

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
WEBINAR
ESSENTIAL WORKERS:
ONE YEAR INTO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Washington, D.C.

Thursday, March 18, 2021

PARTICIPANTS:

Keynote Remarks:

JARED BERNSTEIN
Member, Council of Economic Advisers, The White House
Former Senior Fellow, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

Moderated Discussion:

MOLLY KINDER, Moderator
David M. Rubenstein Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program
The Brookings Institution

THE HONORABLE TERESA MOSQUEDA
Councilmember
Seattle City Council

THE HONORABLE TOM WOLF
Governor
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. KINDER: Good morning and welcome to today's event, "Essential Workers: One Year Into the COVID-19 Pandemic." I'm Molly Kinder, a Rubenstein fellow at the Metropolitan Policy Program here at the Brookings Institution.

Over the next hour we will honor the country's 50 million essential workers who've been on the COVID-19 frontline over the past year at great risk to themselves and to their families. They're the grocery clerks, hospital workers, first responders, transit workers, home health aides, and so many more.

Since the start of the pandemic we've expressed our gratitude to them for keeping us safe and fed and protected in a harrowing year. But, of course, essential workers need far more than just our praise. In a new Brookings Metro report published today, my colleague Laura Stater and I write that a year into the pandemic much more needs to be done to ensure that essential workers receive decent pay, that they have the lifesaving protections that they need, and that they have the power to shape their work conditions and stay safe.

Today, we're going to hear from federal, state, and local leaders about what it will take to pay, protect, and empower essential workers. We're going to discuss some of the innovative policies and programs that are leading the way. And we're going to hear from four essential workers about what they've experienced in the pandemic and what they hope will change.

To get our conversation started I'm delighted to welcome Jared Bernstein to give keynote remarks. Jared is currently a member of the Council of Economic Advisers at the White House. Previously, he served as chief economist to then Vice President Biden and was a senior fellow at the Center for Budget and Policy priorities. Jared has spent his career standing up for workers and championing policies for better wages and a fairer economy. Please welcome Jared Bernstein.

MR. BERNSTEIN: Thank you, Molly. I'm truly elated to be here at Brookings today, at least virtually, to honor the work that essential workers have done to keep this country throughout the past year. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare inequities long embedded in our economy as well as our reliance on the work of the people we're honoring today.

You know, there's a famous scene in the movie "The Princess Bride" where, after allegedly inconceivable things happening, one character tells another, "That word 'inconceivable,' I don't

think it means what you think it means.” This scene comes back to me when I think about the depth of the challenges facing our essential workers.

Consider what’s essential to us. At the most basic level food, housing, breathable air and drinkable water. At a level up, but equally essential, there’s our family and our friends, there’s healthcare, paths to opportunities and personal fulfillment. Any successful society must prioritize these essential trends.

And here’s the key point. Once we recognize our essential needs any successful society must also prioritize the essential workers that ensure we meet those needs. And it’s here where we have a lot of work to do, work this administration takes extremely seriously, work we’re already making real progress on.

This perspective on what we mean by “essential” comes across fulsomely in the excellent policy paper by Molly Kinder and Laura Stateler that accompanies today’s event, an analysis from which I’ll extensively borrow in a moment. But first, I must note that this perspective, the elevation of the importance of essential workers, has been something President Biden and Vice President Harris (inaudible).

Essential workers are providing lifesaving medical care, cleaning our hospital rooms, delivering our food and other essential goods, stocking our grocery store shelves, getting us from place to place, keeping our cities’ lights on, and so much more. They’ve been on the frontlines of that pandemic. He argued, “American workers are the heart and soul of this country.”

Too often, though, we’ve taken these workers and the work that they do for granted. But the coronavirus pandemic has heightened this critical truth all across this nation. It’s often our lowest-paid workers who have stepped up during the crisis. More recently, the president put it this way when talking to essential workers, “You kept the country going. You’re carrying it on your backs.”

Molly and Laura’s work underscores the president’s take on this. They find that there are around 50 million essential workers, about a third of our workforce. They work in healthcare as nurses, personal care aides, home health aides, and hospital workers. They’re cashiers in retail. They’re janitors in the facilities we occupy. They’re security guards and stock clerks. They’re the sanitation workers I watched from the window of my home office this very morning. They’re truck drivers and transportation

workers who keep vital supply chains open.

Their paper finds 22 million essential workers, just under half, earn a median wage of less than \$15 an hour, an important non-random wage level I'll come back to shortly. Black and Brown workers are not just overrepresented among essential workers, they're overrepresented in low-wage jobs and in positions that pose a direct risk to their health.

But let me assure you that I'm not here today speaking on behalf of the Biden administration; simply to talk about the challenge. Sticking with the motivation behind today's event I'm here to talk about solutions.

You'll recall that a second ago I reported that almost half of essential workers earn less than \$15 an hour. That means that one of the most direct ways to help them is to do something President Biden has been working for since before he took office: raise the national minimum wage to \$15 an hour. The president was disappointed when this proposal had to come out of the American Rescue Plan for procedural reasons. But that must mean we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work, finding a legislative path forward for this policy that this disproportionately lifts the pay of women, workers of color, and essential workers.

By the way, this is one reason it drove me more than a little bit nuts to hear opponents of the Rescue Plan claim that the minimum wage had nothing to do with the crisis. The only way you can believe that is if you're not paying attention to who's been keeping this country going throughout the crisis.

Let me now elaborate a bit on how the American Rescue Plan helps essential workers, among others. Over 400 billion in stimulus checks that help all Americans, but particularly those, like essential workers, who have been hit hardest by the pandemic; 170 billion in support for child care and school re-openings to decrease the burden of additional child care expenses on essential workers; 75 billion in investment in COVID-19 testing and contact tracing; the public health workforce vaccine distribution reducing the chance of infecting for frontline workers who are most at risk; 350 billion in aid to state and local governments who employ millions of essential workers and would be facing the prospect of looming budget cuts for educational and public safety positions; 5 billion in nutritional assistance programs that low-income Americans; 30 billion in rental assistance that will benefit essential workers

trying to pay their housing bills; 120 billion expansion in the Child Tax Credits provided additional relief to essential workers with kids at home who've incurred high costs during the pandemic.

The Rescue Plan is designed to finally deliver COVID-19 the knockout punch it has heretofore avoided. It is calibrated to be of the necessary magnitude to reliably get us to the other side of this crisis so that our economy can finally launch a robust, inclusive, and racially equitable recovery.

But getting to the other side of this crisis doesn't mean our work is done. Not by a long shot. It means we must turn in economic terms from the cyclical to the structural. If you've paid even passing attention to President Biden's aspirations, you know that getting back to where we were before this crisis sets the bar too low. We must turn to our structural challenges from reversing the disinvestment in public goods to hastening the shift to clean energy; to standing up a viable child care sector; to economic investments in innovation, education, manufacturing; to empowering all workers through stronger labor law and more connective bargaining, essential or otherwise; and much more.

To be clear, reducing long-term child poverty, affordable and accessible child care, a cleaner, safer environment, and a higher minimum wage will help not just essential workers, but many other workers, as well. That's as it should be because Joe Biden will always put working people at the heart of his policy agenda.

But we will never forget those who in his words have kept the country going and carried us on your backs. "Essential" means something important to this administration. I dare say it means something essential. And I believe that not just our words, but our deeds, even in these early days, has shown that to be the case. I hope and trust you're as excited as we are to see what's coming next.

Thank you and have a great session today.

MS. KINDER: Great. Thank you so much, Jared, for sharing these remarks and for sharing with us the strong commitment of the Biden administration for essential workers. And some of the things that Jared discussed from raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour to strengthening our labor laws to make it easier for workers to organized, these are some of the policy recommendations that Laura Stateler and I have in our new report today. So, it's very encouraging to hear these very strong commitments from Jared on behalf of the Biden administration. And, of course, I always appreciate a reference to the movie "The Princess Bride."

Now I'm very pleased to introduce you to four essential workers: Lisa Harris, Sabrina Hopps, Tony Powell, and Jeffrey Reid. Over the past year I've had the great privilege of learning from Sabrina and Lisa, Jeffrey and Tony as they shared with us their experiences from the COVID-19 frontline and informed our work at the Brookings Institution.

In this video they will share with you the sacrifices they've endured over the past year and what they hope will change coming out of the pandemic. Our thanks to the Omidyar Network for their support, to Joshua Kogan for his extraordinary photography, to UFCW Local 400 and 1199 SEIU for all of their collaboration, and, of course, to the workers for generously sharing their stories.

(Video begins)

MR. REID: I am currently the number two person in the Meat Department and I've been in that capacity for that last 12 years.

MS. HARRIS: I started when I was 19 at my local Kroger.

MR. POWELL: My mother's always told us to make sure we take care of our community. I've been there for 44 years.

MS. HOPPS: I'm a single mother of six, a grandmother of five, and I have been working in housekeeping over 16 years.

MR. REID: I had a full range of emotions, some of them being fear. I was fearful am I going to contract this virus? Initially, you could see the fear in people's eyes. You see a customer that you know every day and you see them, they got a mask on, they got gloves on.

MS. HARRIS: I choose to keep my family safe, so I have not seen them in person since COVID began. I come out to my car to eat on my breaks, which also leads to a feeling of isolation.

MS. HOPPS: Being in housekeeping you never know what a patient has, so it's scary.

MR. POWELL: To see people dying. I see people I went to school with and grew up with and they'll come in and, just like that, they're gone.

MS. HOPPS: We are risking our lives. I have asthma and I just got over pneumonia I February. But I take that chance to go out here to work because I know we have to survive.

MS. HARRIS: I see 300 people a day. I'm grateful for my healthcare that the union fought for.

MR. POWELL: You know, we're not immune to it and we're constantly exposed, but if I was that person with COVID I would hope that somebody will take care of me like I'm taking care of them.

MS. HOPPS: I have learned now not to get as close to patients. But right now I have no choice because they have no visitors.

MR. REID: Mostly grocery workers, such as myself, a vast majority of them are Black and Brown and those are the people that have really been affected by this coronavirus.

MR. REID: Everything is expressive here. Sometimes you take home -- people want to take you home, you know what I mean.

MS. HARRIS: Watching my associates have to deal with people at the door act in a hostile manner when being asked to put on a mask for less than \$15 an hour.

MR. REID: These are people who work very, very, very hard and get very, very, very little. We no longer get hazardous pay and this hazard is still out here. And so you feel like a slap in the face.

MS. HARRIS: There are people who are working here that are checking out people's food, who are buying their own food with food stamps.

MR. POWELL: The techs and the EVS workers and the respiratory therapists, their job is just as important as any doctor or any nurse, but you're not getting the respect and the compensations that you should.

MR. HOPPS: I want to see workers like myself get paid more than minimum wage, to be honest with you, to have money saved in my bank account.

MS. HARRIS: I feel like the world has got a glimpse of how hard things are for people who are frontline. People who have sucked up their fear every single day and marched through that door not knowing whether today would be the day they catch it deserve recompense for that.

MR. REID: You're doing important work. They need to be compensated for that, you know what I mean. They need a good healthcare plan, you need paid vacations. That's what I think a good job entails.

MS. HARRIS: We need to make sure that we're taking care of those that serve us every day.

(Video ends)

MS. KINDER: I'm delighted to now introduce the speakers for our panel discussion, Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda and Governor Tom Wolf.

Councilmember Mosqueda is an at-large member of Seattle City Council. She has over a decade of experience working with labor unions and working families. And she sponsored an innovative hazard pay mandate that has required large grocery employers in Seattle to temporarily boost pay for essential grocery workers.

Governor Wolf is the governor of Pennsylvania, on the other side of the country. Previously, Tom ran a successful family business. And as governor he has championed higher wages and introduced what I consider the most innovative and best statewide hazard pay program in the country.

Welcome, Councilmember Mosqueda and Governor Wolf. Thank you for taking the time to join us today.

Before we turn to some of the specifics of the policies and programs you put in place for essential workers, I just wanted to start with hearing how your own constituents have been impacted by the pandemic and what the essential workers in the frontlines of your communities are going through.

Councilmember Mosqueda, you know, Seattle was one of the first places in the country to be hit by the pandemic. What has this meant for essential workers in your community?

COUNCILMEMBER MOSQUEDA: Well, good morning and thank you very much for having me. It's an incredible honor to be here with you, with the governor and with the esteemed research team from Brookings. Your research and your data-driven solutions have been instrumental in looking at what the impact of COVID has been on frontline workers.

It's truly an important question to ask how the workers are doing because your video centered why we're even having this discussion. And to get a little bit more of a glimpse into the lives of essential workers I want to add to some of the stories you just heard, stories of mostly women who have been disproportionately impacted either by losing their job or having to still go to work; stories of mostly people of color who, as we see from the data shows that they are not only higher risk of contracting COVID, but also dying from COVID. And these very workers also either having disproportionate rates of

unemployment or, on the flip side, still having to go to work, sometimes in two to three jobs, and having higher rates of exposure to COVID and risk coming home with the disease.

One story comes from a grocery worker out here in Seattle, who was advised to go home, strip his clothes off at the door, immediately jump into the shower, and wash off and throw his clothes into the washing machine before he could even give his kiddos a hug or his spouse a kiss. This is after just going to his job as a normal grocery worker and this is the type of exposure that they were worried about and are at risk of every day.

Another UFCW Local 21 member out here in Seattle testified when we were considering the hazard pay law that she feared going to work so much that she physically shook as she walked into her place of employment because she had repeatedly been stocking produce and having customers reach over her, grabbing that zucchini with their mask under their nose or around their chin. And when she reminded folks to bring up their masks to cover their nose, she'd get yelled at, so close that she could feel droplets of spit coming at her.

And another worker, a mother here in Seattle, a grocery worker, who had no child care for her kiddo because her daycare closed. She couldn't find another affordable daycare in the very expensive city of Seattle and she drives now over an hour to an outside city called Lakewood to drop her child off for daycare and drives an hour back to the city of Seattle just so that she can keep her job, so that she can have daycare cover her shift as she works at the local grocery store. And where does she sleep after she drives the hour back to get her kiddo? In her car because he made the impossible decision of whether or not she was going to pay for that child care or pay for her apartment. And she had to pay for child care in order to keep her job.

These are the very essential workers that we are talking about right now, calling heroes. These are the essential workers who are on the frontline making these impossible decisions.

So, there was a report from Brookings very recently, last month actually, that said for the past few months leaders have said that it's not enough just to praise these workers. We also must pay these workers.

And the very first impact that COVID has had is showing that these workers are truly essential, but all the while our economy has continued to deem them as expendable. But these are our

essential workers, not just in grocery stores, but also in farm working and hotel and healthcare and long-term care, truck drivers, transit drivers, all low-wage workers that deserved respect and fair pay before COVID and absolutely deserve it now.

So, I'm proud that we in Seattle recognized the hazard that many of these workers were in and recognized it by making sure we offered hazard pay because of the hazardous way that they were in. But we shouldn't be thanking them for their sacrifice because these workers should not be sacrificial.

Right now I am excited to continue to work on the progress that we've made to build on the recommendations in your report because we should not be going back to business as usual, where these very essential workers were making minimum wage, are still struggling to put food on their own table while they sell food to others; who are struggling to care for their own families as they care for others in healthcare settings.

And I really appreciate the work that Brookings has done to highlight the disparity not just in terms of what workers have experienced, but the disparity in terms of who has profited during this pandemic. Because there are pandemic profiteers that are clearly benefiting during this time of COVID, and making sure that those profiteers are sharing their profits by increasing pay over the long haul for workers, including benefits, you know, not going after workers who are trying to unionize, and truly giving them respect in their jobs, not just during the time of the pandemic.

Thank you to Brookings for highlighting this disparity within Amazon, Walmart, Kroger. The report showed how hazard pay went away at the very moment that the hazard just got worse in these grocery stores. And we want to make sure that we're correcting for that.

So, it's a really powerful story of workers coming together in this moment and recognizing that we have an opportunity to right the wrongs of our past local economy. But we cannot do this without recognizing who has been disproportionately impacted, these low-wage workers, women, people of color, large immigrant and refugee communities. And their stories compound and add to the stories we've heard here in Seattle, and I'm looking forward to working with you as we lift up these stories and make long-term progressive change.

MS. KINDER: Great. Thank you, Councilmember Mosqueda. You gave us a lot there. We're going to come back and unpack some of these specific things, but thank you for centering this

discussion on the lives of the workers who have been so impacted. And your point about women disproportionately impacted, workers of color, I think that's something that we should center our discussion on.

Governor Wolf, I'd love to ask you the same question and Councilmember Mosqueda has raised, also, this issue of hazard pay. So, I'd like to hear from you, how have Pennsylvanians been impacted? I'm not sure, is that how you say it? How do you say residents of Pennsylvania? Is it Pennsylvanians or --

GOVERNOR WOLF: Yes.

MS. KINDER: Okay, good.

GOVERNOR WOLF: That works. That works.

MS. KINDER: Okay, great.

GOVERNOR WOLF: Yeah. No, I'd like to thank you for having me and I think Councilmember Mosqueda did a phenomenal job of pointing out what I think the primary, one of the big effects of this pandemic has been, and that is a much broader appreciation for just who frontline workers are and how important they are to our lives.

I mean, it's not just a morally good thing to do, it is that, but it's also important that we now understand how essential that they really are to our daily lives. When you can't buy food, when you can't go to the grocery store or you go to the grocery store and the food isn't on the shelves because the folks doing the processing haven't been able to do it, we actually recognized for the first time I think in a long time how important they are.

And as Councilmember Mosqueda said, it's not enough to say, you know, here's a pat on the back, we really appreciate what you're doing, thank you for your service. We can't just do that. And so things like an increase in the minimum wage, as Jared Bernstein said.

And what we've done in Pennsylvania and I think what Seattle has done to actually create a fund to raise the compensation for hazard work or hazard pay for workers who are on the frontlines. What we've done in Pennsylvania, maybe it's innovative, but it's certainly not nearly enough. We need to do more.

One other thing. You pointed out that I was in business before I got this job. This is the

first time I've been in politics in my life, so I've been in politics now for six years as governor of Pennsylvania. Most of my adult life I was in business and I was in a business that is notorious for not paying its frontline workers adequately. But I did and I paid a good wage, shared my profits in annual cash distributions to my employees, and my benefits were Cadillac benefits.

And what I found in this really minimum wage job, that was supposedly minimum wage, that if you treat your employees fairly, they treat you fairly. And I think employers, not just the rest of us, good employers are recognizing that if they want to do a good business, if they want to be profitable and productive, then they really owe these frontline essential workers a lot more. I hope that's one of the benefits that has come out of this pandemic.

MS. KINDER: That's great. And I just want to invite for anyone who's listening and wants to join the discussion and ask a question, on Twitter use the hashtag #EssentialWorkers and we will pick up your questions.

So, Governor Wolf, that's a great segue back to Councilmember Mosqueda. You know, it's really inspiring to hear of an employer voluntarily choosing to invest in their workers, offer good benefits, and share profits. Unfortunately, some of the research that my colleagues Laura Stateler, Julia Du, and I have done during the pandemic has highlighted that some of the biggest and most profitable retail and grocery chains, who have earned just extraordinary profits during the pandemic, with a few prominent exceptions, like companies like Costco, which has been so generous both with the starting wage in addition to hazard pay, companies like Costco stand out as an exception. We found that typically the large retail companies were not meaningfully raising pay during a pandemic when the frontline workers were at risk and when profits were up so significantly. I think we found that in the first three quarters of 2020, 13 of the largest retail companies earned almost an additional \$18 billion extra in profit.

So, Councilmember Mosqueda, I'm really struck by some of the leadership you've shown, similar to some of the other cities on the West Coast, from L.A., Long Beach, on up, into Washington State. You spearheaded a mandate requiring that some of these large, profitable grocery chains do offer temporary pay bonds. So, can you tell us a little bit about your motivation, why you thought that was necessary, and whether or not this is something that could be a model elsewhere?

COUNCILMEMBER MOSQUEDA: Thank you very much. I am really excited to be part

of this panel and to continue to hear about the great work happening with Governor Wolf's leadership. And this is an issue that many cities and states across the country are grappling with.

I hope that as we talk about public policy we center ourselves on how we treat essential workers as essential. Because a lot of essential workers are out there saying, great, now I've been deemed as essential. Does that actually mean that I get ongoing pay so that I can afford food and put a roof over my head? And, you know, when an employer is like, nah, we're just going to put up a sign that says, "Heroes work here," that does not pay their rent. That does not put food on the table.

So, the public policy changes that we need to enact in our cities and our states really need to get at the root cause of the inequities that we see. And right now that root cause of the inequity that we see is, in part, the low wages that many of these workers have experienced; in part, lack of access to healthcare, which is why I'm a huge champion of Medicare for All, thanks to our own congressional Congresswoman Jayapal, who reintroduced that yesterday. And which is why I think hazard pay is the beginning of the conversation about how we recognize the hazard that many of these workers are in.

When you provided the data, it complemented many of the stories that we heard here in Seattle. The example of these very large companies that Brookings highlighted -- Amazon, Walmart, Kroger, and a handful of others that had skyrocketing profits during this pandemic -- juxtaposed to many of the employers who originally offered around a \$2 hazard pay, which pretty quickly went away in early summer and late spring. And in lieu of that hazard pay, they offered workers a \$5 gas card. That does not respect the workers. It doesn't pay rent. It doesn't put food on the table. It doesn't help make sure that they have healthcare.

So why the actual hazard pay legislation was needed in the first place is because we saw these workers working already paycheck-to-paycheck, recognizing that most Americans only have about \$400 in their savings account to begin with. When there was a risk of losing their job and there is a risk of contracting COVID, we had to act very quickly to make sure that workers in the essential workforce or in the service sector had the care that they needed.

But specifically, in grocery, we saw that there was five times higher rates of exposure and infection to grocery store workers on the grocery floor, according to an October 2020 British Medical

Journal report. And it showed that there was a 20% increase in the number of workers who tested positive despite 91% of them actually wearing a mask effectively.

And to complement this, the Brookings Metro report also at the same time showed that these grocery stores were reporting record profits, profits of about 270% at Albertson's, up 70% at Amazon, and up 99.8% at Kroger. The money not going back to workers, but going back into dividends and CEO pay. So, these were some of the more compelling reasons to act quickly, and we did so and we did it with urgency.

Within the month of January, we took sort of notice of what was happening in Long Beach and other cities in California. And we acted with urgency to pass the hazard pay, \$4 an hour increase in hazard pay.

And what has the result been? 73% of Seattleites favor the hazard pay legislation that we passed. It is overwhelmingly supported and it is a positive impact in our local economy. Seattleites get that. I think voters across this country will get that.

That's despite grocery stores like Kroger saying that they're going to shut down stores. Now, they've threatened to shut down two here in the city of Seattle and let's note that one of those stores already had their lease up for termination because they're redeveloping that property.

But we've also seen really positive impacts, like Trader Joe's and PCC recognizing the worker power, recognizing the positive sentiment in the electorate, and recognizing it's the right thing to do right now and feeling that pressure. They applied it to their stores across the board. That's incredible.

And after Seattle passed our hazard pay legislation, the city of Burien next door passed theirs. And now King County, named after Martin Luther King, has passed their hazard pay, as well. And all cities in our region are going to be able to access hazard pay.

This is incredibly important and I think part of the narrative is vast policies can happen because these policies have been backburnered for so long. And it is important as we think about recovery to make sure that these are not flash-in-the-pan policies, but these are really setting the stage for those longer-term equitable policies.

Hazard pay is not an increase in the minimum wage. This is temporary, so we must continue to work on increasing the minimum wage locally and across the nation, \$15 an hour. I know

your recent report also talked about that. Medicare for All, making sure that there is equitable access to affordable child care across this country, universal child care, and Domestic Workers Bill of Rights because those workers make other work possible. They make our local economies run. And Vice President Harris at the time was a co-sponsor, along with our very own Congresswoman Jayapal, who introduced the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights at the national level, building on what Seattle passed two years ago.

My fear is in this moment we are acting with urgency, respecting essential workers, in many ways lifting them up, but we have to be wary of disaster capitalism on the horizon and people saying that worker protections, labor standards need to be eroded, that taxation and the revenue that is creating the foundation for the very services that our most vulnerable rely on need to be cut back. That type of disaster capitalism is just on the horizon and we need to both protect against it and continue to advance the very important changes that we made. Because it's popular, it's the right thing to do, and it's actually the key to opening our economies back in a more equitable way and faster.

MS. KINDER: That's great. Thank you, Councilmember Mosqueda. And I think some of the polling I've seen out of California suggests similar rates of popularity of some of the California mandates.

And just anecdotally, the Trader Joe's employees in my own neighborhood in Washington, D.C., have confirmed they, too, are getting a doubling of hazard pay to \$4 an hour, which is one of the ripple effects of some of the work that you're doing out West.

Governor Wolf, some of the pushback to the hazard pay mandates that we're seeing, which really focus on just a portion of essential workers, is that they don't cover everybody. And I think part of the reason that's the case is that not all employers right now in this pandemic recession have a lot of excess profit right now and that raising pay right now at this moment might be difficult. That's some of the consideration.

And something that my colleagues and I have written a fair bit about at the Brookings Institution is that to reach a broader swath of low-wage essential workers we need national reform. We need a higher minimum wage that's phased in and we also need congressional funding for hazard pay. That's the best way to make sure that everybody, not just those at more profitable companies, get it.

That, of course, hasn't happened, so Democrats had initially tried to include a very generous Heroes Fund early in the pandemic. It never passed into law. The most recent relief bill had a lot of important things for essential workers, but did not include a minimum wage increase or hazard pay.

What strikes me about what you've done in Pennsylvania is while it was small-scale, it was just with \$50 million of federal relief, so it wasn't able to reach all the workers who were eligible or deserved it, and not even for a very long period of time. I think it provide what's possible if there really was more federal support. And especially with this \$350 billion in state and local aid that's just been passed, some state and local governments are in a better place than others and may be able to harness some of that funding to do more of what Pennsylvania did.

So, given that we might be facing this opportunity with more federal funding coming directly to state and local governments, I'd just love to hear a little bit more about how you approach this. Like, you know, I was always struck by what an equity focus you had in this program. You know, you had a limited amount of money, but you targeted it at the workers with greatest need. Can you just explain more about what you did and reflect on what this might mean, if there was more federal money available, how we might replicate some of the approach you took?

GOVERNOR WOLF: Sure. Thanks. Actually, there are three things.

I think in Pennsylvania, we did, as you pointed out, a \$50 million hazard pay program, but we said, okay, here's how we're defining the essential frontline workers, and it was \$50 million. I don't think it was by accident that actually it was oversubscribed immediately, \$900 million worth. Now, I don't know if all those requests were merited, but just that's 18 times what we actually had available. \$50 million for Pennsylvania is a lot of money, but it was not close to being enough. So, I think that that's something that we learned that employers and employees obviously think that that's important.

The second thing is it really reinforced the notion of how important the minimum wage is, to your point. If you really want to ensure that everybody -- because, as Councilmember Mosqueda said, this is actually something that tons of people doing the most essential work are getting the lowest pay. That doesn't make any sense.

Now, I understand that the market sometimes has funky ways of actually allocating the dollars in the labor market, but that really doesn't make sense that we have something that is so socially

important, economically important, and they're not being rewarded. So, the minimum wage would be one way to sort of pay everybody. Because in Pennsylvania, my idea of minimum wage is that it also gets rid of tip minimum wage, it's consistent. I think Washington State has done that and I think that's really important, so that we're raising it for everybody, not just saying, okay, you're not going to get it. So, I think the minimum wage is important.

And I think there's a third thing. What we found in -- this is compensation and monetary compensation for doing this is important, but we also have to worry about the safety of the workers. And so in Pennsylvania, we did specific things to say we're going to check on employers to make sure that you're keeping your employees safe, that you're -- you know, we have a mask mandate in Pennsylvania, that you're enforcing that to keep your frontline workers safe; that you're looking at things like social distancing; you're cleaning surfaces. And those are the things that I think we also can't forget as we go through this, that we owe our frontline workers compensation, the benefits they deserve. We also owe them a safe workplace.

And I think that those are things that I've tried to put into place in Pennsylvania and I think have been popular and I think successful as far as they've gone. But I think they've also shown how much more we have to do.

MS. KINDER: So, Governor Wolf, just building on this really important point you made about safety, you know, I think some of what we're seeing now with the results of some internal audits of OSHA from the Department of Labor is that at a federal level we just have really failed to keep workers safe on the job, whether it was the woeful lack of PPE in the early days, you know, I interviewed so many workers in hospitals and nursing homes who just didn't have proper PPE, or just this inadequate level of enforcement of safety standards and inspecting workplaces.

You know, how much were you able as a governor to fill some of that void? And how much, especially when it comes to workers voicing safety concerns, like what's the ability to actually inspect and investigate and enforce some of these standards?

GOVERNOR WOLF: Yeah, thank you for pointing that out. I think we did a lot in that area. But, again, we could always do more.

Pennsylvania at the beginning of this pandemic had essentially no PPE. And we spent --

we would meet first daily, six days a week, with the task force to increase that and then, as we got better, maybe twice a week. But we actually built up our supplies of PPE, had a big warehouse full, and that was from zero to more than we've used throughout the pandemic now in terms of face masks, ventilators, and all kinds of things. Everything that has ever been important in the pandemic, we now have a stockpile. We didn't before and I think that's important.

And we made that available, in fact, mandatory for employers. So, if they couldn't get it, we could get it to them. And so we made sure that the people in food processing, in grocery stores, and other retail operations, if they didn't have the face masks, we'd get it to them. I think that was important.

And to the other point you made, we recognized that we need to do inspections and act affirmatively to do those things, but we also need to make sure that workers had a sense that if they didn't think they were being treated fairly, we had a place in the Commonwealth that they could turn. So, we had a phone number that they could call and make sure that the Department of Labor and Industry or Department of Agriculture, whoever was inspecting for whatever reason, would know that there was a problem and that they would follow up on that. So I think both of those things are important and thank you for reminding me.

MS. KINDER: No, thank you, Governor Wolf.

Councilmember Mosqueda, you know, I think a lot of the country looks to Seattle and Washington State as really a model of passing already a lot of the priorities that are still a fight elsewhere. So, whether it's a higher minimum wage or paid leave, you know, it's not a surprise to me that some of the more innovative hazard pay mandates were coming out of Seattle. You'd already done things similarly with gig workers. So, it's almost like a bit of an innovation factory of sort of seeing what's possible with more progressive policies.

You know, given that some of your constituents went into the pandemic with some better protections, with some of this paid leave that you were so involved in helping pass before you became part of the city council, as well as a higher minimum wage, how much of that extra protection or better pay and better protections provided a cushion to some of the workers going into this pandemic? And what's the sort of unfinished agenda?

COUNCILMEMBER MOSQUEDA: Thank you so much. All of the data shows from the

last recession the key to helping to weather economic downturns is investing in our lowest-wage workers. It's protecting public programs and public services, staying away from austerity budgeting. And frankly, it also shows that progressive revenue and progressive taxation is key to that, not just scale back during times of downturn, but to actually figure out how those who were doing the best during these times can pay into our local economies to help those who are most vulnerable, our lowest-wage workers, and to protect core government services.

So, it is true, in the city of Seattle we are weathering better than some other cities. Let's use child care, for example. National average of child care closures across this country are upwards of 40%. 40% of child care is saying that they might not be able to reopen their doors post-pandemic. Here in the city of Seattle, we're at about a 7% closure rate, 7% to 10% in our county. That's still one out of every 10 child cares. We have to address that and make sure that they can reopen. We had child care deserts in our own city prior to pandemic, so we have to reinvest in those.

But we are weathering better in terms of access to child care than many other cities across the nation. And according to the national statistics, we're doing about four times better in terms of keeping those child care centers open.

We're also, you know, suffering from a lack of investments into core government services over the past few decades. And if you look at housing investments at the national level, in the past administration we had a 40-year historic low in terms of investments in housing and public housing services. And the consequence has been that many cities and states, we're left out on our own to try to address the biggest crisis that is far bigger than our borders, but far too important to just wait for someone else to come in.

Now, we have an administration who is showing leadership. Thank you very much for the congressional action and the president's signature on the recent round of COVID support that includes housing assistance, but we are seeing more people fall into homelessness. We are seeing the instability of housing that was before COVID manifest in more people living in RVs and tents right here in Seattle. And I know cities across this country are experiencing that. We have to act with urgency to address that as we increase the very foundation that workers need, so that they can have a base pay that supports them to a greater stability.

In Seattle, we are very proud that the data continues to prove that I think you called it an economic innovative center here. I can't remember what you said, but it was great, I need to record that. Because we do work on economic experiments out here that we know will be successful.

Seattle's minimum wage is one of those. We passed \$15 an hour minimum wage. And literally, the headline in March of 2016 said, "The sky is not falling from Seattle's minimum wage hike," a year into the minimum wage implementation. And, in fact, the report went on to say that two times as many restaurants opened than closed after implementing minimum wage. That's what the data shows.

We used that data as we passed our statewide initiative that I was so proud to have led on with the Washington State Labor Council and our partners out here to increase the minimum wage across our state and to provide sick, and safely pointing to what Seattle had done, showing that not only was it good for workers, it was good for the local economy, as well.

And it included paid sick leave, paid sick days, not just for when you're sick or your family member's sick, but the safe leave element is really critical right now. Safe leave means that you can take time off if you're a survivor of domestic violence or experiencing a violent situation, can go get help at a medical facility, and move if you need to keep your family and your kiddos safe. You can take time off to do that.

And what's happening right now during the pandemic is greater experiences of domestic violence, more people being preyed upon during this time because there's a lot of stress in the community. And we need to have paid sick and safe leave replicated across our country. We need an increase in the minimum wage so that more of those individuals have economic stability and can leave if they need to.

We also, as you just mentioned, need to address the ongoing crisis within workplaces and increase the number of dollars available for inspection and enforcement. Because it's the very essential workers, the demographic there, women, people of color, immigrant workers, who are less likely to call for enforcement because they're in fear of losing their job or retaliation. And our national and state level inspectors have just fallen over the past few decades. This is our chance to increase those numbers of inspectors, increase labor standards, and make sure that we're investing in good, progressive labor standards that create the foundation, so that we can weather these storms better.

In Seattle, we showed that in the last recession we weathered a little bit better than the rest of the country. I'm hoping that if we use this moment and we invest in labor standards, protecting the things that we've already done, like gig economy and sick leave, minimum wage, access to unions for independent contractors organizing within the Lyft and Uber industry, and making sure that folks actually have access to that sick leave and child care, we're going to be better positioned in the future not only to weather the next recession, but we'll be able to help the local economy and that's good for business, as well.

MS. KINDER: Thank you. Governor Wolf, we fielded a question from Twitter that I think is an interesting one for you. The person is saying that they agree that workers need a living wage, but how do we deal with the fact that there's very different living wages across the country because of different costs of living. So, a living wage in San Francisco is going to look different from York, Pennsylvania.

So, does it make sense, is the question, to have one uniform federal minimum wage? And if not, does it make sense to do something with variations? So, how do you think about that?

And also, I'll add in the context that I know as governor, you've really championed to raise Pennsylvania's state minimum wage, which is the same as the federal, which is a shocking \$7.25 an hour. And you faced resistance with, you know, the legislature that you have.

So, to what extent is it helpful for Congress to pass these changes? So that's one question. And the second is, how do you deal with this very different cost of living?

GOVERNOR WOLF: You got to be careful with an old man like me to ask too many questions because I'll forget what the second question was.

MS. KINDER: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Is it helpful for federal to do it versus state? And how do we deal with the -- if are going to go with federal, how do we deal with the different --

GOVERNOR WOLF: Right. Yeah, I mean, I think theoretically, if you were raising the minimum wage to \$80 an hour, yeah, maybe you'd want to take into account the various factors, but no one's suggesting that. \$12 to \$15, the path to \$15 over the next few years is not going to break the bank in any market in any part of the United States. I think we're talking about a minimum wage.

And one of the guidelines maybe you'd want to use is where do your social services kick

in? When do you children start qualifying for Children's Health Insurance or SNAP programs or Medicaid, things like that? And so the argument you can make, and I make, you know, \$15 an hour, Pennsylvania actually saves taxpayer money. We're spending less on some of these services. Some of it's federal taxpayer money, some of it's state taxpayer money.

So, one of the ways it might be helpful to look at the minimum wage is to say, okay, where are we in terms of setting in our minds what our minimum social standards are? And they are somewhere around \$15 because if they weren't, we wouldn't have all these other programs that Republicans and Democrats make available for so many different reasons. So, that's one thing.

I'd like to also get back to the issue that Councilmember Mosqueda talked about. This pandemic has brought out compound issues. I mean, pay is a key factor, but I talk about safety in the workplace, we put together a command center in Pennsylvania that was actually -- it was actually made up of labor and business interests, the state chamber of commerce. And they came up with a report that is really interesting.

In addition to adequate pay, we need to make sure that we're doing things with child care and that these especially frontline workers, they need someone to take care of the kids. We need housing. We need transit, transportation help. We need help when it comes to health. I expanded Medicaid in Pennsylvania. It was one of the first things I did and drove the uninsured rate down to its lowest level ever, but it's still 5%. That's 5% of folks who don't have access, who are one health emergency away from complete disaster. And a lot of those folks are on our frontlines.

So, you know, we need to -- in addition to minimum wage, in addition to compensation issues, all of us need to think about these broad things. And as I say, in Pennsylvania, the idea is that this is a moral issue, but it's also a very practical issue. It's stupid not to actually pay people we depend on to makes them want to actually come to work and do a good job for us.

And so I think we're learning that and that might be one of the great lessons of this pandemic. We really need to rethink all the things that we're doing to make sure our economy runs and kind of one of those things is to make sure that our frontline workers are taken care of.

MS. KINDER: That's great. And I'm conscious of the time. We're toward the end and to the sort of pivoting, we're a year into the pandemic, the vaccine coverage is getting better by the day.

And I just want to acknowledge that Governor Wolf has dedicated some of the upcoming Johnson & Johnson vaccine to frontline workers, which I think is excellent news. It's been really concerning to see how essential workers have been sort of pushed back down in the queue, so it's really encouraging to hear news like this.

So, you know, the end or hopefully some end to the worst is upon our doorstep. And as we think about the point that was made about not going back to the old normal, coming out of this and trying to do things differently, and really improving the circumstances for frontline workers, you know, I'm just curious, with an audience in Washington what would be the most important thing you would want to see happen coming out of Washington to help you do what you want to do to structurally change things for workers? That would be my first question. And then I have a second round before we wrap up.

So, Councilmember Mosqueda, I'm curious, you know, you've already mentioned so many wonderful achievements that have already happened in Seattle. But what would be the most instrumental change at a federal level that would really, you know, change the game for some of these priorities for a long term?

COUNCILMEMBER MOSQUEDA: There's a few, but I'm going to again reiterate Medicare for All. The report that we saw from Public Citizen said that millions of infections of COVID would likely have been prevented had people had access to comprehensive healthcare. We know, as well, that one-third -- one-third -- of the COVID deaths have been tied to a lack of insurance. So, I have to underscore that in order for us to both prevent more deaths and harm in terms of the lingering consequences of not just COVID-19, but the next iteration of a public health crisis -- which will be coming; we knew this was going to be coming and we were not prepared as we should have been -- we need to have Medicare for All.

And I absolutely applaud Governor Wolf. I've followed some of his work on expanding Medicaid and health insurance. This is where I started my program, as well, with expanding Medicaid and standing up our exchange plan out here for the marketplace after the passage of the Affordable Care Act. But we still do not have access to comprehensive, affordable, quality healthcare for everyone that is not tied to employment.

And you look at the folks who are most impacted by COVID right now, these "essential

workers” going without the essential healthcare that they need. This is core to how we create stability for workers. You cannot actually get healthy if you don’t have access to comprehensive healthcare. And you cannot be healthy and stay home to stay healthy if you don’t have a home. So, underscoring again the importance of investment in housing.

I’ve already talked about universal child care. Appreciate and applaud what Governor Wolf has also mentioned in that arena. This is the equalizer. This is the great equalizer to make sure that workers can go back to work, largely, predominantly women can go back to work, either as employees or opening up their own small businesses which have been shuttered at very high degrees for our smallest businesses across this country. And it can be the great equalizer if we invest in child care providers and recognize they, too, are more likely to be women, immigrants, people of color, and working very low wages. So, investing in child care as a career option and making sure that they have living wage jobs, access to unions, benefits, and the respect that they deserve because their work, just like domestic workers, keeps our economies running.

And I have to mention just a few more directly related to worker protections at the federal level that I’d like to see. Greater protections for workers who want to unionize. The amount of workers who currently sit through forced meetings to intimidate them to not sign union cards is astounding and that’s happening today in 2021. We need incentives to unionize and protection against that type of behavior.

I applaud Senator Sanders. I know he just recently introduced legislation related to the CEO pay ratio, which helps to address the staggering income inequality that we see just growing in the aftermath of COVID, but was certainly there prior to COVID.

Progressive taxation. In Seattle, Washington, I led the charge for the jumpstart progressive taxation bill to tax those companies in Seattle with more than \$7 million in payroll and who have workers making over \$150,000 in salary. So, it’s a progressive progressive tax. And doing more things like that at the national level to close corporate loopholes, to tax those who are the wealthiest right now, to make sure that we’re reinvesting in our systems, taxation is not a penalty. It is how we keep roads open and schools funded. It’s how we can help make sure that families and our kiddos and our seniors are healthy. So, addressing those immediately is a priority.

And to continue to make sure that we are lifting up investments in the worker protections that we've already made in our local jurisdictions, and warding off any sort of conversation that says you've got to scale back worker protections or cut taxes as a way to stimulate the economy. That is not what the data shows. We are on the right path if we continue to protect workers and push progressive taxation. And that way we can do what is sort of the simple saying: More money towards jobs and education and less money towards jails and occupation. That is how we can help invest in our communities and create greater stability in the long run.

MS. KINDER: Great. Thank you. And Governor Wolf?

GOVERNOR WOLF: Can I just add to that?

MS. KINDER: Sure.

GOVERNOR WOLF: I think the one thing that we need to -- maybe it's my perspective as a progressive politician, but before that a business owner, is that this is in the self-interest of the business communities to do these things. Universal healthcare, I mean, the councilmember pointed out, why the heck in the United States is -- I think we're unique in the developed world where the business community is forced to bear the responsibility, financial responsibility of supporting healthcare. That's not only unfair to the workers, it's stupid for businesses.

If we had universal healthcare, whatever form, it would actually help us. We could have workers who wouldn't have to worry about that one thing. If we had paid family leave, you know, we could actually take care of our families and that would make our workers better when they're at work. I mean, there's so many things that we've learned in this pandemic and I think one of them is that we all have a shared vested interest in making sure that we treat people well.

And our frontline employees, to the extent they're the most egregious examples of how we undercompensate, underserve in so many different ways from housing to healthcare, to spending any way you could think, that we really need to do a better job. And the surprising thing is everybody who's in business really ought to support this.

MS. KINDER: Yeah. Well, that was a really great note to end on. We're out of time now, but I just wanted to say just an enormous thank you to both of you for sharing so many of these perspectives, for sharing all the different ways that in Pennsylvania and in Seattle and Washington State

you are really centering your policies on essential workers and really are so committed to making the future for essential workers so much better than even before the pandemic. So, thank you again for your time, for your insights, and I really appreciate it. And best of luck with the second year of the pandemic, if you can believe I'm actually saying that. So, thank you again.

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Expires: November 30, 2024