

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Business/Economy

Union calls on state to treat Alaska grocery workers as 'first responders,' bolstering access to masks and tests

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A food workers union is calling on Alaska's governor to designate grocery store workers as "first responders" to free up safety equipment to help protect the employees and customers from COVID-19.

The United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 1496 in Alaska wrote a letter to Gov. Mike Dunleavy asking that the state's grocery store workers be treated like medical workers in a sense, said Buster Martin, the local union president.

The goal is to put them near the front of the line for testing for the virus and for receiving face masks and other protective gear, he said. The gear is in short supply in Alaska and nationally.

Grocery stores in Alaska and across the country have been swarming with customers as the response to the new coronavirus has escalated. Those workers should be prioritized for receiving personal protective equipment, after first responders like medical, police and emergency officials, Martin said.

The gear and testing for grocery workers would benefit the public, too, he said.

"If someone was found to be infected, they could stop working if they needed to," Martin said. "That makes everyone safer, because they're in touch with a lot of people."

The union sent a letter to the governor last week making the request, Martin said.

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Members of the union “are on the front lines of the coronavirus outbreak working around the clock to keep these businesses open and ensure that families in our communities have the essential food and supplies they need,” the letter says.

[Concerned shoppers empty shelves, but shippers say flow of goods to Alaska continues uninterrupted]

“Today, on behalf of UFCW Local 1496 and our 2,400 members, I am calling on you to do the right thing by recognizing Alaska’s grocery, retail workers as first responders,” the letter says.

Jeff Turner, a spokesman for Dunleavy, said the governor’s office had not replied to the letter as of Wednesday.

“First responders are individuals certified to provide medical care in emergencies before more highly trained medical personnel arrive on the scene, like a firefighter or EMT,” Turner said in an emailed statement.

Other states have moved to step up support for grocery store workers during the pandemic.

The Vermont governor has classified grocery store workers as essential personnel alongside medical workers and emergency responders, boosting child care support. The Colorado governor sent a letter to grocery stores urging them to provide workers with gloves, masks, face screens and protective gear.

Dunleavy has taken steps to address a “growing shortage” of protective gear for medical workers, including by requiring that elective dental and surgical procedures be postponed. The state is also taking steps so that personal protective equipment will be produced in Alaska, the governor said at a press conference on Tuesday.

The union has also urged stores to increase support for workers amid the virus outbreak, and the stores are responding, Martin said.

Carrs Safeway has provided a temporary \$2-an-hour raise to employees, he said.

Fred Meyer provided a temporary payroll bonus of \$150 for part-time workers and \$300 for full-time workers, he said.

[Amazon workers test positive for COVID-19 at 10 U.S. warehouses]

Among other steps, the store chains plan to install Plexiglas protection to help separate cashiers from the public, Martin said.

Fred Meyer has also supported the call for securing protective gear for grocery store workers.

“We are advocating to government officials at all levels for help securing a priority place in line for all grocery workers — after health care workers — to have access to protective masks and gloves,” Fred Meyer’s parent company, Kroger, said on Twitter on Wednesday.

Carrs and Fred Meyer are also providing additional sick leave protections to ensure workers are paid if they come down with the virus, Martin said.

Alaska Commercial Co., which has grocery stores in rural Alaska, has given its employees a \$2-an-hour raise between March 8 and April 4, about a 15% increase, said Dan McConnell, president of the company.

The company is planning to provide masks and face shields for its workers, he said.

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