to Find Its Coronavirus Footing. 'It's a Time of Great Stress.' *Wall Street Journal*. [online] 31 Mar. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-struggles-to-find-its-coronavirus-footing-its-a-time-of-great-stress-11585664987> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

⁶ Weise, K. and Conger, K. (2020). *Gaps in Amazon's Response as Virus Spreads to More Than 50 Warehouses*. The New York Times. [online] 5 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/05/technology/coronavirus-amazon-workers.html>.

⁷ Palmer, A. (2020). *Amazon to hire 75,000 more workers as demand rises due to coronavirus*. [online] CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/13/amazon-hiring-75000-more-workers-as-demand-rises-due-to-coronavirus.html>.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Mattioli, D. (2020). WSJ News Exclusive | Amazon to Expand Shipments of Nonessential Items, Continue Adding Staff. *Wall Street Journal*. [online] 13 Apr. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-seeks-to-hire-another-75-000-workers-11586789365> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

¹⁰ [Amazon is far from the only operator of warehouses in the United States. It is, however, the highest-profile employer in this sector. As a result, there is disproportionate media attention to and information available about Amazon's employment policies, hiring trends, wages, benefits, working conditions and employees. Thus, the examples throughout this briefing book often focus on Amazon, with less frequent attention to other players.](#)

increased stress, be accompanied by minimal improvements to working conditions, and increase risk of COVID-19 infection for essential employees via contact with peers and surfaces.

Though increased hiring rates at a time of mass joblessness provide crucial opportunities for able-bodied persons to earn a wage, unskilled workers have little leverage to demand that employers provide personal protective equipment (PPE), paid leave, safe working conditions, satisfactory wages, and respect for worker dignity and voice. Warehouse employers, including but in no way limited to Amazon, must be responsible for providing essential workers with proper PPE, adequate closure time to sanitize facilities, and unlimited PTO with zero provisions, including when facilities are closed for sanitation.

On the job risks to health and well-being

Risk factors for exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace

Warehouse workers are responsible for receiving, sorting, and distributing thousands of items that come and go from thousands of locations. In performing this work, essential warehouse employees share space, equipment, and come into contact with countless unsanitized surfaces. [According to a new study by the National Institutes of Health, infectious coronavirus is detectable in aerosols for up to three hours, up to 24 hours on cardboard and up to two to three days on plastic and stainless steel.](#)¹¹ Given the nature of the work, essential workers inside warehouses could come into contact with thousands of carbon, plastic, and stainless steel items per day.¹² These items are received by the warehouse workers from locations where coronavirus could have been present, and are shipping from the warehouse to further distribution centers. If an item comes into contact with a coronavirus carrier at any point in the supply chain, a number of essential workers and consumers could be subsequently exposed. These risks to potential exposure from surfaces demonstrate a need for a consistent supply of PPE for all essential workers in this system.

Asymptomatic warehouse workers can unknowingly infect their coworkers and contaminate both the facility and the items moving through it. Increased, free workplace testing for COVID-19 is essential for limiting the spread inside of these large facilities. As of May 1, Amazon has confirmed an in-house, pilot COVID-19 testing program for its employees, rumored to be taking place in Fresno, California, however, the company has not confirmed where it will be conducting the pilot.^{13,14} Meanwhile, as of May 29, employees at individual warehouses are still suffering from a lack of tests, despite pleas to Amazon officials.¹⁵ To be effective in protecting those inside and outside warehouse facilities, warehouse companies like Amazon must follow through on the testing of all essential workers, and pay those who test positive to stay home. But in the absence of government support, mounting comprehensive testing programs will be a major challenge for smaller warehousing employers.

¹¹ National Institutes of Health (NIH). (2020). *New coronavirus stable for hours on surfaces*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/new-coronavirus-stable-hours-surfaces>.

¹² www.airseacontainers.com. (n.d.). *A Guide to Warehouse Logistics: From Shipping Materials to Fulfillment Efficiency*. [online] Available at: <https://www.airseacontainers.com/blog/a-guide-to-warehouse-logistics-from-shipping-materials-to-fulfillment-efficiency/> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

¹³ <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-confirms-covid-19-testing-program-for-employees-in-fresno-2020-4>

¹⁴ Sebastian, D. (2020). Amazon Aims to Test All Employees for Covid-19. *Wall Street Journal*. [online] 16 Apr. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-aims-to-test-all-employees-for-covid-19-11587048230>.

¹⁵ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2020/05/29/kenosha-officials-ask-test-all-amazon-workers-coronavirus/5278667002/>

It is critical that essential workers also have access to sufficient breaks; not only can sufficient breaks provide mental health benefits and help to prevent burnout, but they also allow workers time to engage in proper handwashing -- one of the most critical mitigation techniques.¹⁶

Measures to reduce or compensate for risks of workplace COVID-19 exposure or illness

Warehouse workers do not have the luxury of working from home or performing work remotely; they are one of the few classes of workers who, during this pandemic, must be available to perform work in person if distribution of food and other necessary goods is to continue. Eight steps that can be taken to protect these essential workers from COVID-19 -- and the supply of food and essential goods for which they are responsible -- are listed below:

1. Providing workers with **personal protective equipment**, including face masks, gloves, and sanitizing stations.
2. Ensuring that **social/physical distancing** within the place of employment is prioritized. This means training employees on how to keep a safe six-foot distance from other employees inside and outside the warehouse facility. Productivity targets and rates of task completion often need to be reduced for employees to maintain adequate distance while navigating a busy warehouse.
3. All essential warehouse employees should be provided with **COVID-19 testing kits**, as soon as supplies are available. Testing kits for warehouse employees should be free and provided by the employer.
4. **Temperature checks** may be a suitable alternative or a bridge to widespread testing. Some warehouse and manufacturing companies have already installed both manual temperature check protocols and thermal cameras for widespread checks, proving a model.^{17,18} Employees who register above the CDC-recommended 100.4°F should be sent home -- with pay -- until they have had at least three days without a fever.¹⁹ (Note, however, there is some speculation that thermal cameras may also be tracking employee behavior that could be indicative of unionizing.²⁰ Given concerns about the privacy implications associated with this level of surveillance, guidance and/or regulation is needed to encourage that thermal camera footage is used only to protect public health.)
5. Warehouse employees should have access to **paid sick leave** during the pandemic. Given the public health benefits of precaution, unless and until rapid testing is widely available and broadly affordable, a positive COVID-19 test result should not be required to access paid leave. Paid leave must be available to both part-time and full-time employees.
6. Workers need **sufficient and frequent breaks** to maintain ideal hygiene and to help mitigate burnout. Social distancing requirements should be enforced while workers are on break.

¹⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020) *How to protect yourself and others* [online]. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/prevention.html>.

¹⁷ jcox@bakersfield.com, J.C. (n.d.). *Local food companies boost workplace protections after employees test positive for COVID-19*. [online] The Bakersfield Californian. Available at: https://www.bakersfield.com/news/local-food-companies-boost-workplace-protections-after-employees-test-positive-for-covid-19/article_7f0cb796-7dda-11ea-9a27-1f3f7116d112.html [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

¹⁸ US Day One Blog. (2020). *Update on how we're protecting employees*. [online] Available at: <https://blog.aboutamazon.com/company-news/update-from-amazons-operations-network>.

¹⁹ Id.

²⁰ Peterson, H. (2020). *Whole Foods tracks unionization risk with heat map*. [online] Business Insider. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/whole-foods-tracks-unionization-risk-with-heat-map-2020-1?amp> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2020].

7. Because the virus can reportedly live on surfaces for days, warehouses -- or subsections of them -- should be required to **shut down for sanitation** within 4 hours of a positive test result being reported. Custodial workers who sanitize the facility must be equipped with proper PPE and should be offered hazard pay for the risky task.
8. **Separate and managed employee interaction in large facilities.** Limit employees' interactions with others by separating workers into consistent workgroups of no more than 10. These groups should be assigned facilities, tasks, break rooms, and walkways that are entirely separate from other small groups. In addition, employees' temperatures are taken at the start of each shift. If one employee is running a high fever, the entire group of ten is sent home to prevent a possible outbreak. If one employee gets sick, managers can know exactly with whom he or she has come into contact.²¹ (This tactic has been implemented at Bolthouse Farms facilities, the country's largest baby carrot distributor, providing a workable model.²²) **Two-week rotating schedules** for warehouse employees could be implemented as an alternative or in addition to groupings of 10 or fewer.

At present, there are many differing response tactics and mitigation strategies in use within companies and among companies in the warehouse sector. Because items move quickly between warehouses and suppliers taking varying degrees of precaution, the virus has the potential to travel along supply chains. **Thus, the entire shipping and receiving industry, inclusive of the warehouse sector, should consider a coordinated response.**

Pre-existing workplace challenges & means of addressing them

Perhaps the greatest risk to warehouse workers' health and safety today is the risk of contracting COVID-19; however, there are other threats to employee well being associated with continued job performance. For example, the stay-at-home/shelter-in-place/safer-at-home orders increase demand for doorstep delivery, which taxes warehouse workers. Some warehouse workers report that both the physical and mental stress was difficult to manage even before the pandemic, and that workers were "held to the productivity standards of a robot."²³ The increased physical and mental stress of the pandemic's demands could compromise workers' immune systems, putting them at an increased risk of infection or more severe effects of infection if exposed.

A workplace culture that leads to fear of retaliation if workers speak up about a lack of PPE or concerns about safety measures within facilities is another non-COVID-19 risk associated with continued job performance for warehouse workers. This includes those who voice a desire to take time away from work for personal reasons, including concerns about contracting the disease or caring for a child or loved one who is currently at home. Some workers are afraid of talking to reporters, fearing that they will be retaliated against for doing so.

To address long-standing workplace challenges that could compound with COVID-19 infection or take employees out of work for different reasons, workers need:

²¹ Alex Wagner (2020) *6 Feet Apart* [Podcast]. 2 Apr. Available at <https://crooked.com/podcast-series/six-feet-apart/>. (Accessed: 2 April 2020).

²² jcox@bakersfield.com, J.C. (n.d.). *Local food companies boost workplace protections after employees test positive for COVID-19*. [online] The Bakersfield Californian. Available at: https://www.bakersfield.com/news/local-food-companies-boost-workplace-protections-after-employees-test-positive-for-covid-19/article_7f0cb796-7dda-11ea-9a27-1f3f7116d112.html [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

²³ Guendelsberger, E. (2019). *I Worked at an Amazon Fulfillment Center; They Treat Workers Like Robots*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/5629233/amazon-warehouse-employee-treatment-robots/>.

- adequate breaks;
- reasonable hours;
- general workplace safety measures;
- affordable and high quality health insurance;
- workers' compensation insurance;
- access to telemedicine and counseling support.

Employees also need robust whistleblower protections so that they may make internal or external reports of inadequate safety measures or precautions in warehouses.

Work-life nexus: expectations, terms, & benefits of employment

Warehouse worker eligibility for particular benefit programs that safeguard health and wellbeing typically depends on many factors including:

- the state in which the employee works;
- the individual policies of the employers or facilities;
- the number of hours the employee works;
- the job and position of the employee within the facility;
- the length of employee's tenure with the company;
- worker classification or job status factors (e.g., employee vs. contractor; seasonal or temporary/probationary employee).²⁴

Warehouse workers are typically classified as employees or are employed by third party staffing companies.²⁵ About 24% of shippers use a mix of company-owned and third party operated distribution centers, and 3% use only third party operations.²⁶ Third party employees are not necessarily guaranteed benefits from their employers,²⁷ which could put them at further risk of COVID-19 contraction due to inaccess to time off, healthcare, or other benefits. Those classified as employees are more likely to have access to paid time off (PTO) and to health insurance.²⁸ In the face of COVID-19, however, these benefits may still not be enough. As the severity of the pandemic in the United States became clear, Amazon began offering unlimited unpaid sick leave and two weeks PTO for employees with a COVID-19 diagnosis²⁹ in addition to regular PTO accrued by both full time and -- as the result of a recent win³⁰ -- part time employees. [By May 1, however, Amazon allowed these policies to sunset, and workers can now be fired if they miss shifts.](#)³¹ While many employers -- indeed, many people -- would like this crisis to be over, the epidemiological evidence

²⁴ amazon.jobs. (2019). *Benefits Overview for U.S. Amazon Employees excluding CT, NC, UT and WI*. [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.jobs/en/landing_pages/benefitsoverview-us.

²⁵ www.wcirb.com. (n.d.). *Classifying Warehouse Operations | WCIRB California*. [online] Available at: <https://www.wcirb.com/content/classifying-warehouse-operations> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

²⁶ http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hub/396583/file-2176666302-pdf/docs_new/Workforce-Management-Research-Brief.pdf?__hssc=48983673.2.1590767207284&__hstc=48983673.5bb927e033d943c012d6b7e041e76bb9.1590767207282.1590767207282.1590767207282.1&__hsfp=923474208&hsCtaTracking=0c0750d0-5ba5-4c49-bf22-04297f4f4f18%7C1f01184c-dba5-47bb-a396-161d3e2f3649

²⁷ SHRM. 2020. *Employee Work Classifications/Categories And Benefit Eligibility*. [online] Available at: https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/cms_011250.aspx [Accessed 30 May 2020].

²⁸ Id.

²⁹ Hamilton, I.A. (n.d.). "I don't want to be there, but I need the income": Worried Amazon workers say the company's sick-leave policy is failing to protect them. [online] Business Insider. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-workers-coronavirus-policies-inadequate-2020-4> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

³⁰ Palmer, A. (2020). *Amazon gives part-time warehouse workers paid time off after a group of them fought for it*. [online] CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/23/amazon-gives-part-time-warehouse-workers-paid-leave-amid-coronavirus.html> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

³¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/may/07/amazon-warehouse-workers-coronavirus-time-off-california>



indicates that it is far from over, making this reduction of benefits risky and inappropriate. A lack of protections will likely result in employees who are feeling ill to still show up for work because they can't risk termination.³²

As warehouses expanded their workforces in response to demand spikes, many of the new hires were classified as temporary or "seasonal."³³ It is uncommon for workers so classified to be eligible for employer-provided health insurance or PTO accrual,³⁴ making it especially difficult for these new members of the warehouse workforce to take precautionary time off or to seek medical attention if they suspect that they've contracted or been exposed to the coronavirus.

Furthermore, to access COVID-19 related PTO, workers are often required to supply a positive test result to their employer. Tests for COVID-19, however, are notoriously absent from the healthcare system in United States,³⁵ therefore employees who must provide this proof to receive PTO may have no option to do so. The tests that are available could also be prohibitively expensive.^{36, 37} Without proof, many employees may not feel they can take unpaid leave. Those who live paycheck to paycheck already or who are suddenly the only earner in their household may not elect to take unpaid time off, which could further endanger others inside and outside warehouse facilities.

Unions

Some warehouse workers are unhappy with their conditions of employment and are looking to organize for worker protections. This was true long before the pandemic. Warehouse workers, especially those at Amazon, have been calling for greater protections for years without avail.^{38, 39} A February 2020 unionization campaign led by Target

³² Id.

³³ Bensinger, G. (2020). Opinion | We Need Amazon During the Coronavirus. That's a Problem. *The New York Times*. [online] 31 Mar. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/opinion/covid-delivery-amazon.html> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2020].

³⁴ search.amazondelivers.jobs. (n.d.). *Fresh Warehouse Team Description at Amazon*. [online] Available at: <https://search.amazondelivers.jobs/job/san-francisco/fresh-warehouse-team/3413/15852900> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2020].

³⁵ Eder, S., Twohey, M. and Mandavilli, A. (2020). Antibody Test, Seen as Key to Reopening Country, Does Not Yet Deliver. *The New York Times*. [online] 19 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/us/coronavirus-antibody-tests.html> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

³⁶ Haseltine, W.A. (n.d.). *Tests For COVID-19 Are Expensive, But They Don't Have To Be*. [online] Forbes. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhaseltine/2020/04/08/pricing-and-profiteering-from-covid-19-tests/#526cc67d1ccb>.

³⁷ Abrams, A. (2020). *COVID-19 Testing Is Supposed to Be Free. Here's Why You Might Still Get Billed*. [online] Time. Available at: <https://time.com/5806724/coronavirus-testing-costs/>.

³⁸ Crosbie, J. and Crosbie, J. (2020). *Coronavirus Has Forced Amazon's Hand. Will Anyone Make Them Pay Up?* [online] Rolling Stone. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/coronavirus-amazon-worker-treatment-jay-carney-977742/> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

³⁹ Schoolov, K. (2019). *How Amazon is fighting back against workers' increasing efforts to unionize*. [online] CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/22/how-amazon-is-fighting-back-against-workers-efforts-to-unionize.html>.

warehouse employees cited “prison-like” conditions that harm workers.⁴⁰ Now, in the midst of the pandemic, essential workers have greater visibility. Workers who disagree with benefits or conditions in warehouses, however, may be afraid to vocalize concerns regarding virus protection. Amazonians United is a relatively small union that is present at some individual Amazon warehouses across the country, but it appears to have no national organization. The union’s only apparent victory, secured via petition⁴¹ and walkouts, was the creation of PTO for part time workers in March. Albeit an important win, the union appears to have little to no clout in the fight for better conditions in the pandemic. Amazon has been actively working to suppress this type of organizing, stating in a 2019 management training video, “We are not anti-union, but we are not neutral either. We do not believe unions are in the best interest of our customers or shareholders or most importantly, our associates.”⁴²

Dangerous conditions that may expose employees to the disease are exacerbating existing tensions between unhappy employees and Amazon.com, Inc. On March 30, about fifteen Amazon warehouse workers walked out during their lunch hour to protest insufficient sanitation measures at a Staten Island facility.^{43, 44} The workers called for the building to be temporarily closed for deep sanitation after several had become sick, and demanded that employees be paid during the closure.⁴⁵ Christian Smalls, a leader in the demonstration, was immediately fired. Amazon claims that Smalls was fired for lack of compliance with social distancing measures and that he was ordered to stay home after coming into contact with an infected peer.⁴⁶ New York state’s attorney general, Letitia James, disagrees, stating

It is disgraceful that Amazon would terminate an employee who bravely stood up to protect himself and his colleagues. At a time when so many New Yorkers are struggling and are deeply concerned about their safety, this action was also immoral and inhumane.⁴⁷

Attorney General James, New York City mayor Bill deBlasio, and several U.S. Senators have called on Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos to provide more transparency regarding the firing of Smalls and three other warehouse employees.^{48, 49} Prominent union heads and more than 40 local political leaders called for Smalls’ reinstatement.⁵⁰ Smalls has not been reinstated at Amazon, but is actively organizing and calling attention to Amazon through Twitter exposé and other forms of protest.⁵¹ Meanwhile, remaining Amazon workers have had little success in organizing to demand protections during the pandemic. On May 1, 2020, International Workers Day, workers from Amazon, Trader Joe’s, Instacart, Shipt, Whole Foods, Walmart, Target, and FedEx attempted to call attention to “continuing failure to provide adequate

⁴⁰ (2020). Unionization Campaign Launches at Target’s Warehouse Facility in Perth Amboy, New Jersey Amid Growing Concern Over Prison-Like Conditions that Harm Workers. [online] Insider NJ. Available at: <https://www.insidernj.com/press-release/unionization-campaign-launches-targets-warehouse-facility-perth-amboy-new-jersey-amid-growing-concern-prison-like-conditions-harm-workers-2/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2020].

⁴¹ Coworker.org. (n.d.). *COVID-19: Amazon, Please Extend Paid Sick Coverage To All Your Fulfillment Workers*. [online] Available at: <https://www.coworker.org/petitions/covid-19-amazon-please-extend-paid-sick-coverage-to-all-your-fulfillment-workers> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

⁴² Schoolov, K. (2019). *How Amazon is fighting back against workers’ increasing efforts to unionize*. [online] CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/08/22/how-amazon-is-fighting-back-against-workers-efforts-to-unionize.html>.

⁴³ Amazon workers strike over virus protection. (2020). *BBC News*. [online] 31 Mar. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52096273>.

⁴⁴ Bellafante, G. (2020). ‘We Didn’t Sign Up for This’: Amazon Workers on the Front Lines. *The New York Times*. [online] 3 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-chris-smalls-amazon.html>.

⁴⁵ Id.

⁴⁶ Amazon workers strike over virus protection. (2020). *BBC News*. [online] 31 Mar. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52096273>.

⁴⁷ Id.

⁴⁸ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/07/senators-ask-jeff-bezos-for-more-info-on-amazon-firings.html>

⁴⁹ Bellafante, G. (2020). ‘We Didn’t Sign Up for This’: Amazon Workers on the Front Lines. *The New York Times*. [online] 3 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-chris-smalls-amazon.html>.

⁵⁰ Bellafante, G. (2020). ‘We Didn’t Sign Up for This’: Amazon Workers on the Front Lines. *The New York Times*. [online] 3 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-chris-smalls-amazon.html>.

⁵¹ Twitter.com. 2020. Christian Smalls (@Shut_Downamazon) On Twitter. [online] Available at: https://twitter.com/shut_downamazon?lang=en [Accessed 30 May 2020].

protection in the workplace” by walking off the job and encouraging boycotts. This demonstration likely caught the attention of some consumers and company officials, but essential protections were not widely granted as a result of this protest.⁵²

Warehouse workers are under-unionized and under-valued in this midst of the pandemic. When one worker walks out in protest, he or she can be easily replaced by someone willing to do the job with the benefits offered. This is especially true at a time of historic unemployment rates, when many are desperate for a job that can provide any security in order to survive and feed their families.

Beyond the job risks to health and well-being

Risks of exposure to COVID-19 to workers, families or community from non-workplace factors

The risks of exposure to COVID-19 to workers and their families or communities also depends on many non-workplace factors, including housing and living arrangements, transportation, childcare arrangements, social distancing within the community, a lack of affordability of essential goods, and a lack of access to information. For warehouse workers, these risks may take form in the following ways:

- **Transportation risks.** Many warehouse workers may be commuting to and from their jobs via several modes of public transportation,⁵³ putting them at greater risk of exposure by virtue of being in enclosed forms of mass transit and shared conveyance.
- **Housing/living conditions.** Many warehouse workers may live with others who are also working in high-risk industries, such as other food system workers. Being in close contact with these persons may put all parties in a household at an increased risk of exposure.
- **Risks from childcare arrangements.** Warehouse workers who are still working during this crisis may be affected by the challenge of finding child care. Because schools and many daycare centers are closed, there may be limited care for the child, placing a strain on the child’s family. Working parents may be tasked with paying out-of-pocket for childcare, an expense that they otherwise would not have because the child would normally be at school. Additionally, the interaction with the childcare provider may increase the child’s/families risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Risks associated with financial insecurity

Workers who are unable to go to work, or who should not go to work because they are ill, have been exposed to an ill person, or need to care for a loved one at home, may be fearful of economic harm from lost or reduced wages. The average amount of cash that an American has on hand is \$8,863, but only \$2,729 for single people ages 34 and younger⁵⁴ -- almost 50% of warehouse workers fall into this age category.⁵⁵ Warehouse workers who are low-wage may have even less than this in savings. In either case, it is hardly enough to pay for one’s rent/mortgage, child care, food

⁵²Bond, S., 2020. NPR Choice Page. [online] Npr.org. Available at:

<<https://www.npr.org/2020/05/01/849218750/workers-walk-off-jobs-demand-safer-working-conditions>> [Accessed 30 May 2020].

⁵³ Bellafante, G. (2020). ‘We Didn’t Sign Up for This’: Amazon Workers on the Front Lines. *The New York Times*. [online] 3 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-chris-smalls-amazon.html>.

⁵⁴ Martin, E. (2019) ‘This chart shows how much money Americans have in savings at every age’, *CNBC*, 12 March [online]. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/11/how-much-money-americans-have-in-their-savings-accounts-at-every-age.html>

⁵⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) ‘Employed persons by detailed industry and age’, *Labor force statistics from the current population survey* [online]. Available at: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18b.htm>

expenses, and other costs of living in the event that there is no source of income for the family. Workers may also be facing increased expenses in the form of full-time child care costs, costs to care for a sick person at home or an elderly loved one, or even costs related to private transportation to and from work.

In mid-March, Amazon began offering an extra \$2 per hour for essential workers.^{56, 57} While this hazard pay makes this perilous essential work modestly more remunerative, and may be particularly appealing to those who have lost work and cannot access unemployment benefits, it does nothing to reduce the risks to employee health and, in most places, does not move workers away from the economic margins. Despite continued high demand for Amazon products and services that may extend indefinitely, Amazon will not offer hazard pay after the end of May.⁵⁸

Adequacy & resilience of the warehouse workforce

Warehouse workers are absolutely crucial to help citizens stay safe during these uncertain times. The people who buzz around inside these massive buildings to organize and distribute millions of items provide us with access to essential and nonessential goods from the comfort of our couches. High demand for doorstep delivery is increasing and is likely to stay inflated even as the pandemic panic subsides.⁵⁹ To meet the evolving food demands for a nation in crisis, warehouse workers are needed now more than ever to complete the nearly invisible work required to supply food and other essential and nonessential items to consumers' doorsteps. Warehouse workers are essential to keep the economy and the health of the nation closer to normal, but the companies who manage these workers -- and those who benefit from their work -- must not treat them like mere cogs in a machine.

It is worth noting that Amazon value has increased over 30% since January, with most of this growth in April.⁶⁰ Sales are up 10%-40% from 2019,⁶¹ making it clear that people are more dependent on Amazon's services than ever. CEO Jeff Bezos has gained at least \$25 billion in wealth since early March.⁶² Company growth may require more workers to distribute more goods than ever. It is possible that this expansion is taking advantage of desperate people who have lost their jobs in other industries in order to maintain Amazon's dominance in the marketplace. Amazon was dominant before the pandemic began, but now Americans are genuinely relying on its services. As the *New York Times* put it on April 3, "Amazon has come to seem more like a utility, as essential as a municipal water supply."⁶³

Meanwhile, thousands of Amazon employees have skipped work at warehouses because they are scared. Remaining workers must shoulder the burden of meeting increased consumer demand with reduced ranks. If warehouses are understaffed, there is a risk of large delays, consumer frustrations, and abilities to reliably access food. While millions

⁵⁶ Sebastian, D. (2020). Amazon Aims to Test All Employees for Covid-19. *Wall Street Journal*. [online] 16 Apr. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-aims-to-test-all-employees-for-covid-19-11587048230>.

⁵⁷ Radio, S.C.P. (2020). *Amazon To Change Time-Off Policy During Pandemic, Extend Pay Bump*. [online] Southern California Public Radio. Available at: <https://www.scpr.org/news/2020/04/24/92168/amazon-to-change-time-off-policy-during-pandemic-e/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2020].

⁵⁸ <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/5/13/21256756/amazon-pay-increases-frontline-warehouse-workers-covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-may>

⁵⁹ Herrera, D.M. and S. (2020). Amazon Struggles to Find Its Coronavirus Footing. 'It's a Time of Great Stress.' *Wall Street Journal*. [online] 31 Mar. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-struggles-to-find-its-coronavirus-footing-its-a-time-of-great-stress-11585664987> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

⁶⁰ Cnn.com. (2019). AMZN - Amazon.com Inc Stock quote - CNNMoney.com. [online] Available at: <https://money.cnn.com/quote/quote.html?symb=AMZN>.

⁶¹ Herrera, D.M. and S. (2020). Amazon Struggles to Find Its Coronavirus Footing. 'It's a Time of Great Stress.' *Wall Street Journal*. [online] 31 Mar. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-struggles-to-find-its-coronavirus-footing-its-a-time-of-great-stress-11585664987> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

⁶² Weise, K. (2020). Bezos Takes Back the Wheel at Amazon. *The New York Times*. [online] 22 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/technology/bezos-amazon-coronavirus.html> [Accessed 23 Apr. 2020].

⁶³ Bellafante, G. (2020). 'We Didn't Sign Up for This': Amazon Workers on the Front Lines. *The New York Times*. [online] 3 Apr. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-chris-smalls-amazon.html>.

of people have lost jobs and countless companies have scaled back on operations, there has been a spike in demand for workers in industries providing critical products and services.⁶⁴

Those who hold the existing and newly formed positions at Amazon, however, experience no true protections from contracting COVID-19, and no guaranteed care if they fall ill and can't prove it. As of May 20, Amazon warehouse workers have documented more than 1,000 cases among warehouse workers, and eight deaths.⁶⁵

Worker supports in context: reasons to address risks to warehouse workers

For practical reasons -- namely, so that warehouses can remain open and functional, and so that food and other essential items will continue to be accessible to consumers -- ensuring that the risks to warehouse workers are addressed, and ensuring that this group of workers' needs are met, is essential. In addition to the practical reasons, though, it is critical to remember that those within this group of workers are not merely employees that are to be exploited for the purpose of underpinning distribution, but rather *people* with unique lives, families, and financial, physical, and psychological needs. Addressing the risks to these workers is morally good and correct from a utilitarian perspective -- that taking care of the needs of these people will ultimately be beneficial for the needs of the whole -- or a categorically imperative one: that we should always treat another as someone who has dignity and intrinsic worth.

Though Amazon has increased pay until the end of May, they could be seen as taking advantage of unemployed people who are desperate for work, who will show up even with a major risk of infection and no guaranteed protections. Strikes and boycotts, such as the demonstration on International Workers Day, do not yet appear to majorly affect distribution rates or consumer buying and use of services. What would be a PR nightmare for a smaller company has hardly seemed to phase Amazon.

Amazon is an incredibly dominant entity that has prevented internal unionizing and aggregated other companies at breakneck speed. As many smaller companies continue to go under during the pandemic and subsequent financial crisis, Amazon continues to go stronger. At this point, the only thing that may get the company's attention is customer loss or massive worker walkouts. Either or both of these actions will cause major disruptions in the supply chain, and could cause further major harm if citizens who are reliant on Amazon's services are unable to access essential goods.

At this point, Amazon

To prevent exacerbate this crisis, must be held worker protections.



may be too big to fail. disruptions that could warehouse companies accountable for

⁶⁴ Gelles, D. and Corkery, M. (2020) 'Help wanted: Grocery stores, pizza chains and Amazon are hiring', The New York Times, 22 March [online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/business/coronavirus-hiring-jobs.html>

⁶⁵ Los Angeles Times. (2020). He was part of Amazon's coronavirus hiring spree. Two weeks later he was dead. [online] Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2020-05-27/la-fi-tn-amazon-worker-dead-hiring-wave> [Accessed 29 May 2020].

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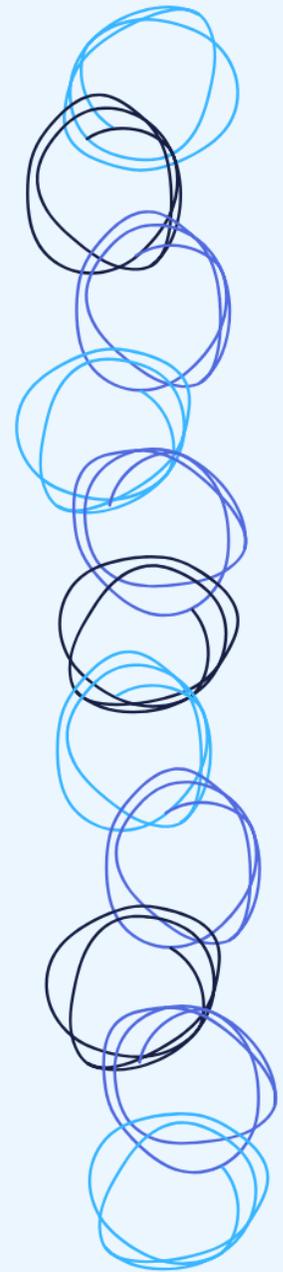
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Key Facts About Warehouse Workers

- **Workforce size & composition:** According to 2019 Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the total number of warehousing and storage workers employed was 788,000. Of those, 33 percent were women, 65.3 percent were white, 23.8 were black or African American, 5.2 percent were Asian, and 32.2 percent were Hispanic or Latinx.⁶⁶ This means that over 60 percent of warehouse workers identified as a minority race, compared to just 36.4 percent of the total working population in the United States.
- **Age of workers:** The median age of warehouse workers is 37.1.⁶⁷ Approximately 17.5 percent of warehouse workers are age 55 and older. Additionally, over 30 percent of workers are in the 25-34 years of age category, a category that encompasses the average ages in the United States to have a child for the first time.⁶⁸ Workers in this age group may be parents of young children.
- **Wages:** Though employment in the warehousing sector has doubled in the last decade, average wages have not increased significantly. In 2010, nonsupervisory warehouse employees earned just under \$16/hour. Today, they earn \$18.78/hour.⁶⁹ Amazon's internal minimum wage is \$15/hour.
 - o At the early height of the COVID crisis, Amazon raised its minimum wage to \$17/hour, and will pay associates double the regular rate for overtime work at a minimum of \$34/hour.^{70, 71} (This increase is scheduled to expire on May 16, 2020.) This move is estimated to cost the company \$500 million by the end of April. But for perspective, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, personally earns about \$275 million per day.⁷²
 - o As of April 12, 2020, the average annual pay for Amazon Warehouse jobs category in the US was \$32,015 per year.⁷³ It takes Bezos just 10 seconds to personally acquire the same amount.



⁶⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) 'Employed persons by detailed industry, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity', *Labor force statistics from the current population survey* [online]. Available at: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm>

⁶⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) 'Employed persons by detailed industry and age', *Labor force statistics from the current population survey* [online]. Available at: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18b.htm>

⁶⁸ Bui, Q. and Miller, C.C. (2018) 'The age that women have babies: how a gap divides America', *The New York Times*, 4 August [online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/04/upshot/up-birth-age-gap.html>

⁶⁹ (n.d.). *Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject*. [online] Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available at: https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/CEU4349300008?amp%253bdata_tool=XGtable&output_view=data&include_graphs=true [Accessed 23 Apr. 2020].

⁷⁰ Sebastian, D. (2020). Amazon Aims to Test All Employees for Covid-19. *Wall Street Journal*. [online] 16 Apr. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/amazon-aims-to-test-all-employees-for-covid-19-11587048230> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].

⁷¹ Radio, S.C.P. (2020). *Amazon To Change Time-Off Policy During Pandemic, Extend Pay Bump*. [online] Southern California Public Radio. Available at: <https://www.scpr.org/news/2020/04/24/92168/amazon-to-change-time-off-policy-during-pandemic-e/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2020].

⁷² Glum, J. (2018). *The Median Amazon Employee's Salary Is \$28,000. Jeff Bezos Makes More Than That in 10 Seconds*. [online] Money. Available at: <https://money.com/amazon-employee-median-salary-jeff-bezos/>.

⁷³ ZipRecruiter. (n.d.). *Amazon Warehouse Annual Salary (\$32,015 Avg | Apr 2020)*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Amazon-Warehouse-Salary> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2020].