



OPENING STATEMENT

House Committee on Education and Labor

Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Opening Statement of Chairwoman Alma Adams (NC-12)

House Subcommittee on Workforce Protections Hearing

Clearing the Air: Science Based Strategies to Protect Workers from COVID-19 Infections

[Zoom](#)

Thursday, March 11, 2021 | 10:45 a.m.

I want to welcome everyone to the first hearing of the Workforce Protections Subcommittee in the 117th Congress. Today, we will discuss the imperative to protect workers' health and safety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed one of the most significant threats to workers' health and safety in a century.

Across the country, tens of thousands of workers have been infected by COVID-19 on the job and many thousands have died. Meatpacking workers, health care workers, transportation workers, correctional workers, and other frontline workers are all struggling with the severe physical **and** emotional trauma of the pandemic. While some of us have the luxury of working from home, these workers—who are disproportionately low-income and people of color—are risking their lives to keep our communities afloat.

One of our witnesses today, Pascaline Muhindura, is a nurse at a hospital in Kansas City. Her coworker, Celia Yap-Banago, died of COVID-19 due to unsafe working conditions. Ms. Yap-Banago's family is watching today's hearing. I want to express our condolences for your loss and appreciation for the critical work for which Ms. Yap-Banago gave her life.

These tragic losses are even more heartbreaking considering that, until recently, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, was missing in action.

Under the Trump Administration, the federal agency charged with protecting workers refused to issue new enforceable safety standards, leaving workers vulnerable to workplace infections. The agency made it harder to keep track of workplace illnesses and injuries.

The political appointees at OSHA failed to leverage the agency's resources to adequately inspect worksites, and allowed multi-billion-dollar corporations to get off with meager penalties while ignoring worker deaths that were likely linked to COVID-19.

And, during a hearing last year, OSHA's Acting Assistant Secretary even refused to acknowledge that COVID-19 poses a "grave danger" for workers.

Now, OSHA's inspectors and staff have worked hard to keep workplaces safe given the resources they have. But the Trump Administration's political leadership abandoned OSHA's mission and left workers with little to no help from their government.

As a recent report from OSHA's Inspector General found, worker complaints have skyrocketed during the pandemic, but OSHA inspections have fallen dramatically over the past year. The report also called on OSHA to consider issuing an Emergency Temporary Standard.

A recent *Wall St. Journal* investigation revealed a litany of major workplace COVID outbreaks, OSHA complaints, and insufficient responses from federal OSHA or state OSHA plans. The main argument for inaction: federal OSHA had no COVID-related standards. The *Journal* identified more than 1,000 worker deaths from COVID-19 that were likely linked to workplace transmission of the virus but had never been investigated by OSHA. Employers had failed to report many of these fatalities to OSHA.

Today, our expert witnesses will help us assess how the Biden Administration can recover from these failures and keep workers safe and healthy moving forward.

First, OSHA must swiftly issue a strong Emergency Temporary Standard, or ETS, to protect workers against COVID-19 infections. For more than a year, Chairman Scott and I urged the previous Administration to issue an ETS, but OSHA refused. Thankfully, the Biden Administration has moved quickly to restore OSHA's purpose by directing OSHA to consider issuing an ETS. I am hopeful we will see this ETS soon, but we must do far more to fully protect workers.

As our witnesses will share, we must better protect workers from the airborne transmission of COVID-19. We now know the virus spreads not just through large droplets that quickly dissipate, but through microscopic particles that can travel long distances and for long periods. This has major implications for protecting workers who are frequently in close contact with others. Yet, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not updated its workplace guidance to reflect this clear scientific evidence, which is also needed to shape a strong OSHA standard.

We also need a plan to get vaccines to all the essential workers who have risked their lives to keep our economy going. Americans across the country are thankfully starting to get vaccinated. But we still have no national strategy to ensure that—in addition to emergency responders and health care workers—grocery store clerks, meat processing workers, teachers, transportation workers, corrections officers and others are not left behind.

We must also take clear steps to keep track of workplace infections. Shockingly, the federal government has **no** system for monitoring the number of workers who have gotten sick or where they are employed. The previous administration even effectively gutted requirements for employers to report COVID-19-related worker hospitalizations. We cannot hope to learn from the lessons of this pandemic without the data to understand how to protect workers in the future.

Any discussion about protecting health care workers must also address the disproportionately high rates of violence that health care and social services workers face on the job. Today, we will discuss legislation introduced by Representative Courtney that requires OSHA to quickly issue a workplace violence prevention standard to protect health care and social service workers.

Finally, in order for OSHA to identify and address the most dangerous workplaces, it must be able to collect accurate injury and illness data. Today, our witnesses will also discuss legislation, introduced by Representative Takano, that would allow OSHA to effectively enforce its injury and illness recordkeeping requirements.

National emergencies, such as this pandemic, are the exact reason why OSHA was first established. Yet, for far too long, OSHA's leadership was asleep at the wheel, costing the lives of workers. Now, we have the opportunity to restore OSHA's mission and protect workers' health and safety at a time when they need it most. Today's hearing is an important first step towards that goal.

I now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Keller, for his opening statement.