New Jersey announced its first two positive Coronavirus cases today. It is almost certain there will be many more cases in the state in the weeks ahead. We have all heard the advice that in addition to stringent hand washing, if an individual exhibits any symptoms he/she must stay home from work and self-quarantine. As many social scientists-- and workers themselves--have noted throughout the country: if workers don’t have paid sick days, missed work means missed income.

This puts many workers in an economically precarious position. And it puts all of us at an increased health risk. According to the [Federal Reserve](https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2017-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201805.pdf), almost 40 percent of people cannot cover a $400 unexpected expense. This means that a day (let alone two weeks) without pay is an economic disaster. And it is often the workers who do not have sick leave protections who are the ones that may be preparing our meals, taking care of children, and ringing up our hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes at our local retail store.

Just today New Jersey Senator Menendez joined with 14 Senate colleagues urging major U.S. employers to commit that workers will not be penalized for following recommended health procedures in order to protect the public from further spread of the coronavirus. The Senators stressed that “No one should be penalized by their employer or put in any financial duress for following CDC guidance.”

New Jersey workers are in a *slightly* better position that those in some other states. In October, 2018 our state’s lawmakers passed the [New Jersey Earned Sick Leave Law](https://nj.gov/labor/wagehour/lawregs/nj_state_wage_and_hour_laws_and_regulations.html#11D1). Under this law workers accrue paid sick leave. But considering the current coronavirus outbreak, the law itself may not be enough. Under the current law, for every 30 hours worked, a person is entitled to one hour of leave. However the law allows for a maximum of 40 hours per year. Yet the [Center for Disease Control](https://www.cdc.gov/) recommends a quarantine time of a full 14 days— so for most employees, they would only have enough sick time for a week of quarantine.

New Jersey should consider reviewing the state law in light of the current coronavirus outbreak, even if it they enact temporary measures. Perhaps an extension of paid sick leave to cover 14 days so that no sick worker during the coronavirus outbreak feels economically vulnerable. However, under the current law, this could place a burden on businesses to pay for that leave, which could be economically harmful for small businesses. So perhaps a better route may be to use our state’s [Temporary Disability and Family Leave Insurance](https://myleavebenefits.nj.gov/) programs that are already in place to help workers. These insurance programs already have sufficient weeks available. The state should ensure that coronavirus is a qualifying event and enact parameters around it, particularly for those who told to self-quarantine regardless of a diagnosis. In addition, perhaps additional provisions should be considered for independent contractors and freelancers in the gig economy who may not have access to these benefits.

And it is not just paid sick days that workers need. Many workers do not have access to health insurance and many of these workers are on the frontline of our Coronavirus defense. Thousands of Newark Airport workers, for instance, don’t have health insurance and cannot afford to go to the doctor. This can put them, their families and the public at risk. New Jersey has pending legislation to address this health insurance crisis. Under the proposed [Healthy Terminals Act](https://www.billtrack50.com/BillDetail/1190397)  passenger service workers— baggage handlers, cleaners, wheelchair attendants, airport food service workers and more— would earn a supplement to their wages that they could use to acquire desperately needed healthcare.

The legislation, sponsored by Senator Loretta Weinberg as S989 in the Senate, and sponsored by Assembly member Annette Quijano in the Assembly, would apply to workers at Newark Liberty International Airport. Companion legislation in New York State would cover workers at John F. Kennedy International Airport and LaGuardia Airport.

Senator Loretta Weinberg (D-37), said that workers need this bill now. “This is alarming. Right now, airport workers face this contagion alone without meaningful health insurance to protect them, their families and their neighbors,” said Weinberg. “It’s not a question of if, but when the Coronavirus strikes the United States in greater numbers. It’s our duty to be prepared for the worst and that means equipping airport workers with the tools they need, including critical health insurance.”

Coronavirus highlights shortfalls in both workers’ protections and public health in the United States. New Jersey has made significant strides to protect workers, yet when a public health crisis occurs, we are learning this may not be enough. New Jersey can be on the forefront to protect all of us in the months ahead.