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SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis
Briefing on “Heroes of the Coronavirus Crisis:
Protecting Frontline and Essential Workers During the Pandemic”
May 21, 2020

Thank you to Ranking Member Scalise and the Members of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis for joining us today.

This briefing will examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on essential frontline workers, and the steps the federal government can take to better protect these workers.

The coronavirus pandemic has already killed more than 90,000 Americans, more deaths than in any other nation on earth. Throughout this crisis our nation’s essential workers have continued to serve their communities at great personal risk to themselves and their families. They are the true heroes of this crisis, and I am deeply honored that several of these heroes have joined us today.

These heroes treat patients who are sick with coronavirus and comfort the families of those who have lost loved ones. They respond to emergency calls and keep our communities safe. They stock our grocery and drug store shelves. They keep our transit systems running. And they clean our hospitals and offices to prevent the virus from spreading further.

Tens of thousands of essential workers have been infected with the coronavirus, and many have lost their lives. I am particularly concerned that many essential workers still lack basic protections that are needed to keep them and their families safe and healthy. That must change.

It is unacceptable that four months into this public health crisis, many front-line medical professionals and other essential workers still face shortages of critical supplies like masks and hospital gowns. These shortages must be acknowledged and immediate steps must be taken to procure and distribute these necessary supplies.

At last week’s briefing, this Committee heard from two former FDA Directors and other bipartisan public health experts who warned that safely reopening our economy requires a comprehensive, nationwide strategy for testing, tracing, isolation, and treatment. Protections for essential workers must be a cornerstone of that strategy. Otherwise, these workers will be put at even greater risk as states begin to reopen, and we will all face a greater risk of a second wave.

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Essential workers across the United States have made incalculable sacrifices to serve their communities during this dark time. We owe them our thanks, and much more.

We must provide them the protections they need, the financial support and paid leave they deserve, and the clear public health guidance that is critical to prevent further harm.

Today, we will hear the stories of some of these workers.

We will hear about Leilani Jordan, a 27-year-old from Largo, Maryland, who continued to work at a grocery store during the pandemic in order to serve her neighbors and community. She passed away due to the coronavirus. We are honored to be joined today by Ms. Jordan's mother, Zenobia Shepherd.

We will also hear the story of Jason Hargrove, a bus driver from Detroit, who died from the coronavirus. We are honored to have Mr. Hargrove's friend and fellow bus driver, Eric Colts, with us today.

The Committee will hear today about the stress and anguish faced by essential workers who fear spreading the virus to loved ones and have been forced to isolate themselves from their children and families.

We will also hear about the financial strains that force many low-income Americans to keep showing up to work, despite the risks.

And we will hear from first responders who battled the pandemic at the peak of the crisis in some of the hardest hit areas of the country, including New York City. These cities and states have been literally begging the federal government for months to provide more resources to protect these workers—and they are still waiting.

Today's witnesses have agreed to share their stories with us—including the incredibly painful loss of their family members and friends. I hope we can honor their loved ones and ease their suffering by conducting today's proceedings in a truly bipartisan manner. I hope we can find out about their needs and how we can fulfill them.

I will now yield to the distinguished Ranking Member, Mr. Scalise, for his opening remarks.