



Testimony of Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 668

Presented to the
Pennsylvania House Labor and Industry Committee
on Monday, October 23, 2022

Public hearing on HB 2860

By
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Chairman Cox, Chairman Mullery, and members of the House Labor and Industry Committee, please accept this testimony on behalf of the Service Employees International Union Local 668 and our nearly 20,000 members across Pennsylvania. My name is Steve Catanese, and I am the President of SEIU Local 668. Our union represents health and human services workers, employment and youth counselors, social workers, corrections and probation officers, court employees, ChildLine caseworkers, drug and alcohol counselors, and 911 dispatchers, the vast majority of whom work in the public sector employed by state, county, and municipal governments, as well as publicly funded nonprofit organizations.

Whether in a public office building, a healthcare facility, a correctional institution, in the field, or even from their own home, our members work every day to serve the people of Pennsylvania. Many of our members work in high-risk environments and deal with some of the most vulnerable members of our community. In some cases, they face unsafe and health-hazardous environments; at times, their workplaces can become volatile, even violent.

Despite the risks they face on the job, none of our public-sector members are guaranteed safety and health protections at work because they are excluded under the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA). Not only are their workplaces unprotected under the law, our Commonwealth is unable to collect basic information about safety and health hazards in public workplaces without a mechanism to report on workplace conditions and concerns, illnesses, or injuries sustained on the job. For over a decade, we have fought to extend OSHA-style safety and health standards for public-sector workers; however, we have a long way to go.

All workers, regardless of their employer, deserve the right to safety on the job and a healthy workplace. We can all agree when we go to work, no matter what our occupation may be, we should return home to our loved ones safely at the end of the day. There is no reason my members in the public sector should have fewer rights than those in the private sector.

Only approximately half of the states across the nation have state-level occupational safety and health programs. Therefore data on safety and health in public workplaces is incomplete, to say the least. However, we know from information that has been reported that public-sector workers experience far higher rates of workplace injuries, violence, and health hazards. Across Pennsylvania in 2020, 557,890 workers were employed by state, local, and municipal public entities, excluding them from OSHA coverage; that's more than 10% of our 5,488,591 total employees. Without centralized incident reporting and data collection, Pennsylvania has very little insight into safety and health concerns or incidents of work-related injuries and illnesses in the public sector.

House Bill 2860 will provide our Commonwealth with the information we need to ensure that Pennsylvania workers are protected on the job and decision-making entities at the state, local, and municipal levels are equipped with the data they need to make the best decisions on behalf of Pennsylvanians. This bill will increase government transparency and accountability so public dollars won't be needlessly spent on the consequences of unsafe workplaces. With this information available, decision-makers can take preventative measures to avoid unnecessary spending and identify problematic patterns that negatively impact the productivity and well-being of our public-sector workforce.

Relevant Information Is Needed for Successful, Data-Driven Decision-Making

As responsible stewards of public services across the Commonwealth; we must have the necessary information to determine the frequency of incidents that threaten the health and well-being of workers, determine the cause of such incidents and take appropriate preventative actions. Responsible policy decisions can only be made when stakeholders have sufficient pertinent information to assess the scope and cause of these occurrences.

Data from states with public sector workplace safety reporting mechanisms shows that public sector workers experience higher rates of workplace injuries and illnesses. Occupational safety and health surveillance capacity levels vary from state to state. Only around half of U.S. states have state-based OSH programs covering public sector state and local employees. In general, it is estimated that workplace injuries and illnesses are under-reported, even amongst employers and industries required to maintain such data.

Our Commonwealth does not currently have the information and reporting infrastructure to accurately gauge the safety of public workplaces either for workers or the members of the public they serve. In 2020, 557,890 state and local employees across Pennsylvania lacked OSHA-style coverage. Consequently, Pennsylvania does not have a comprehensive mechanism for accumulating or tracking data and information on workplace injuries and illnesses for more than half a million workers in our state.

The Risk Disparity Between Private and Public Sector Employment

Annually, the AFL-CIO releases a comprehensive national and state-by-state profile of worker safety and health in the United States, *Death on the Job*; the current edition of the report, released in April 2022, incorporates data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and other reporting agencies through 2020. Referencing the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020 Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses, the 2022 *Death on the Job* report states, "In 2020, state and local public sector employers reported an injury rate of 3.9 per 100 workers, 44% higher than the reported

rate of 2.7 per 100 among private sector workers” (DOTJ 2022, p.25). However, reporting to the BLS Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses is voluntary, and there are limitations with the current injury reporting system, and overall workplace injuries are often underreported.

While we may not have information specific to the public-sector workforce in Pennsylvania, we do have information for our private-sector workforce. There were 122,700 total workplace injuries and illnesses cases in Pennsylvania’s private industry in 2020, a rate of 3 workers per 100; this exceeds the national rate of 2.7 workers per 100. Given the increased risk documented in other states, i.e., 44%, Pennsylvania’s public-sector workforce could potentially see a rate of 4.32 per 100 workers.

The impact of workplace injuries and illnesses often comes with costs that extend beyond the affected worker, with lost work time, occupational restrictions, job transfers, and expenses associated with workers’ compensation and insurance. For example, in Pennsylvania in 2020, our private sector alone saw 77,100 cases of injury and illness¹ resulting in time away from work, a rate of 1.9 per 100 workers, which is also higher than the national rate of 1.7 per 100 (DOTJ 2022 p.241).

Workplace violence and its impact on the safety and health of public-sector workers, particularly those in healthcare and human services, is of significant concern to our members statewide. Unfortunately, the public sector is certainly not alone; workplace violence is rising. As of 2020, social services and healthcare sectors “accounted for 76% of lost-time injuries from workplace violence” (DOTJ 2022 p.137). In 2020, the private sector saw an astronomical 70% increase over the last 15 years in the rate of workplace violence in social services and healthcare, now at 15.0 over 10,000 workers. However, the risk of workplace violence and assault for public sector workers is more than ten times greater for government health care and social service workers, a staggering 161.0 vs. 15.0 per 10,000 workers (DOTJ 2022 p.137).

On October 1, 2021, Nassir Day, a 25-year-old expectant father and security guard, was shot and killed on the job in an office building in Philadelphia, protecting the public and the people who work there. Our members work in that building. This was not the first time violence made its way into one of our worksites; sadly, it was not the last.

Worker Observations

The workers we represent operate in a variety of occupational environments. Whether in the field, in the office, or teleworking from home, all of them should have the guaranteed right to

¹ 7U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, State Data, Nonfatal Occupational Injuries and Illnesses Requiring Days Away from Work, Job Transfer or Restriction, 2020 private sector only, released Nov. 3, 2021.

safe and healthy workplace conditions. In response to the COVID pandemic, workplaces in both public and private sectors undertook the task of keeping workers safe, whether that meant transitioning to telework, implementing social distancing protocols, or providing personal protective equipment. While the pandemic has brought many changes to the workplace, we have very little information available on the impact of these measures on the public sector workforce.

To ensure that our Commonwealth functions efficiently and effectively, it is necessary to understand the impact and cost of workplace safety and health hazards for our public-sector workforce. When faced with an unsafe working environment, productivity suffers. Therefore, for our public sector workforce to achieve successful outcomes and provide the high-quality services that Pennsylvanians rely on, we must have the information and data necessary to determine the root causes of foreseeable threats to worker safety and prevent harmful outcomes.

Conclusion

The more information we have, the more effectively we can prevent workplace injuries, illnesses, and fatal incidents for vulnerable and high-risk workers and others. Due to the lack of a comprehensive reporting mechanism for occupational safety and health data, Pennsylvania cannot fully understand the scope of the risk faced by public sector workers on the job or the members of the public whom they serve.

House Bill 2860 provides a valuable tool to our Commonwealth by efficiently collecting and aggregating worker injury and illness data in the public sector. By collecting this information and cross-coordination with the appropriate agencies, the General Assembly and other government entities will have the information required to make data-driven decisions and be successful, responsible stewards of the Commonwealth's taxpayer dollars.

Pennsylvanians deserve a government that prioritizes effectiveness and efficiency. We know that unsafe and health-hazardous workplaces negatively impact productivity and worker morale in any occupation. The working people who serve this Commonwealth want nothing more than to do their jobs and assist their community to the best of their ability. It is our responsibility to ensure they have the tools they need and the proper working conditions to do so. This legislation will equip our public agencies and our legislature with the insight necessary to make informed, cost-effective decisions that best serve the interest of Pennsylvanians.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony today. If you have further questions or would like additional information, please contact our Legislative and Communications Director, Christopher Hundley, at Christopher.Hundley@seiu668.org. Thank you again.