

Essential Workers Deserve Our Support By Lt. Governor David Zuckerman

During the pandemic, we've seen the absolutely essential work provided by grocery store workers, pharmacy workers, janitors, trash collectors, child care workers, and assisted living and nursing home caregivers, among others. Imagine where we would be without them. As your Lt. Governor I urge you to stand up for your fellow Vermonters who have been providing essential services for all of us through this pandemic.

I encourage the House to approve the Essential Employees Hazard Grant bill and send it to the Governor for immediate signing. I'm pleased that the Senate passed S.346 last month (28-0), the hazard grant bill to recognize and honor our essential workers. The fact is many essential workers could make more money on unemployment, yet they've been coming to work to serve their fellow Vermonters.

Essential workers have shown up, risking their own health and the health of their families, to care for elderly people in nursing homes, to make sure the rest of us had food on grocery store shelves and take-out from restaurants, to pick up our trash, to clean our hospitals and to work at many jobs that allowed the rest of us to stay home and stay safe. They deserve to be paid so that they can support their families and Vermonters.

We told non-essential workers to work from home or not work. We told them they would be safer at home. BUT we asked essential workers to go to work regardless of the danger. Despite these somewhat conflicting messages, workers cooperated.

Imagine that you went to the grocery store during the pandemic and found a big sign on the door saying, "We are closed until further notice. We don't have enough employees who are willing to risk working with the public." So, then you went to another grocery store and found the same thing -- and, the pizza delivery people decided they weren't going to risk their health.

Imagine if the caretakers in the nursing homes decided it was too risky and stopped coming to work. Most of these people work for minimum wage, which the legislature has increased despite the Governor's veto.

The federal government was willing to pay people who were laid off because of the coronavirus an extra \$600 a week, but the people who stock our grocery shelves and care for our elderly found themselves being paid less than those who were "safe" at home during these weeks and months.

We see a lot of signs on people's front lawns saying, "Thank You to the Essential Workers." Do we mean it? If we do, we should insist they be given adequate compensation for helping us all get through this difficult time. I urge the Vermont House to pass this bill now and for the Governor to sign it.