



Frontline Employees Caring for Senior Texans Deserve Hazard Pay

Texas can show its appreciation and ongoing commitment to these critical frontline aging services workers by leveraging federal CARES Act relief funding to finance a frontline employees hazard pay program.

The serious risks that COVID-19 poses to the elderly have been evident since the first major nursing facility outbreak in Seattle. Aging services providers quickly began adjusting operations and taking precautions to process and implement recommendations from various sources, including the Centers for Disease Control. While all Texans had to adapt to keep themselves and their families safe, Texans working on the frontlines serving seniors in health care and housing settings made the heroically difficult decision to repeatedly risk their own health and safety for the benefit of those they serve.

Working with seniors is rewarding, but even in the absence of a virus that poses an extreme risk to providers and the seniors they serve there are significant stressors associated with serving a vulnerable population. With the pandemic, employees in this sector were asked to make financial and personal sacrifices that went beyond the measures taken by the general population. They were asked to forgo second jobs to reduce the risk of spread among facilities; and they showed up, day-after-day, despite early challenges in obtaining personal protective equipment.

There's no debating COVID-19 has devastated long term care facilities. Due to COVID-19, recent reports have described nursing homes as the most dangerous job in America. As of November 2, 2020, over 18,000 nursing and assisted living facility employees have contracted COVID-19 according to DSHS. Of that number, 54 employees have died.

As the pandemic progressed, state and local governments imposed rigorous new requirements on aging services providers. For example, assisted living and nursing facilities were required to prohibit all visitation. While necessary, the prohibition on visitors required workers to step up in new ways. Employees of all job descriptions became companions to residents that could not visit personally with their loved ones. The isolation was incredibly hard for the residents, but it was (and continues to be) emotionally and physically draining on the employees as well. Add in legitimate fears regarding personal safety and relatively low wages, and the risk of burn-out is serious and real in a workforce already facing critical shortages.

The COVID-19 challenges are not over. Although visitation is now allowed in care facilities, it is understandably subject to rigorous regulatory requirements. Workers will be expected to continue making personal sacrifices to keep seniors safe. Texas can show its appreciation and ongoing commitment to these critical frontline aging services workers by leveraging federal CARES Act relief funding to finance a Texas frontline employees hazard pay program.

Several states including Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and Vermont have implemented similar programs to show their support to these critical employees. These payments should prioritize hourly employees who earn low and moderate wages serving older Texans in long term care settings. Direct care workers, housekeepers and sanitation staff, dining services staff, maintenance staff, and other hourly workers have all faced the heightened risk of COVID-19 exposure and the accompanying fear and anxiety. And still, they continue to sacrifice during this trying time. They deserve to be recognized and rewarded for their service.

We encourage Governor Abbott and the state of Texas to adopt a frontline employee hazard pay program that prioritizes frontline workers caring for our most vulnerable population and at elevated risk of COVID-19. Our association offers the following recommendations to be considered in developing a successful program in Texas:

1. Create a grant program where eligible employers may apply for a one-time lump sum to be distributed to eligible employees ONLY in the form of hazard/hero pay.
2. Allocate the amount of federal funds appropriate to include a meaningful number of eligible employees who have not received hazard pay through other authorized publicly funded programs.
3. Funds should be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis.
4. At a minimum, eligible employers should include nursing facilities, assisted living facilities, and other residential settings serving high-risk populations.

5. Employee eligibility should target low to moderate wage, part-time and full-time workers at elevated risk of COVID-19 exposure, and prioritize those making an hourly wage of less than \$25 per hour. Individuals who received unemployment benefits during the eligibility period should not be included.
6. Program criteria should include a minimum number of hours worked for both part-time and full-time eligible employees within a defined timeframe (eligibility period).
7. One-time award amounts of \$500 for eligible part-time employees and \$1000 for eligible full-time employees should be considered.
8. Any unused grant funds should be returned to the state by a specified date.
9. Employer grant recipients should be authorized to deduct any applicable payroll taxes, including the employer's and employee's share of payroll taxes, related to the payment to an eligible employee of hazard pay funded by the program.
10. Eligible employees at elevated risk of exposure should meet one of the following criteria:
 - employees providing services or care on the premises of an eligible employer to vulnerable populations; or
 - employees cleaning, sanitizing, or maintaining the premises of an eligible employer to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.
11. All eligible employer applicants should be required to submit a complete application by the submission due date.
12. Eligible employers should be subject to audit to ensure awarded funds were distributed according to program rules.

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