



REMARKS BY SECRETARY EUGENE SCALIA  
CORONAVIRUS TASK FORCE  
PODIUM BRIEFING  
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Transcript



Mr. Vice President, thank you. Thanks to the Task Force. And of course, thanks to the President for his leadership.

The important public health measures that have been discussed so much at these briefings in this room have had a large impact on American workplaces. We saw that again today, as the Labor Department released figures showing that 6.6 million new unemployment claims were filed last week. We're all mindful, the President mentioned this, that the American people are making difficult sacrifices; that has included being furloughed, laid off or having a small business struggle.

That said, American workers can be encouraged, by how swiftly and comprehensively the President and Congress have responded.

Three weeks ago, the U.S. had never had a law requiring paid sick leave at U.S. companies. But three weeks ago, the President signed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which did provide paid sick leave as well as expanded family and medical leave for employees at small businesses—with those small businesses being reimbursed, dollar for dollar, for having provided that leave.

Last week, we at the Labor Department issued rules to implement these leave requirements, of the Families First Act and we have been in near-constant contact with employers and employees to help them understand the law, and—in a number of cases already—to help workers get the leave that they were entitled to.

Another unprecedented benefit for workers was provided in the CARES Act less than two weeks ago. That law, as you know, includes a \$600-a-week plus-up to unemployment benefits that are provided by the States.

We have millions of unemployed Americans who are making a sacrifice for our national well-being. These bonus payments—and they are unprecedented, the

government has never provided a plus-up unemployment payment like this. These payments are intended to make those workers whole, as near we can.

This temporary benefit is available not just to employees, but also to the self-employed and gig economy workers. Before the President signed the CARES Act, gig workers and independent contractors were not available for unemployment compensation. Today they are.

At the Department, our team has worked day and night to enable States to make this benefit available. I'm pleased that a number of States are now making those \$600 additional weekly payments. More states will follow in the coming days. How long it takes will vary by State—some States' systems will take longer. But we at the Department will continue to support them. We've already disbursed half a billion dollars to states to help them with their systems in making these payments. We have another half a billion dollars that we are ready to release.

And for workers who don't get this benefit when it's first due them, States will be able to catch them up later when their computer systems are able to make these payments.

Let me add, that we are also mindful at the Labor Department that many Americans remain in the workplace, including on the front lines in our hospitals, as well as our emergency responders. My Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration—or OSHA—has been providing guidance to employers and employees on coronavirus since the early days of this health emergency. We are fielding and responding to calls from workers worried about their health, and sometimes from workers who believe they've been illegally disciplined by their employer for expressing health concerns. We will not tolerate retaliation. OSHA

will continue to work with workers and employers to keep workplaces safe, using all the tools available to us, including enforcement if needed.

I wanted to finish by commenting on the Paycheck Protection Program which we heard about earlier, run by the Small Business Administration. This of course is loans to small businesses to enable them to meet certain costs including utilities, rent, and, most important from my perspective, payroll. As you know, if these companies receiving the loans keep their workers on payroll, these loans are largely forgivable.

Here's why that program is so important from my perspective. We're seeing unemployment filings right now of the like that we've never seen before. But these numbers aren't the result of an underlying weakness to our economy. Our economy has been vibrant—incredibly strong, just weeks ago. If, as we heard again today, we are disciplined now, and adhere carefully to the guidance being provided by health authorities, we'll get that economy back. The President spoke at the State of the Union of “the blue collar boom” we were experiencing. We want to lay the groundwork now for a “blue collar bounce back.” We'll get there in part by helping companies hold on to their workers, which is what the Paycheck Protection Program does—keep them on payroll, so that when businesses are ready to re-open, they have the workers they need and Americans have jobs. We will continue at the Department and I know here at the White House to be laser-focused on American workers and jobs until this is done. So thank you very much.

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