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“Hero Pay” for Frontline-Grocery Workers and Drug Retailers in Los Angeles County

At the close of 2019, a new virus, SARS-CoV-2, was first detected and on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, COVID-19, was a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The outbreak has since spread to 192 countries and regions, with more than 109 million confirmed cases as of February 17, 2021.¹ In Los Angeles County (County) there have been over 1,160,000 reported infections and over 19,000 reported deaths, many of which have taken place in low-income communities of color.

The nature of the virus has caused governments across the globe to implement safer at home orders that have impacted every sector of the economy. While many sectors were able to transition their workforce to working from home, millions of workers in face-to-face service industries were deemed ‘essential’ to ensure that our communities

¹ “COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.” Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

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continue to operate, and basic needs continue to be provided for. Notably, frontline grocery and drug retail workers are two categories of essential workers who have continued to show up for work despite the potential exposure through interactions with customers and co-workers who may have contracted the virus. Working in an essential industry, grocery and drug retail employees also have not had the luxury to work at home to help their children with distance-learning and, as a result, have incurred additional childcare expenses. Because of their work on the frontlines, grocery and drug retail workers have met the frantic pace of demand to keep County residents fed and ensure access to medicine during this pandemic. This has been true since the beginning of the pandemic, with people across the nation rushing to grocery and drug retail stores to stock up on supplies bracing for the unknown.

Frontline grocery and drug retail workers have been met with COVID-19 exposures and outbreaks in their place of work. The inability to practice social distancing consistently at work due to large crowds has not only increased exposure risks but also contributed to the psychological distress workers have felt during the pandemic, with research finding that employees with direct customer exposure were five times more likely to test positive for the virus.²

The pandemic has exposed and deepened social and economic inequalities in the County- with the burden of the crisis affecting the most vulnerable low-income communities, especially low-income workers of color. Meanwhile, some of the largest grocery retailers in the nation and County have flourished and expanded their market

² Lan F, Suharlim C, Kales SN, et al. "Association between SARS-CoV-2 infection, exposure risk and mental health among a cohort of essential retail workers in the USA." *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

share. These employers employ a labor workforce that consists of low-wage workers who have been disproportionately impacted by the economic fallout of this pandemic, with nearly half of low-wage workers having trouble paying their bills and roughly a third having trouble paying their rent or mortgage.³ A study conducted by the Brookings Institute also found these top retailers have seen a 40% increase in profit averaging \$16.7 billion in extra profit in 2020, while their stock prices increased by an average of 33%.⁴ Although these inequalities have been exposed and are out in the open for us to finally discuss and address, this public health crisis and the economic unraveling have widened the already deep divide between low-wage frontline workers and their employers and shareholders.

Grocery and drug retail workers are among the heroes of this pandemic, putting their lives on the line – often for low wages and minimal benefits- in order to sustain our food system and maintain healthy communities. Despite their importance to our communities, their employers have not provided sufficient family-sustaining wages and “Hero Pay” during the recent surge of COVID-19 cases. It is imperative for this Board to act with urgency to support these workers to be justly compensated for the unprecedented risks they encounter on the job during this pandemic and require their employers to provide for “Hero Pay.”

³ Parker, Kim, et al. “Economic Fallout From COVID-19 Continues to Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest.” Pew Research Center.

⁴ Kinder, Molly, et al. “Windfall Profits and Deadly Risks.” Brookings.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors approve the attached urgency Ordinance to amend Title 8 – Consumer Protection, Business, & Wage Regulations of Los Angeles County, to require grocery retail and drug retail employers to provide an additional \$5 per hour hazard pay to employees working frontline positions as compensation for the hazards these employees face during the COVID-19 pandemic.

WE FURTHER MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Consumer & Business Affairs, in consultation with the Workforce, Development, Aging, & Community Services (WDACS), to report to the Board of Supervisors within 90 days of the date of adoption on the effectiveness of the provisions of the Ordinance, recommendations for additional provisions that further the intent of the Ordinance including workforce development opportunities, and whether the provisions of the Ordinance are still necessary based on the County’s recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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