

My name is Morgan Lindsey, Executive Vice President of SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania. Our union brings together over 45,000 health care workers across the Commonwealth working in hospitals, nursing homes, state facilities and caring for seniors and people with disabilities in their home. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the COVID vaccine as one piece of a recovery program for the Commonwealth.

Since the pandemic hit Pennsylvania nearly a year ago, our union has worked tirelessly to be a source of information and education for essential workers. In those first few frightening and chaotic months of COVID last spring, we compiled and created materials on topics ranging from best practices in hand washing and handling potentially contaminated laundry to how to apply for unemployment compensation. We have viewed our role in this moment not as only the traditional 'representative for purposes of collective bargaining,' but as a trusted resource.

When the vaccine was released, we surveyed our members so we could gather the most up to date information that was most important to them. We have held town halls with experts, medical doctors, nurses and epidemiologists where caregivers could virtually gather to ask questions and tackle misconceptions. We have engaged with the Department of Health -- connecting our nurse members directly to leadership -- because nurses are consistently rated "the most trusted profession" and we know their expertise and leadership is needed in this moment to navigate the ever-changing nature of this pandemic. We also partnered with employers to provide educational materials, and are developing a plan to engage with the general public.

Through our work, we know there is an enormous amount of misinformation circulating, and we must recognize that one critical aspect of the public health crisis we collectively face is distrust, which is born from four years of bad science, politicalization of this pandemic, and a lack of protection for frontline workers. Vaccination, masking, and social distancing have been viewed by many as dangerous, unnecessary, or a conspiracy. We must also recognize the long and shameful history of abuse against Black communities by scientists and medical professionals erodes the trust needed to combat the pandemic effectively. Our goal is to provide a safe space for these conversations and rebuild trust in our institutions of public health, particularly in communities who have borne a disproportionate share of the crisis.

One opportunity that has come out of the last few months is workers' ability to leverage the vaccine to get benefits that the government has failed to provide them over the course of the pandemic. Through their unions, essential workers have been able to negotiate for benefits like hazard pay-type bonuses when they get the vaccine.

While we are not in opposition to a Pennsylvanians' right to refuse the vaccine, we strongly disagree with this issue being discussed at today's public hearing. Workers across the Commonwealth have been devastated by this pandemic and need action and solutions from our elected leaders. We are testifying about people's right to refuse a vaccine when the real issue is that people **want** the vaccine, but we lack the infrastructure to get it to them. This failure is the result of the purposeful, decades long defunding of our public health system.

COVID-19 has laid bare the long-standing flaws, failures and weaknesses of our healthcare system and the slow and steady defunding of our state health departments. Years of understaffing, poor recruitment and retention of staff, and failure to fill openings in the Department of Health created a system that could not withstand a global pandemic.

Legislators have prioritized tax breaks for corporations and the rich over properly funding and staffing our public health system, and balanced the state budget by not filling nurse vacancies in our Department of Health. As a result, Pennsylvania ranked 45th in the amount spent per person for public health in the nation in 2019. There is an undeniable connection between the Commonwealth's ability to handle vaccine distribution and the lack of funding of Pennsylvania's public health system.

And as our essential workforce continues to fall ill and face not only the physical hardship of COVID, but the devastating financial impact of lost wages, Representative Mehaffie's COVID paid sick leave bill languishes in committee, where it's been for **seven months**. I am not alone in questioning the priorities of this committee to serve the real needs of workers in this Commonwealth.