TESTIMONY OF VLADIMIR CLAIRJEUNE, SEIU 32BJ MEMBER

NEW YORK STATE SENATE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON CITIES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LABOR
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT
STANDING COMMITTEE ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON CITIES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LABOR
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
BLACK, PUERTO RICAN, HISPANIC AND ASIAN LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS
TASK FORCE ON ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS
TASK FORCE ON PUERTO RICAN/HISPANIC AMERICANS
TASK FORCE ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

May 18, 2020

Hearing on: Exploring solutions to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities.

Thank you members of the Senate and Assembly for the opportunity to testify. My name is Vladimir Clairjeune, and I am a member of SEIU 32BJ, which represents 85,000 property service workers in New York, including 8,000 airport workers. Up until early April, I was a Passenger Services Representative at JFK Airport for 11 years. I am a first generation American and the son of Haitian immigrants. I live in Jamaica, Queens.

We know from the data that the Coronavirus has impacted communities of color hard. ^{1,2} Today I would like to share my experience as an airport worker of color, which has shown me two major ways we can address this disparity: first, by providing truly accessible and affordable healthcare, and second, by increasing worker power in industries that have a high concentration of workers of color.

I personally have worked through the Swine Flu, Bird Flu, Ebola, SARS, and now the Coronavirus. I feel lucky this far in managing to stay healthy, despite working in those conditions. But many of my coworkers have not been so lucky – many have become sick, and we've lost six New York members to this virus. This has hit really close to home.

The CDC notes that the lack of access to health insurance and paid sick leave are two factors behind the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities. When compared to whites, Hispanics are almost 3 times as likely to be uninsured, and African Americans are almost twice as likely.³ When workers don't have health insurance, they are worried about the costs of medical care, and avoid seeking medical care unless they absolutely need it. Similarly, when workers don't have access to paid

¹ https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/imm/covid-19-deaths-race-ethnicity-05072020-1.pdf

² https://time.com/5834414/nypd-social-distancing-arrest-data/

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html

leave, they are more likely to continue working even while sick, harming not only their own health but exposing their coworkers to diseases like COVID-19.

I have experienced and witnessed this first hand. 95% of my coworkers at the airport are people of color. We live in neighborhoods near the airports – particularly Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx – where many of us live in big apartment buildings and have little room to safely isolate. The coronavirus has upended our lives, and it has exposed the difficult choices we have been forced to make over the years, to manage rising health care costs and stagnant wages.

For us, this is because most of the employers at the airport offer such expensive health insurance options that we forego health insurance entirely, or trade off paying our bills in order to pay our high premiums and deductibles. I have coworkers who are thousands of dollars into medical debt. I have coworkers who have diabetes and lupus, who pay out of pocket for their medication, or who forgo taking their medication entirely in order to balance the books. And because of the subcontracting system at the airports that awards the lowest bidder, we need to set a standard across the board, so that individual contractors aren't incentivized to cut benefits in order to win contracts.

This is why the State Legislature should pass the Healthy Terminals Act (S.6266-C/A.8142-D) which would ensure that all employers provide airport workers with a \$4.54/hour benefit supplement they can use for health insurance. The workers that would be covered by the Healthy Terminals Act are predominantly frontline workers of color at a higher risk of catching COVID-19. The passage of the Healthy Terminals Act would be an immediate step towards reducing racial disparities in healthcare by helping thousands of predominantly minority workers.

I would also like to talk about how labor unions have played a crucial role in protecting workers, especially workers of color like me. Since airport workers have been on the front lines from the beginning, we have been under a lot of stress, but have been fighting every step of the way to make progress. When I started working at JFK 11 years ago, I was making around \$7.15 an hour with no benefits, no voice, no job security, and no respect. I had to fight alongside my coworkers, and seven years later, we won a union and a path to \$19 an hour. Our union has helped push for proper training and equipment, and provided us with avenues to communicate with our managers. These benefits are crucial for workers who help our State's critical infrastructure run – the workforce should always be stable, trained, and experienced.

We have a greater say in our workplace when we are united in a union. For example, in 2014 during the Ebola outbreak, 200 cabin cleaners at La Guardia Airport walked off the job over health and safety issues, and as a result were provided with additional training to protect themselves from infectious diseases. Our union has helped workers file OSHA complaints against employers in cases involving the handling of infectious materials and bloodborne pathogens. Our union is providing ongoing guidance on how to best protect ourselves from COVID-19.

When the workplace is more democratic, workers have more power to act to protect their health and safety, which in turn protects the passengers they serve. Individually workers are less likely to demand better working conditions for fear of relation. This is particularly the case in low wage industries like fast food and gig work, where there is a concentration of workers of color. Unions can help these workers fight for better safety practices, higher wages, health insurance, and paid leave: all policies that will produce better health outcomes for workers. Finally, the data makes the union difference clear: African-American workers who are union members earn nearly \$9,000 a year more than their non-union

counterparts, and for Latino workers, the yearly advantage is more than \$11,000. Workplace justice is racial justice and health justice.⁴ New York should ensure that all workers have the ability to collectively bargain and form a union, and that their rights are upheld.

Being laid off has been stressful. Pandemic relief is helpful but it's going to end. My bills keep coming, and I'm one of the main contributors to my household. In the midst of this all, we should be assured that now and when we are called back to work, we will have real, meaningful access to healthcare. I am fighting on behalf of my coworkers. I am fighting to realize Hector Figueroa's vision for workers like me, who were once considered disposable and interchangeable. We need the Healthy Terminals Act now.

Thank you.

⁴ http://www.seiu.org/cards/5-good-reasons-to-unite-at-work/for-people-of-color-and-women-workers/p3