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'I'm scared to go to work': Grocery store workers describe what it's like to be on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic

Courtney Biggs Apr 2, 2020, 10:33 AM



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Grocery store workers have been deemed "essential" to the public good during the coronavirus pandemic.

But these low-wage employees have now been thrust into unexpected risk and anxiety.

Business Insider spoke with grocery clerks across the country. We're only using their first names at their request.

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What was supposed to be a "low-stress job" for 35-year-old grocer, Rebecca, has turned into a high risk but essential role, "You're working 30 or 40 hours in the exact place you're being told to avoid."

Rebecca took the job in Manhattan as a source of income while she focused on her music and other creative pursuits. But the coronavirus pandemic has changed what felt like a secondary gig to something more crucial.

"There's a certain amount of pride that comes with the job but definitely anxiety would be the overwhelming feeling for me right now," Rebecca told Business Insider.

Store policies where Rebecca works have changed to allow employees to wear masks

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Business Insider spoke with other grocery clerks across the country for their heroing stories. We're only using their first names at their request.

Working and waiting until symptoms show

Gabrielle, a 23-year-old clerk who works the night shift at a Walmart in Erie, Pennsylvania, told Business Insider that customers aren't respecting social distancing rules.

"Customers mostly forget and get too close to ask for assistance. I have had a total of one customer reference the six-foot rule and respect it."

Like Rebecca, she has access to gloves, disinfectant sprays, and wipes, but no masks. She says employees are encouraged to take their temperatures at home before coming into work.

Both Rebecca and Gabrielle have access to two weeks paid leave in addition to their regular PTO, if they test positive for COVID-19. But like many Americans, they can't access a test.

"We've had two cases at my store alone and I've worked alongside both of them in the last two weeks," says Rebecca. "But because I can't just get a test to make sure, I just keep working and waiting until symptoms show."

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feels trapped by an impossible decision.

"I'm scared to go to work and worried about getting sick over a job that pays less than \$12 per hour. But I also feel like I can't just stay home because the elderly need supplies and a kind word. It's really a hard decision."

Josh, a 22-year-old UberEats cyclist in Manhattan, said he will continue to make deliveries because it's "an important service" and "somebody has to do it." It's also the "only job hiring right now."

Josh is using gloves and practicing contactless delivery by leaving food outside apartment doors or with a doorman. One upside, he said, was that his job has actually gotten easier during the COVID-19 pandemic "because there's no cars on the road."

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