



PRESS RELEASE

Attorney General Frosh Leads Coalition Urging the Trump Administration to Protect the Health and Safety of Tens of Thousands of U.S. Meat and Poultry Workers
Executive Order Purporting to Keep Processing Plants Open During Pandemic Lacks Meaningful Safety Measures; Will Result in More Closures and Cost Lives

BALTIMORE, MD (May 12, 2020) – Maryland Attorney General Brian E. Frosh today led a coalition of 20 attorneys general in [calling for](#) President Trump to take immediate action to ensure the health and safety of meat and poultry processing plant employees, who have been deemed essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 28, Trump signed an Executive Order invoking the Defense Production Act (DPA) in an attempt to keep meat and poultry processing plants open despite widespread outbreaks of COVID-19 in these facilities. Over 10,000 cases have been tied to the plants, and 45 workers have died. The Order purports to force employees to continue working without imposing adequate and enforceable mandates to protect their health and safety.

“The conditions for workers in meat and poultry processing plants have become much more dangerous during this pandemic,” said Attorney General Frosh. “Thousands of employees have fallen ill, and lives have already been lost. The industry’s failure to protect employees and the Administration’s failure to support testing, provision of personal protective equipment, and enforcement of safety standards will continue to endanger the health and well-being of employees.”

The incidence of COVID-19 infections among meat and poultry industry workers is so severe that many plants are reporting hundreds of workers testing positive for the novel coronavirus. These clusters of infections are also devastating their surrounding communities. Yet the industry, with workplaces already considered among the most dangerous in the country, has continued to operate the plants without instituting adequate health and safety measures. Despite fast-moving disassembly lines requiring workers to stand shoulder to shoulder for hours, efforts to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and enforce social distancing measures have been sporadic at best. Some companies also continue to impose punitive measures for employees who fall ill and are unable to work. Rather than slowing line speeds to enable safer working conditions, plants have sought, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has approved, new line speed waivers that force employees to work faster and closer to one another.

Trump's Executive Order instructs the USDA to ensure processing facilities continue to operate under voluntary guidelines for promoting safe working conditions, but it does not mandate these protective measures or commit to enforcing them. The Trump Administration must, the attorneys general contend, make these health and safety standards stronger, mandatory, and enforceable. Adequate measures must include:

- Priority testing for workers in the processing plants;
- Immediate access to adequate PPE;
- Suspension of all line speed waivers, and a halt to approval of any additional waivers;
- 6-foot physical and social distancing where possible, and plexiglass barriers where distancing cannot be achieved; and,
- Isolation and quarantine of COVID-19 positive workers, with full pay.

Without additional measures to protect these workers, Trump's Executive Order will prolong the spread of illness and death and imperil its own goal of keeping the plants open. Additionally, the Order may compound the harm done by the federal government's failure to provide assistance for COVID-19 testing and PPE by attempting to strip from states their ability to determine when or if these processing plants are safe to continue operating in order to protect the health and safety of their own workers.

Joining Attorney General Frosh in signing today's letter are the attorneys general of California, Colorado, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.