

ASK THE CANDIDATES 2022: WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY



“Do you believe working North Carolinians should expect to be safe when they go to work?”

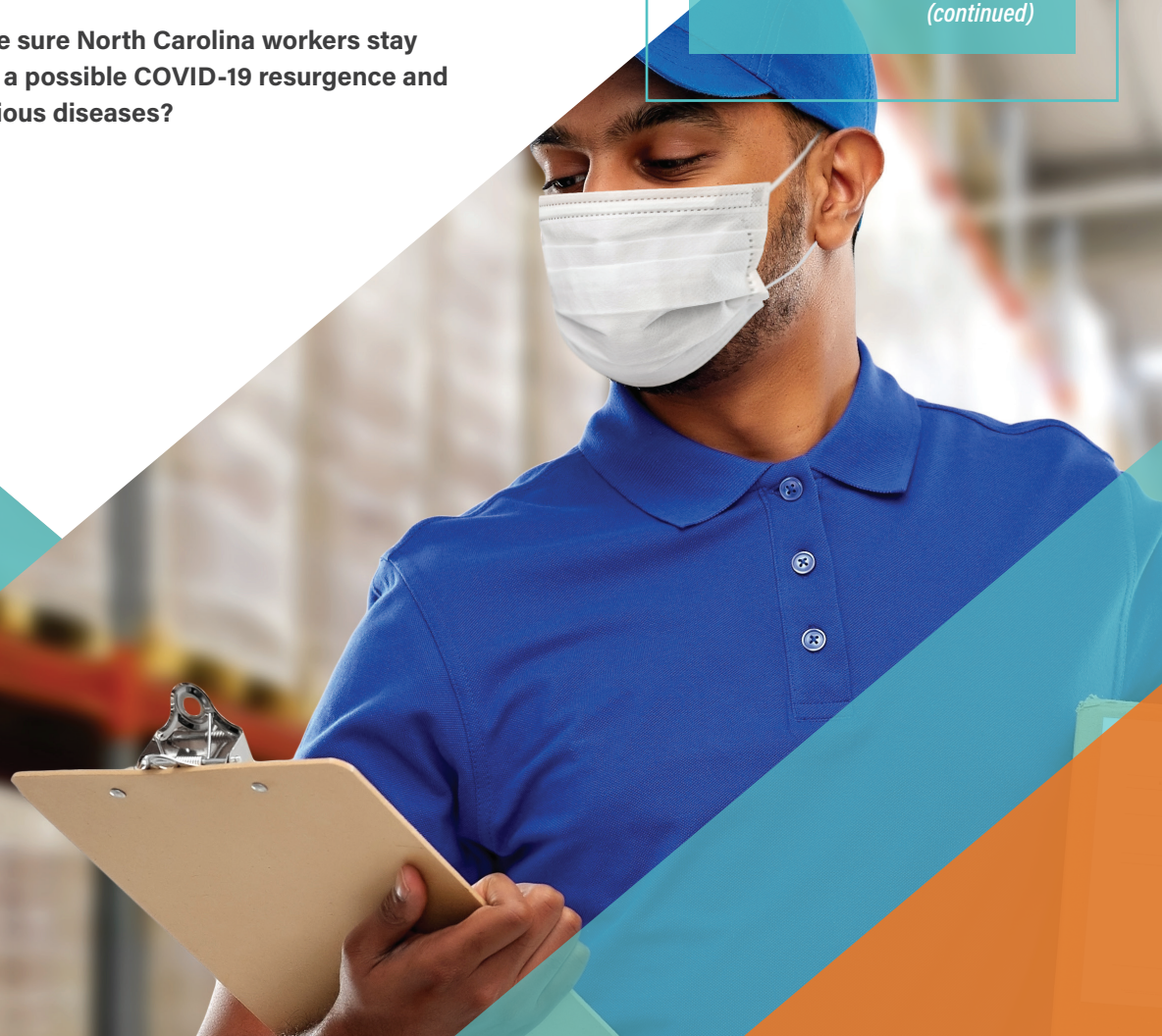
THE PANDEMIC HAS SHOWN US that existing health and safety regulations are inadequate to protect workers from airborne infectious diseases in the workplace. North Carolina was caught off-guard in the spring of 2020 when COVID-19 started spreading through workplaces, especially crowded indoor spaces like meat processing facilities. We need to be better prepared for the next health crisis. Creating an OSHA standard for businesses would help keep workers and their families safe at a time when many people have no choice but to go to work.

- **How will you make sure North Carolina workers stay healthy in the face of a possible COVID-19 resurgence and other airborne infectious diseases?**

FACTS YOU CAN USE:

Federal OSHA has not issued a COVID-19 standard for workers other than healthcare workers. While federal OSHA may issue an airborne infectious disease standard at some point, that could be far in the future and may not protect all workers.

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For the last two years, COVID-19 has been the leading cause of workplace deaths by wide margins. North Carolina Department of Labor reported 26 workplace deaths due to COVID-19 in 2020 and 25 in 2021. Some states have issued OSHA rules for industry sectors where workers are especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

NC OSHA has put out very few recommendations for employers on protecting employees from COVID-19 and has issued no enforceable requirements other than adopting the federal rule protecting healthcare workers (which was recently largely repealed). Their educational efforts are focused on how employees can protect themselves rather than the employer's legal obligation to provide a safe and healthy workplace.

North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services has issued detailed guidance for businesses, including specific guidance for meatpacking facilities, agricultural operations, childcare facilities, and nursing homes. Still, most of the recommendations are not enforceable.

People of color are suffering from higher rates of COVID-19 infection and are disproportionately represented in the highest-risk jobs in North Carolina.

Even though COVID-19 may be less of a hazard to workers than previously, without a rule on airborne infectious diseases, there are few enforceable protections for workers from a future pandemic.

Did you get real, meaningful answers to your questions?

If not, here are some follow-up questions that might help you get a more specific answer:

- Do you support NC OSHA issuing an airborne infectious disease standard requiring employers to have a plan to protect workers, modify working arrangements when necessary, provide adequate personal protective equipment, and provide paid sick time related to the disease?
- Will you allocate additional resources to increase NC OSHA's ability to investigate workplaces in industries with high numbers of positive COVID-19 cases, such as prisons and meat processing facilities? If not, what steps do you believe NC OSHA should take to protect workers from the pandemic?



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