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State Lawmakers Must Protect Workers and Families as Wisconsin Reopens

MADISON, WI – More than twenty-five state organizations representing a broad cross-section of Wisconsin interests sent a letter to state lawmakers today urging them to adopt and strengthen policies for protecting workers and their families as the economy reopens.

According to the letter, *“the court decision striking down Wisconsin’s Safer at Home order has imperiled our state’s efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus. If state lawmakers fail to act, they will endanger the health of thousands of Wisconsin workers, our families and our communities.”*

The letter calls on state legislators to work with the Governor to put in place *“objective, evidence-based standards for relaxing social isolation policies as the pandemic eases and for restoring the social isolation policies if or when the number of cases climbs.”*

The groups are also asking state lawmakers to establish *“a firm policy that workers cannot be required to return to workplaces that fail to meet safety standards established by the Centers for Disease Control and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.”*

“Failing to adequately protect workers will exacerbate the already disproportionate harm the virus has caused in communities of color across the state.” said Lisa Peyton-Caire, CEO and President of The Foundation for Black Women’s Wellness. *“Many people of color are employed as essential workers in fields where COVID-19 has wreaked havoc, such as food processing and health care. Lawmakers must act to avoid further casualties within Black, Latinx, and Native American communities as we reopen, and to do so with all deliberate haste.”*

The letter refers to the fact that the state legislators and Supreme Court Justices who have actively blocked enforcement of safer-at-home requirements did so while working safely from home. They should extend that option to the rest of the Wisconsin workforce: *“Like the legislators who filed the litigation and the state Supreme Court justices who decided the case, Wisconsin workers should not be forced to return to workplaces if that would put their health and their lives at risk.”*

Ken Taylor, the Executive Director at Kids Forward, said it is time for legislators to step forward and offer their plans for how to reopen the state, while protecting workers and communities. *“It’s not acceptable for Republican legislators to block the Governor’s efforts to respond to the pandemic without proposing an alternative,”* Taylor said. *“Because their actions have created a dangerous vacuum in public policy, the legislators who blocked the Governor’s efforts must assume responsibility*

to develop their own plans to safely reopen Wisconsin. And if they don't develop such a plan they must bear the responsibility for the public health and economic consequences."

The letter notes that reopening the economy will succeed only if workers are not returning to unsafe places of employment. *"Any economic benefit will be short-lived and a spike in cases will set the state back even further if state lawmakers fail to ensure that strong protections are in place for workers and the people they serve."*

Last week the Evers administration proposed issuing an emergency rule to replace the executive order. However, the Governor withdrew that proposal based on the negative response of Representative Nass, who co-chairs the committee that has the authority to review and halt emergency rules. Based on the negative response of this one member of the Assembly, there is now no opportunity to develop, negotiate and refine a state level response to the pandemic.

This lack of a state response is compounded by confusion and lack of clarity at the local level. After the court ruling, many counties and municipalities issued their own safer-at-home orders, but some local governments, in a state of uncertainty, rescinded those orders after questions were raised about whether the ruling also undercuts the authority of local officials to enforce executive orders relating to health emergencies. Though the Attorney General has deemed the local orders legal, fear of litigation has kept some counties from restoring the orders they originally created to keep their residents safe.

The groups signing onto the letter include:

9to5, National Association of Working Women
ACLU of Wisconsin
African American Roundtable
Community Advocates
End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin
EQT By Design
Feeding Wisconsin
GRandparents United for Madison
Public Schools (GRUMPS)
Kids Forward
Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin
Madison Area Urban Ministries
NAACP of Dane County
nINA Collective
The Center for Media and Democracy

The Foundation for Black Women's Wellness
Voces de la Frontera
Warmline Inc.
Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools
Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health
Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Wisconsin Conservation Voters
Wisconsin Council of Churches
Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice
Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group (WISPIRG)
Wisconsin Voices
WISDOM
Worker Justice Wisconsin
Youth Justice Milwaukee
Youth Justice Wisconsin

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Kids Forward, formerly the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.