

## E&E Energywire

### 'Terrified' energy workers press feds for safety standard

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Published: Thursday, May 21, 2020

The president of the Utility Workers Union of America called yesterday for a federal infectious disease standard for the workplace as one member of his union described being "terrified" of working during the coronavirus pandemic.

The push for a federal standard by James Slevin, whose union has about 50,000 members, followed legal action this week by the AFL-CIO that aims to force the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to issue an emergency temporary standard for infectious diseases.

"We definitely need this today," Slevin told reporters on a conference call. "We need it to make sure that there's no rollback on safety measures, to make sure that there's enforcement for companies that aren't doing the right thing."

Personal protection and safety are top of mind for utility workers because they are on the front lines of the public health crisis — venturing out into public spaces and private homes. They fix power lines and gas leaks while wearing face masks, trying to stay 6 feet from others and cleaning their hands.

Slevin was among several union officials on a call with reporters led by the AFL-CIO to outline the precautions that have helped electric, natural gas, water and communications operations continue while much of the U.S. population stays home to slow down the spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. Questions remain about the ability of workers to stay safe and maintain social distancing as businesses begin to reopen.

The utility workers union is affiliated with the AFL-CIO, whose [lawsuit](#), filed Monday in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, indicates that the labor organization is not seeking a "one size fits all" response to workplace threats from the coronavirus.

The filing says OSHA could consider a mandatory requirement that all employers adopt a comprehensive infection control plan to assess risks to employees from infectious diseases like COVID-19. Companies could comply with various protection provisions, such as social distancing measures, hand sanitizer access, supplies of appropriate personal protective equipment, testing and quarantining, the document says.

Liz Shuler, secretary-treasurer at the AFL-CIO, said a potential infectious disease standard was close to being issued when the Obama administration left. But she said the Trump administration walked away from it.

"Had that been in place when the pandemic hit, we would've had, obviously, a mandate that companies have the personal protective equipment that was needed and required," she said. "They would've educated their workforce ... so everyone knew exactly what was required to stay safe during a health care crisis like this, and there would have been enforcement."

OSHA, which is part of the Department of Labor, pushed back against criticism that has been bubbling for weeks.

"The Department is committed to protecting American workers during the pandemic, and OSHA has been working around the clock to that end," OSHA said in a statement yesterday. "The Department is confident it will prevail in this counterproductive lawsuit."

In April, Bloomberg Law [reported](#) that Secretary of Labor Eugene Scalia had defended OSHA's approach to the coronavirus situation and the lack of a regulation specific to the virus.

"We have the tools we need, and will use them if necessary," the news service quoted Scalia as saying. OSHA also has [posted](#) COVID-19-related information on its website.

### 'Ticking time bombs'

Jessica Skoczylas, a gas utility worker and union member in Michigan, told reporters yesterday about some of her pandemic experiences. When the situation began, Skoczylas said, she and co-workers "were terrified to walk into a customer's home."

Face masks eventually became part of the routine, she said, as did questions about how people are feeling. Skoczylas compared her work going to residences to walking into a minefield.

"You don't know if there's little ticking time bombs everywhere," Skoczylas said, adding that the virus means she has more to worry about than just gas leaks at people's homes. "You're just trying really, really hard to focus."

Sometimes maintaining 6 feet of distance with customers can be challenging, she said. Skoczylas noted the use of PPE, rotating shifts and focusing on emergency work. Now she said anxiety is going back up as work picks up and customers go to more stores.

Others on yesterday's call held by the AFL-CIO described supply shortages of items like hand sanitizer, paper towels and certain face masks. Speakers suggested the situation has improved in many areas, though it will be something to continue to monitor and remains an issue in places.

Donnie Colston, director of the utility department at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, said about 240,000 of its members are utility workers. He stressed efforts to open communication with districts and local organizations.

"We worked with the locals to address their major concerns for workers — PPE availability, crew staffing for electric and gas workers, how do we get to one person per truck, how do we stagger our shifts, how do we do remote reporting, social distancing of crews, sequestration of power plant operators," Colston said. "Only essential work should be performed during the crisis."

Other topics, he said, include COVID-19 testing and antibody testing that utilities may do. Colston said a recent issue being addressed is possible contact tracing to track people within the time of work and the contacts they've had.

Colston said many utilities have been working well, although a few "do not have the same perspective" about communicating with locals. That led to working through senior management to seek to improve the relationship.

Mutual assistance among utilities for power outages and how to conduct that is also on the mind of the power industry as major weather events such as hurricanes may loom.

Slevin said he was pleased that the House included federal funding for state and local governments in the proposed "Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act." And he called on the Senate to realize the gravity of the issue. The utility workers union president also said the proposed act correctly calls for OSHA to issue an emergency temporary standard for infectious diseases.

OSHA is needed more than ever to help make sure every worker is safe, Slevin said, and he called a potential standard "vitally important" as a new world emerges.

He said OSHA has been "silent" on a number of fronts and has lacked enforcement. But Slevin also has described putting pressure on the industry at times, adding yesterday that his organization is "in this together" with companies. The goal, he said, is for workers to go home at the end of the day.

"Throughout this pandemic, our members have been working 24/7 in some of the hardest-hit communities across this country," Slevin said.