

(Logo)

Date

The Hon. Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
California State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814
Submitted via email to Leg.Unit@gov.ca.gov

RE: SB 606 (Gonzalez) - Request for Signature

Dear Governor Newsom:

(Organization) writes in strong support of SB 606 (Gonzalez) to address the need for stronger enforcement measures to keep workers safe as we continue to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

(Insert information on your organization and why the bill is important to you)

Workers have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic for the past year. Whether in grocery stores, meat packing plants or agriculture fields, our essential workers have suffered greatly with high rates of illness and death due to worksite exposure to this deadly virus. They have faced widespread COVID-19-related violations, including the failure to provide personal protective equipment, access to paid sick leave, or enforcement of adequate social distancing guidelines. Workers have been further harmed by widespread retaliation for reporting unsafe conditions.

According to Cal/OSHA, COVID-19 “has killed hundreds of workers in California and sickened thousands, and workers will continue to become ill and die until the pandemic subsides. COVID-19 is an occupational health emergency causing more deaths in less time than any other workplace crisis in the nearly fifty-year existence of Cal/OSHA.”¹ A recent study by the University of California at San Francisco shows the unspeakable price essential workers have paid for the failure of companies to keep workers safe at their worksite.² Food and agricultural workers faced the greatest risk of dying from COVID-19, with a 39% increase in death rates during this pandemic, followed by transportation and logistic workers, facilities workers, and manufacturing workers. These jobs are typically held by lower-income workers of color who don’t have the choice of working from home and are often forced to work in close proximity to their co-workers. The study also found that Latino workers had a 36% increase in deaths during the pandemic and Black workers had a 28% increase compared to a 6% increase for white workers. Some non-white workers saw particularly high jumps in deaths during the pandemic, the study found. Deaths among Asian health care workers rose 40% during the pandemic while

¹ <https://www.dir.ca.gov/oshsb/documents/petition-583-dosheval.pdf>

² <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/California-s-essential-workers-dying-in-greater-15893374.php>

Black retail workers saw an 18% increase. This study specifically recommended greater enforcement by government agencies to combat the dangers faced everyday at the workplace.

While the Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) has attempted to respond to the unprecedented worker safety crisis brought on by the pandemic, resources have been insufficient to effectively protect workers from being infected by COVID-19 on the job. Only one Cal/OSHA inspector is employed for every 103,000 workers—a dismal figure alongside far better numbers in nearby states such as Washington (one inspector per 28,000 workers) and Oregon (one inspector per 24,000 workers). This persistent understaffing combined with existing weaknesses in California law have limited the agency's ability to prove violations or levy penalties equal to the underlying misconduct, and both of these concerns have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Cal/OSHA must have the tools needed to address workplace spread, prevent additional outbreaks, and hold violators accountable.

SB 606 will address several of these problems--it codifies federal OSHA's policy to address egregious violations for employers that sets stronger penalties for large corporations where a large number of workers have been harmed by an employer's failure to comply with health and safety laws. Higher penalties for risking the safety of multiple employees will serve as an incentive to comply with the law. Additionally, SB 606 builds on federal OSHA's Corporate Wide Settlement Agreement policy by giving Cal/OSHA the tools to respond more effectively and efficiently to health and safety violations by giving our state agency inspectors the authority to issue company-wide abatements and settlement agreements. Workers do not have months to wait for Cal/OSHA to overturn a corporate policy or procedure that is needlessly putting workers in harm's way.

Strong laws are critical but California workers desperately need aggressive enforcement to help recover from this pandemic and to keep themselves and their families safe. That is why we are proud to support SB 606 (Gonzalez) and urge your signature on this important measure.

Sincerely,

(Signature)

(Name, Title, Organization)