DISPOSABLE

IN THE FACE OF COVID-19, THE POULTRY INDUSTRY SEEMS WILLING TO PAY FOR CHEAP CHICKEN WITH WORKERS’ LIVES
ABOUT THIS BRIEF
Oxfam has been working with a poultry worker justice coalition that includes worker centers, unions, advocates, experts, and academics for several years.

In an effort to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the people who work in poultry processing plants in the US, we reached out to some of these coalition members and worker communities and conducted more than 40 interviews. We talked to workers from several countries (Haiti, Guatemala, Laos, Mexico) across various states and employers.

Although the interviewees’ experiences vary plant by plant, nearly all workers reported inadequate measures to protect health and safety. Most notably: limited access to paid sick leave; lack of social distancing on the processing line; limited safety information in appropriate languages; and little or no communication regarding incidents of illness and fatality.

This document seeks to put poultry workers’ experiences and voices at the center of the conversation about how the industry is responding to this public health emergency.

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THE HUMAN COST OF CHEAP CHICKEN

Cheap chicken has always had a high human cost. In the face of COVID-19, the poultry industry now seems willing to pay with workers’ lives.

For decades, the poultry industry in the US has treated workers as disposable in the pursuit of cheap, plentiful chicken. Poultry workers have long struggled to survive on low wages, endured high rates of injury and illness, and labored in a climate of fear.

In 2020, that formula has become deadly. Working in a poultry plant today, in the face of COVID-19, means literally putting your life on the line.

It also means threatening the well-being of your family and community. While a poultry processing plant may provide the conditions to become a COVID-19 hotspot, transmission ripples outward in great waves, knocking down the most vulnerable and tearing through households.

This is no accident. It is the logical end of practices and policies that, over many years, produced skyrocketing production and profits—and cost thousands of workers their health, dignity, and livelihoods. Longstanding systems are now allowing this industry to skirt federal guidelines and squeeze workers without accountability. Meat processing plants operate behind closed doors; workers who are economically desperate and socially marginalized are afraid to speak up.

In the race to keep up production during the pandemic, the industry is cutting corners, disregarding safety recommendations, and keeping workers in the dark. The result? Thousands of infections, hundreds of deaths, and a dark shadow on communities of hardworking families. One estimate is roughly 40,000 cases of COVID-19 and nearly 200 deaths from the virus among poultry and meat workers.¹

Interfaith Worker Justice’s Martha Ojeda, a longtime organizer in Texas, observes, “They want to treat [workers] as disposable. No matter who is going to die. The deaths are increasing in all the plants, the outbreaks in all the plants. And there is not any protection, any concern, any measure.”

Diego, who works at a poultry plant in North Carolina, underscores Ojeda’s points: “My family and I are very sad and worried, because COVID-19 is deadly,” he says. “Many of our friends and co-workers have died from it. I wish people in general would take it seriously—it’s real and very dangerous and a matter of life and death. I also wish the supervisors would take it more seriously and protect their workers.”

As the pandemic is far from over, workers and experts urge the industry to take essential steps to protect workers and their communities. At the minimum, they urge the industry to provide paid sick leave, implement social distancing in the plants, and employ better communication about safety measures as well as incidents of infection and death.
THE POULTRY INDUSTRY IN THE FACE OF COVID-19: LAGGING BEHIND WITH HALF STEPS

As soon as COVID-19 arrived in the US, the economy reacted. Many businesses simply shuttered. Others shifted workers into their homes.

However, countless institutions and industries were determined to be “essential” (critical to the functioning of our society), and workers have been compelled to show up in person for many months now. Most employers have been on a long road to implementing continuous measures to protect these workers from the virus.

The poultry processing industry has been noticeably lagging behind. Since the beginning, the industry has been slow to acknowledge the danger of the virus and slow to implement protective measures for workers. For weeks, plants continued to operate largely under the same conditions as before the pandemic hit.

Workers soon began to raise the alarm. Evelyn, a worker with many years on the line at a plant in North Carolina, recalls, “When the pandemic began in March, they didn’t care about what was happening. We heard it was spreading all over the country, and they didn’t care. They wouldn’t give us masks. We had to buy our own masks. They would yell at us for wearing them. They did not believe in the disease.”

It quickly became apparent that the meat processing workforce was particularly vulnerable to the highly transmissible novel coronavirus. In short order, poultry and meat plants became hotspots for COVID-19 in the US: infection rates skyrocketed and fatalities quickly mounted.²

This vulnerability is not surprising. A poultry plant provides an optimal environment for rapid transmission of the virus: workers stand shoulder-to-shoulder for hours on end in poorly ventilated air that is cold and humid; they have limited access to sanitation facilities (bathroom breaks) or to proper protective equipment (such as masks); and crowded break rooms and simultaneous bathroom breaks add to the physical crush.

Moreover, industry employment practices lay the groundwork for community transmission. Low wages (roughly $14 an hour)³ translate to crowded housing, shared transportation, poor nutrition, and poor health care (and underlying health conditions, such as hypertension and diabetes).

Most importantly, perhaps, poultry workers have little if any access to paid sick leave (except for those workers who belong to unions—roughly one-third of the workforce). Already struggling to stay afloat on low wages, few workers are able to stay home and lose a day’s pay—even if they feel ill. In addition, some companies impose a penalty (in the form of points) if a worker misses a shift.

THE POULTRY INDUSTRY SHOULD DO THE BARE MINIMUM

1. **Provide paid sick leave** to workers (not contingent upon proof of positive COVID-19 test).
2. **Implement social distancing** within the plant, especially on the processing line.
3. **Communicate with workers** and the community. Report incidents of infection and death; provide safety information in appropriate languages.
Given this scenario, it is inevitable that workers will report to work while infected and that the virus will quickly spread to others in the plant—and in the community.

While these developments should compel the industry to take the virus more and more seriously—and to implement more and more safety protocols—the reality has been far different. Even when some plants did, gradually, take some steps toward protections, they have, in recent weeks and months, begun to rescind those measures. Workers report that they feel more exposed and vulnerable than ever. Ramona, who works at a plant in North Carolina, notes, “They’re barely improving conditions after many of us tested positive at work, and some of our co-workers died.”

Significantly, the three most important steps recommended in this report—the ones most likely to stop the spread and protect communities (paid sick leave, social distancing, communication)—are rarely provided by industry employers.

Moreover, the guidelines for baseline measures to safeguard workers established by public health institutions in the United States (and around the world) are not being implemented. In particular, workers reported that plants are not following three (of five) recommendations for the meat and poultry industry issued by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Below is a graphic designed by the CDC.

CDC graphic for meat and poultry processing facilities during COVID-19 pandemic

"The company doesn’t care about the health of the workers. They’re barely improving conditions after many of us tested positive at work, and some of our co-workers died.”
—Ramona, poultry worker in North Carolina

WHAT MEASURES HAVE PLANTS IMPLEMENTED – AND NOT?

In an effort to determine how the poultry processing industry is responding to the public health emergency created by COVID-19, Oxfam interviewed dozens of workers and many experts and advocates. All report that the industry is taking some of the easiest steps, but is generally neglecting to implement the most vital measures that would slow the spread of the virus and protect workers’ lives. Moreover, they say that some plants are already backsliding, even though the pandemic has not significantly abated.

Below is a summary of what workers from various plants across the country reported.

Half measures that do little to offer real protections

- **Temperature checks:** Workers reported to Oxfam that, at first, medical personnel showed up in person to take temperature checks. Since then, the process has shifted largely to scanning by infrared cameras.
  - Temperature checks are hardly adequate to assess possible infection. COVID-19 involves a wide variety of symptoms, and in many cases no symptoms at all (estimates of asymptomatic cases range up to 45 percent).
  - Workers say they are not always informed if they do register a high temperature; moreover, some say the plant may ignore the reading, or even offer a method to lower the worker’s temperature to allow them to enter.
- **Better sanitation:** Many workers interviewed for this report shared that, especially at first, bathrooms were noticeably cleaner.
  - As scientists and epidemiologists have learned more about COVID-19, it’s become apparent that surface transmission is unlikely to be a significant risk.
- **Plexiglass or plastic guards:** Some plants have placed guards in break rooms, or between workers on the line, according to workers interviewed.
  - Most experts agree that these guards are unlikely to prevent transmission in any significant way, as long as workers are still located close to each other (especially facing each other).
- **Limited paid sick leave:** While workers reported that some employers made the move to offer two weeks of paid sick leave, that leave is often provided only upon proof of a positive COVID-19 test.

Essential measures that would safeguard workers’ lives

- **No social distancing on the line:** Workers reported to Oxfam that they are still standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the production line, for hours on end. In addition, bathrooms and break rooms are crowded, and breaks are rarely staggered.
- **Inadequate communication:** Workers interviewed for this brief say that the plants where they work are not reporting infections or deaths to workers or the community, and are not providing crucial information about safety guidelines and practices in languages that are appropriate to the workforce (they say it is only available in English).
- **Inadequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE, such as masks and gloves):** Workers report that they may have to purchase and/or supply their own PPE.
- **No closures to sanitize if positive infections reported.** Workers say plants rarely if ever close for cleaning.
- **No slowing of production output, or the line.** Workers say the line runs as quickly as ever. In fact, the industry continues to seek waivers to maximum line speed rules even now.
• No sick leave for illnesses and injuries other than COVID-19, nor any accommodation for infections in households and families. Workers say plants have never offered paid sick leave, or paid family leave. (Workers who belong to unions—roughly one-third of the workforce—may have paid sick leave covered in their contract.)

*Production-driven measures that endanger workers*
Given the highly transmissible and deadly nature of the virus, it’s urgent that workers be provided with time and capacity to quarantine. Instead, workers interviewed by Oxfam report that some plants, with their focus solely on maintaining production, offer incentives to encourage perfect attendance and/or pressure workers to return quickly.

Workers at one plant in Texas report that the company offers an extra dollar an hour to workers who maintain perfect attendance. Other plants offer chickens at the end of the week, and others offer a $500 bonus for perfect attendance.\(^6\)

**VULNERABLE WORKERS, DEVASTED COMMUNITIES**
As the poultry industry modernized following World War II—consolidating and vertically integrating—it became an organizing force in hundreds of rural communities across the United States. Today, what happens in a single large poultry processing plant has a significant ripple effect on households, religious institutions, schools, and families in the larger community.

As COVID-19 tears through poultry plants, then, it is impacting more than just individual workers: it is devastating their communities. A person exposed at work brings the virus back to crowded, busy households. When a worker falls ill, families struggle to care for that person and each other. When income falters, families face the very real threats of hunger and food insecurity, loss of utilities, and eviction and homelessness. Finally, when a worker dies, families may quickly find themselves destitute and on the street—even struggling to find a way to pay for funeral costs.

“It’s not just that one worker tests positive, it’s all the things that come apart with their illness, or with the sickness, or their death,” Ojeda says. When an individual can no longer work, it may mean their family can’t pay bills for electricity or rent or food.

Diego, the worker in North Carolina, notes, “A co-worker tested positive and died, and sadly left his family orphaned. That’s causing a lot of worries among workers in the plant and in our community.”

**MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS: HOW THE INDUSTRY GETS AWAY WITH IT**
For years, the chicken processing industry has had to recruit economically desperate and socially marginalized workers. The workforce is disproportionately composed of immigrants (often undocumented), refugees, and people of color.

Immigrant workers face challenges in the workplace and the community. Because they often come to the US to earn money to sustain themselves and their families both in this country and in their country of origin, working at the plant is a lifeline. The earnings of a single worker may sustain many people.

Undocumented immigrants are now facing life-or-death situations. Employers willing to overlook invalid Social Security numbers now offer little support. With unemployment skyrocketing to historic highs, these workers are terrified; if they lose their jobs, they lose that income, and they are ineligible for public assistance (in the form of unemployment benefits).
This situation creates an atmosphere where workers are afraid: afraid to speak up about abuses, afraid to take time away from work, afraid to expose themselves to disease. Today, the fact that immigrant workers feel an overwhelming need to go to work is turning into what may be a death sentence for them—and for their families.

Gloria, a poultry worker in Texas, sums up the desperation: “We’re always sick because of the chemicals, but the truth right now is that we can’t miss work. The bills don’t pay themselves. ... We work out of necessity, and the plant takes advantage of that. ... I’m a single mom. I can’t stop working—even if I’m afraid of getting sick.”

STILL TIME TO MAKE CHANGES

After a brief dip in cases and fatalities, and a moment of hope in June 2020, the US is again witnessing a steady climb of cases of COVID-19. As of early August, there have been well over 5.1 million cases and 163,000 deaths in the nation.7 The numbers continue to surge, especially in states that have been slow to implement restrictions and/or quick to reopen; many of these states feature meat and poultry processing plants (for example, Mississippi, Texas, and Georgia).

Although this pattern is tragic, it also opens a window of opportunity. If the US is in the middle of the pandemic, there is time to change course. Employers can review the past months, assess where they are failing, and begin to take responsibility and do what’s necessary to contain the spread and protect workers and communities.

“This pandemic is going to go on for a long time,” says Celeste Anne Monforton, DrPH, of the Department of Health and Human Performance at Texas State University. “I really think a year from now we’ll still be dealing with this. It’s not too late for the industry to get its act together. Start today, make the changes that need to take place.”

The poultry industry, which has thrived over the past few decades, has managed to keep up production despite the pandemic. Although some companies have seen dips in revenue since March, most are still managing to turn profits.

Ojeda, the Interfaith Worker Justice organizer in Texas, notes that poultry companies have the resources, and the imperative, to take these steps today. “I don’t know how it’s possible that these huge corporations … make billions and billions of profit and cannot provide safety equipment, cannot provide social distancing for workers, and [can continue to] treat them like disposable.”

Monforton points directly at the industry for responsibility to its workers. “Had the industry gotten on top of this from the start, there would have been fewer outbreaks, and less substantial outbreaks. ... I have no doubt that lives could have been saved—not just the lives, but the illnesses and the toll it’s taken. … The consequences on the communities are tremendous.”
The price of one worker’s life: $100 and a 105-degree fever

“If they give you ice cream, they’re trying to keep it secret.”

Miska Jean Baptiste, a healthy 44-year-old man working at a poultry processing plant in Maryland, did not realize that he had contracted COVID-19 in April, when he began to run a high fever. The plant checked workers’ temperatures when they arrived to work, but Baptiste’s widow says that the company didn’t inform her husband about his fever, and instead gave him ice cream to reduce the reading. “They try to chill you down so you can go work,” she says.

She says that the plant did not inform her husband or his co-workers of his elevated temperatures for four days. “They keep it secret, because if they send him home …, people on the line, they’ll [get] scared. … If they tell him to go home, everybody’s going to go home. They’re not going to come to work—because they need them to come.”

While workers knew that COVID-19 was in the plant, they were never informed about infections or deaths. “There were people who tested positive, they didn’t tell anyone about it. Every time he came home, I asked him. They never said nothing.”

After four days of feeling feverish, Baptiste went to the doctor, where he registered a fever of 105 degrees. He stayed home for three days, taking Tylenol, but finally asked to go to the hospital, his widow recounts. “He said, ‘Mami, could you call the ambulance for me?’ I said, ‘You don’t feel good?’” He said, ‘No, I can’t breathe.’”

In the hospital, Baptiste soon went into a coma and was put on a ventilator; he passed away without the presence of his family.

What followed was silence. The plant did not contact his widow or inform the other workers in the plant. “The company said he was on vacation when he was in the hospital. … Usually when someone passes away, they have a TV, they put a picture—but when my husband passed, they didn’t do it, they don’t want people to know.”

Eventually, his widow told the story to the media, which prompted the company to reach out. “They tell me they’re going to send an envelope. It was a card, and $100 cash. … I was so mad.”

Now, Baptiste’s widow is struggling to sustain her three children without a breadwinner (she is disabled and unable to work).

“They need workers to work to make money, but they don’t care about people’s lives. The chicken plant still works, still makes money. … If you work somewhere and they don’t care about your safety, stay home. You can survive. If my husband—if they cared about his health, if they let him know about the fever—he’d still be living now. We’d be surviving.”
SICK LEAVE
To this day, the United States is an outlier in not mandating paid time off for workers; the US is the only rich country that fails to guarantee workers some form of paid sick leave. Lack of sick leave means workers who are ill or who are needed to care for ailing children or relatives face a painful choice: either lose pay or go to work sick or go to work knowing those who need care have been left home alone.

Monforton notes that the call for paid sick leave in the US surfaces regularly (particularly when transmissible viruses emerge), but she says COVID-19 has put a fine point on the need. “Every year when we have influenza, the public health community has always talked about the importance of paid sick leave. People should not be forced to choose between going to work sick or getting a paycheck. … Now we have a highly transmissible infectious disease that has killed more than 150,000 people just in the US. And we’re still having conversations about paid sick leave. It isn’t something that should even be debated; it should be mandated.”

Failure in poultry plants
Even though the poultry industry offers full-time, permanent jobs, it does not offer paid sick leave to workers.* In fact, workers who fail to report to work are often penalized for being absent (for whatever reason).

When COVID-19 appeared, some plants did consent to pay for up to two weeks of sick leave—if the worker could prove a positive test result. Some workers have managed to tap into this accommodation, but many have not. It can be difficult to get tested, and it can be confusing because test results can take weeks; if the test result is negative—no matter the symptoms—workers report that employers refuse to pay sick leave.

Ojeda notes that, at one plant in Texas, “Workers were getting positive [results], but not receiving notes from the clinic. They stay out sick with heavy symptoms—but the company won’t pay without evidence. And when [workers] return to work, if they don’t have evidence of testing positive, they will be threatened with being fired for not justifying their absence.”

Tania, a worker in Texas, experienced severe respiratory symptoms, including a persistent cough. To prevent spread of the disease, she took the test and then quarantined for two weeks. When the test returned negative, her company refused to pay her for the absence. “I know from my co-workers that they didn’t pay them either. … I’m afraid that I’ll leave infected, and that I’ll have to stay at home without working, and they won’t pay me.”

* In hundreds of interviews over the course of five years, not a single non-unionized worker told us they had access to paid sick leave. However, roughly one-third of the poultry processing workforce is unionized, and these workers enjoy protections from union contracts. In most cases, these protections include some measure of paid sick leave.
Workers report bringing the virus home and infecting others. Dao, a 65-year-old woman in North Carolina, says she feels responsible for infecting her husband and three children. She adds that two co-workers contracted the virus, and the husband of one died from it.

In another twist, plants may pressure workers to return to work before the two weeks have elapsed. Marta, a worker in North Carolina, says, “I’ve heard from other co-workers [who have tested] positive [that] after a week the company begins to call, asking if they’re well yet so they can go back to work soon, because there is a shortage of workers.”

Lack of paid sick leave means people are eager to go back to work, even if they are sick. Jorge, a worker in North Carolina, explains that “a colleague got really sick for a while and then when he ran out of the sick pay he returned.”

Susana, a poultry worker in North Carolina, describes the fear that this causes: “When one person tests positive at work, and returns to work, it causes so much panic in the workplace.” Khai, a worker at a plant in North Carolina, adds, “Too many people feel sick, but they still come to work until they can’t do the job—then they will go home.”

Finally, while virus decimates the workforce, plants are determined to keep up production. Companies employ a variety of incentives to encourage people not to miss shifts. At least two companies offer $500 attendance bonuses to reward workers for completing their shifts through the end of the month.

According to several workers, a plant in Texas offers an extra dollar per hour if a worker logs a week of perfect attendance; the bonus dollar is not valid if the worker misses even an hour. Inevitably, economically desperate workers will do all they can to report to work consistently, even if they suspect they are ill.

**How to do better**
The cost-benefit analysis on providing sick leave seems clear in the best of times; during a global pandemic, it is stark.

If plants were to offer two weeks of paid sick leave to all processing workers, it would bump the payroll burden a small percentage and would require some attention to shift scheduling. In return, the workforce would be healthier, more resilient, and more productive. In addition, the plant would be better positioned to slow transmission of all manner of illness.

Unfortunately, the industry has chosen to prioritize short-term, bottom-line thinking that puts revenue over the long-term health of the workforce and the community.

**SOCIAL DISTANCING**
As a complicated new disease, COVID-19 continues to present challenges to public health experts and employers. However, as evidence has mounted over the months since the virus reached the US, it has become possible to determine which measures are most effective at limiting its transmission.

At this point (August 2020), social distancing is considered *the* most effective preventive measure. The CDC notes: “Limiting close face-to-face contact with others is the best way to reduce the spread of COVID-19.” —Celeste Anne Monforton, DrPH
As Monforton states, “Social distancing is the vaccine that we currently have available. It’s the most important thing to do.” Employers should be taking proactive and continuing steps to enable workers to maintain distance between each other.

FAILURE IN POULTRY PLANTS
Every worker we interviewed reported that as soon as they enter the plant, they have no ability to maintain a reasonable distance from others. At best, plants stagger break times, so there are fewer workers in the break room at one time and fewer people waiting in line for the bathroom.

On the processing line, however, workers are standing right next to each other, shoulder-to-shoulder (and sometimes face-to-face), just as they have been for years. The plants have not spaced workers, slowed the production line (or quotas), or changed workers’ shifts.

While some plants have installed plexiglass shields or plastic sheets in various locations (for example, at break room tables and on the line), most experts agree that these shields provide little protection if people are still close to each other and sharing inadequately ventilated air.

“This plastic is not enough,” notes Evelyn, who contracted the virus. “We need distancing to protect us from infection. Because we can’t know if the colleague next to you is sick, or the one next to her. I don’t know who I contracted from. Or if I got my daughter sick or if she infected me.”

“There’s not sufficient distance in the bathroom—we’re all bunched up together in line waiting, because they do not have enough toilets,” adds Tania, a processing worker in Texas. “It’s the same on the line; we’re squished right up against each other.”

Moreover, even where plants initially implemented some measures to provide distancing, they are in many cases pulling back on these efforts now. “When I hear now, four months into the pandemic, in many poultry plants, there is still very little social distancing—in fact backsliding now—it’s extremely disturbing, because we know that’s the most important thing,” says Monforton.

Standing in close proximity to others all day long brings a powerful sense of dread to the workers. They do not know who might be carrying the virus—with symptoms or not—and they do know they’re all sharing the same stagnant, cold, humid air. Add to these factors the noise in the plant—processing machines, water pouring constantly—and the need for people to shout.

Gloria, a worker with four years on the line in Texas, notes, “It should be a priority to establish distance in packing and lines of production where they hang the chickens. All that matters to these people [the company] is that we keep up production.”

Evelyn says, “We risk our lives to work for this company. It is a shame. … The supervisor said they cannot do anything. The company owner is the one who makes the decisions. They say they just work there. And it is right: we just work there.”
HOW TO DO BETTER
Poultry and meat processing plants are designed to break down animal carcasses in rapid, continuous steps: from hanging to eviscerating to slicing off wings and breasts. The production line puts workers at stations for each action, and demands thousands of quick motions each shift.

Providing distance between workers would require planning and execution, and would likely involve slowing the line and reducing the level of production. However, most experts agree that it is feasible, and that it’s incumbent on the industry given the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health experts in particular point to the nature of what is, by all accounts, a national emergency, and the fact that many industries have been compelled to make adjustments in order to protect workers, consumers, and the public.

“Many [businesses] closed down or scaled back production so much because of the pandemic,” notes Monforton. “Yet the poultry industry wanted to continue business as usual. A responsible industry would have looked at this situation as the national crisis that it is … and [would have said], ‘We want to continue to be able to provide poultry to our customers and to institutions, but we’re in the middle of a pandemic, and we’re going to have to slow down production, and ensure that our workplace is safe and our workers are protected.’”

The CDC has provided specific suggestions for changes to processing workstations; see graphic on next page.

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**Lack of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE)**

Under normal circumstances, poultry processing workers need several pieces of PPE to stay safe in the plant (for example, gloves, boots, and hairnets); Oxfam has found that the industry has a spotty record of supplying these to workers without charge.

Today, workers report similar patterns around items that are essential to containing COVID-19. The plant may or may not supply masks or face guards consistently and without charge; workers report having to supply their own masks, or being charged for items by the plant.

Gregoria, who works at a plant in North Carolina, says: “I went many times to the infirmary [to ask] for masks which were denied to me during my work shift. …They have changed nothing about worker health protection and sanitation.”
CDC recommendations for alignment of workstations in meat processing plants

How to Align Meatpacking and Meat Processing Workstations, If Feasible

**Bad:**
Workers are within six feet of one another, including at side-by-side or facing workstations.

**Good:**
Workers are spaced at least six feet apart, not facing one another. Other configurations may be used to achieve similar distancing between workers.

Good: Physical barriers, such as partitions, separate workers from each other.

Source: CDC.
COMMUNICATIONS: REPORTING AND INFORMING
The emergence of a deadly pandemic has made it even more critical for employers to provide accurate, timely information to workers—information about employment practices and policies (such as accommodations for COVID-19 testing, treatment, and paid leave), and about what is happening to people who work next to each other every day.

Although companies do not have a strict legal obligation to reveal how many workers have tested positive for the virus, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) does require employers to provide a safe working environment. Most experts agree this means they must alert staff if they might have been exposed to the virus (without revealing the name of the person who tested positive). Employers are also obligated to keep track of COVID-19 infections contracted on the job, and to report hospitalizations or deaths related to the disease to OSHA.13

FAILURE IN POULTRY PLANTS
Lack of information about infections, hospitalizations, and fatalities
In interviews with Oxfam, workers reported that their employers are not providing information about infections and deaths among the workforce. Workers are left to wonder whether the virus is being transmitted within the plant—and what danger it poses to them. When co-workers are absent, are they quarantining? In the hospital? On ventilators? Or have they died? Workers say that they do not expect truthful answers.

Juan, who works at a poultry processing plant in Maryland, says, “Everyone’s worried because we don’t know when someone has tested positive. … Management stays in their offices, and they only come out to give orders and when there are problems in the work area—but it’s with a lot of disgust, and always with a lack of respect for the workers—yelling and with a mean attitude.”

Lenu, who works at a plant in Texas, adds, “The plant doesn’t tell us if we’re exposed to COVID. I see co-workers from the line stop coming to work, and I don’t know if it’s because of the virus. I ask the supervisor, but he doesn’t want to tell us. I don’t feel safe; I’m afraid I’m going to get sick.”

In some cases, workers reported that plants don’t even disclose to workers if they have a high fever. As noted in “The Price of One Worker’s Life” above, the widow of Miska Jean Baptiste says that he felt feverish for days, but when the plant staff measured his temperature, they did not inform him that it was elevated.

Important information in English only
As plants slowly began to understand the necessity to create new protocols to cope with the impact of COVID-19, they created documents that laid out their policies and practices. These documents cover important safety measures (for example, handwashing, social distancing, masks, and quarantining) as well as policies around testing and sick leave.

All workers interviewed report that these materials are, to this day, provided only in English. Monforton notes that this situation is consistent with entrenched communications practices: “There is just such a lack of information, and then that just builds more and more distrust.” She speculates that the memos issued by the company are more for the public and the media than the workers.
Not providing this information in a language the worker can understand is, she says, the “ultimate sign of disrespect—more so when talking about a deadly virus.”

HOW TO DO BETTER
It is imperative, easy, and inexpensive for employers to make vital information accessible to workers. Monforton says that companies can communicate information about incidents of the disease without compromising rights to privacy.

“There are competing considerations when we think about someone who has been diagnosed with an infectious disease balancing that individual’s right to privacy and the need for workers in the plant to know whether they have been exposed or not,” she says. “But there are well-established operating principles of how an employer can do that.”

Monforton maintains that companies could not only inform workers of positive cases, but then could provide extra resources to ensure co-workers’ health. “They could say, ‘We’re going to continue to monitor your symptoms.’ … That’s what responsible employers are doing.”

URGENCY TO ACT

How has the poultry industry continued to evade responsibility in a time of national emergency? And how to hold it accountable now?

Without a doubt, COVID-19 has presented shocking and ongoing challenges to our economy and society. Many sectors, and employers, have stepped up to shoulder responsibility for safeguarding the health and well-being of their workforces (often, it should be noted, in response to worker demands). These measures usually involve some degree of expense or loss of productivity, but they are vital to create the conditions for the economy to continue to operate and meet the “essential” needs of everyone.

It is somewhat surprising, then, to find sectors that still downplay the severity of the threat and that do little more than implement halting half-measures. The poultry industry, well into the sixth month of the pandemic, continues to be committed to “business as usual,” including consistent throughput rates and static practices on the line. The industry continues to seek waivers to maximum line speed rules—at a time when it should be providing distance on those very lines.¹⁴

By contrast, Monforton says, other businesses considered essential have been proactive. “The industries that needed to continue operating, like grocery stores, took a lot of measures, and were continuously changing those measures. As we learned more, and as workers made more demands, they took more and more steps. In my own grocery store it looks a lot different in July than it did in April or May.”

Moreover, while poultry is “essential,” it is not, like many services or goods, visible to most consumers. Poultry processing takes place in remote, scarcely populated areas, in contained, secure buildings.

“Poultry workers now are recognized as essential workers. We really need their labor force to bring food to the table. However, they don’t have any kind of protection. And nobody knows. Nobody knows how their lives are at risk.”
—Martha Ojeda, Interfaith Worker Justice
Today, this veil of secrecy enables the industry to ignore some basic safety guidelines in the pursuit of production and profits. And to continue to regard workers as simply disposable; their health and their very lives are endangered every day.

“Poultry workers now are recognized as essential workers,” Ojeda says. “We really need their labor force to bring food to the table. However, they don’t have any kind of protection. And nobody knows. Nobody knows how their lives are at risk.”

She continues, “We understand in a way the need for these companies to provide the chicken and poultry for the consumers—but it doesn’t need to be at the expense of workers’ lives.”

It is well past time for the poultry processing industry to recognize that COVID-19 has changed the landscape around our food system—and that the industry now needs to change practices to keep up with the deadly nature of a persistent threat to workers and families. While the industry got away with mistreating workers for years, that pattern is now extracting a terrible toll.

It’s time for all of us, as consumers, to expose these practices to light, to speak up on behalf of workers who risk so much, and to demand simple, basic steps that would protect hardworking families across the country.

**THE POULTRY INDUSTRY SHOULD DO THE BARE MINIMUM**

1. **Provide paid sick leave** to workers (not contingent upon proof of positive COVID-19 test).
2. **Implement social distancing** within the plant, especially on the processing line.
3. **Communicate with workers** and the community. Report incidents of infection and death; provide safety information in appropriate languages.
NOTES

1 These estimates of COVID-19 cases and deaths among poultry plant workers were generated in early August 2020 based on the dashboard maintained by the Food & Environment Reporting Network (FERN): https://thefern.org/2020/04/mapping-covid-19-in-meat-and-food-processing-plants/. Although these numbers are shocking, they do not adequately illustrate the real impact of COVID-19 on poultry processing plant communities. First, they do not reflect cases and fatalities outside the plants; many workers report carrying the virus home and infecting family and household members. Second, they are very likely underestimates owing to plants' observed desire to undercount and underreport cases. In an op-ed discussing the FERN dashboard and COVID-19 at these plants, FERN associate editor Leah Douglas notes: "Due to the inconsistent nature of testing and reporting at meatpacking facilities, all of the figures above are potentially undercounts; industry-wide figures almost certainly are higher because few states and no companies are regularly releasing data on worker illness." See Leah Douglas, "Opinion—Smithfield’s Media Attack Shifts Attention from Its Own Lack of Disclosure," FERN’s AG Insider, August 3, 2020, https://thefern.org/ag_insider/opinion-smithfields-media-attack-shifts-attention-from-its-own-lack-of-disclosure/

2 By April 2020, one plant in South Dakota had become the biggest single source of cases in the US. For more information, refer to the CDC site, “COVID-19 Outbreak Among Employees at a Meat Processing Facility — South Dakota, March–April 2020,” August 7, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6931a2.htm?s_cid=mm6931a2_w.


6 Sana Kazilbash, “What NOT to Do When You Go Back to Work.”


9 Sana Kazilbash, “What NOT to Do When You Go Back to Work.”


11 The CDC guidelines continue: “COVID-19 spreads mainly among people who are in close contact (within about 6 feet) for a prolonged period. Spread happens when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks, and droplets from their mouth or nose are launched into the air and land in the mouths or noses of people nearby.” See CDC, “Social Distancing: Keep a Safe Distance to Slow the Spread,” updated July 15, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html.

12 The CDC puts social distancing as the first of “key strategies” to prevent infection among employees of meat and poultry plants. “Keep employees at least 6 feet away from each other as much as possible…. Use physical barriers or partitions, reduce staffing, or modify workstations or work procedures to increase the distance between employees. Add additional clock in/out stations, space out chairs in break rooms, and add outside tents for breaks.” See CDC, “Meat and Poultry Processing Facilities: Key Strategies to Prevent COVID-19 Infection Among Employees,” May 15, 2020,
13 Joseph Pisani and Alexandra Olson, “Workers Turn into Sleuths to Track Sicknesses Where Employers Keep Covid Data Secret,” *Insurance Journal*, July 22, 2020, 

14 See note 5.
COVER: COVID-19 is ravaging the poultry processing workforce in the US, inflicting high rates of infections and fatalities. A poultry plant provides an optimal environment for rapid transmission of the virus: workers stand shoulder-to-shoulder for hours on end in poorly ventilated air that is cold and humid; they have limited access to sanitation facilities (bathroom breaks) or to proper protective equipment (such as masks). The industry needs to step up immediately to implement basic safety measures (paid sick leave, social distancing, and adequate information). Photo: Tyson Foods