We all have been impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic. Like most of you, our first concern is for the health and wellbeing of our families, friends, and coworkers. Keeping track of people we care about must be top of mind for us all. However, the global pandemic has taught us how deeply connected we are. To remain healthy, we must not only care about, but it is also essential that we care for everyone, everywhere.

The purpose of this AAACE position paper is to alert the Adult Education community to The Families First Coronavirus Act (https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6201) that was passed by the House and is currently being debated by the Senate. The act would provide emergency funding to ensure all Americans with income security and access to healthcare during the Coronavirus crisis. Adult Educators have the responsibility to keep current on this important issue that impacts society as a whole and has a profound effect on our learners and programs.

Illogically, at a time when public officials are encouraging people who are sick to stay home, we have yet to come to grips with the fact that more than 32 million private sector workers, many who are part-time and contractual workers, have no paid sick leave. Even if not sick, these so-called contingent workers are under extreme economic stress as more businesses and schools shut down to curtail the spread of the Coronavirus. Sadly, if these workers do not work, they do not get paid.

We know that women of color and workers with lower income are most harmed by this situation. We also know that many of these vulnerable workers are adult learners in our basic education, literacy and workforce development programs, as well as some of our graduate students. As always, we are mindful of their needs and concerns. But what you may not know is that many of our coworkers, the nation’s front-line adult educators, share the same precarious position as their students. National data show that nearly 80% of adult basic education and literacy teachers and 50% of program administrators are part-time (US DoED, 2015). Likewise, over 80% of the Developmental Education courses in college are taught by adjuncts (ibid). In order to do the work they love, these colleagues must piece together multiple part-time teaching jobs and short-term contracts and juggle multiple roles in adult education programs. Many of these educators, like their students, lack paid sick leave and other benefits (Sun, 2010) and are struggling to pay their bills as programs shut down in response to coronavirus.

The Families First Coronavirus Act addresses these and other social impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. The bill establishes a federal emergency paid leave benefits program to provide payments to workers taking unpaid leave due to the coronavirus outbreak. It also provides access to free coronavirus testing, expands food assistance and unemployment benefits, and creates new protections for front line healthcare workers.

It is imperative our community support our learners and front-line educators in every way possible in this time of crisis. One way adult educators can help is by distributing information on this legislation broadly throughout our community. However, we cannot lose sight that this crisis makes the precarious labor market position of our valued adult education workforce more visible and pronounced. This crisis must also be a clarion call to improve the working conditions of our frontline adult educators and to make this issue a top policy priority for our field.
Initiator of the Position Statement: Ellen Scully-Russ, EdD, Chair AAACE Public Affairs Committee

Recommendations for distribution: It is recommended the AAACE Board distribute this paper broadly to AAACE members and partner organizations as quickly as possible. Time is of the essence as the Senate is consider this legislation today, March 16, 2020. The paper should be sent to all members via email, posted to the AAACE website, and shared with the leadership of our partner organizations with a request that they distribute it broadly.

References