

UNITEHERE! Local 11

June 19, 2020

The Honorable Board of Supervisors
County of Los Angeles
Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration
Hall of Administration
500 W. Temple Street
Los Angeles CA 90012

Dear Supervisors:

We write to express our profound concern about Los Angeles County Department of Public Health's (LADPH) process and decision to reopen hotels for tourism and leisure guests on Friday, June 12, 2020. As the Union that represents hospitality sector workers in this region, we do not understand why our organization or membership was not consulted about the conditions in the hotels and the regulations being considered to protect worker and customer safety. We are alarmed by the haste, lack of input, and failure to investigate current conditions and practices at opened hotels. We therefore respectfully request that the County immediately pause the reopening of hotels for tourism and leisure travel.

We do not make this request lightly. Our members have been devastated by this pandemic. Unemployment among hospitality workers exceeds 90%. Our members need to work. However, the health of workers, their families, and guests must come before the hotel industry's desire to reopen for tourism.

As you may know, we represent more than 25,000 hotel and food service workers in Los Angeles County. Our members have led the fight for humane and safe working conditions for all hospitality workers and guests in the region and state. We won the first Cal/OSHA standard to prevent musculoskeletal injuries for room attendants. More recently, we have achieved collective bargaining language and legislation requiring hotels to install panic alarms systems to protect workers from sexual assault and other threatening conduct in the workplace. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, we are focused on ensuring that employers have enforceable policies and procedures in place to protect workers, their families, and the public from the virus.

First, the process to reopen to nonessential guests and issue safety guidelines was irresponsibly rushed. As you know, late Thursday afternoon, June 11, 2020, LADPH's Health Officer issued an Order permitting hotels, motels, and short-term rentals to reopen "for tourism and individual travel" the very next day, Friday, June 12. In the same June 11th Order, the Health Officer issued safety protocols that the hotels must implement to reopen for tourism and leisure guests.

LADPH provided hotels less than 24 hours to train its staff and implement the County's multiple pages of safety protocols. Given the risks facing hotel workers and guests as we know them, the notion that hotels could be trusted to implement these new standards *literally overnight* is misguided and dangerous.

The County's extraordinarily rushed timeline stands in marked contrast to the more responsible approach taken by the County of San Francisco. San Francisco has suffered far fewer deaths per capita (5 per 100k versus 30 per 100k) and lower hospitalization rates for COVID-19 than the County of Los Angeles. Yet the County of San Francisco Department of Public Health has delayed hotels opening for tourism and individual travel until mid-August. And earlier this week, the County of San Francisco Board of Supervisors introduced safety legislation that mandated enhanced cleaning for hotels and large buildings in anticipation for its reopening two months later.

Second, LADPH did not consult or solicit input from our Union or its membership, who are, after all, both the population both most directly knowledgeable about and most impacted by the County's order. As stated above, UNITE HERE Local 11 has spent decades researching, achieving, and training on health standards in hotels. We did reach out to LADPH on Thursday afternoon when we heard—to our surprise and alarm—that an Order would be issued imminently. If LADPH had spoken to our members, they would have learned the following:

- For weeks, perhaps the entire time of the shutdown, many hotels, as well as Airbnb short-term rental operators, have violated the County's previous order and knowingly served nonessential guests. These hotels knowingly cheated the system.
- Hotels in the area do not have a rational, standard system to identify, isolate or contact trace persons with COVID-19 or inform other guests and workers at the worksite. When hotel workers and guests have tested positive for COVID-19, we often learn from other workers, not management. Fearing damage to their brand, hotels avoid informing guests, workers, or Union representatives about the presence of COVID 19 positive persons on the property.
- Hotels have suspended standard cleaning practices, such as daily room cleaning. Room attendants are cleaning extraordinarily dirty rooms with trash, soiled linen and towels piled up in bathrooms and bedrooms. Piles of dirty linen are sometimes stacked in hallways. Hotels have not ensured workers have the time required to thoroughly clean rooms and public areas. Fewer workers are cleaning common and public areas now than before the pandemic.
- Hotels have not adequately and consistently trained their workers on how to protect themselves and their guests from the virus.

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- Many, perhaps most, workers do not want to return to work because they do not believe the hotels are safe. They fear retaliation, loss of unemployment benefits, and loss of their job if they do not return to work when recalled. At one union hotel providing boxed meals for seniors, 60 of 75 cooks declined to return to work.
- Hotels have not consistently provided workers with proper PPE. At one property, management has given workers one set of gloves for their entire shift of cleaning rooms. At another hotel workers have been provided two masks that they are told to take home and wash and bring back to work.
- Many hotels, such as the Terranea Resort in Rancho Palos Verdes and Chateau Marmont, have terminated their laid-off employees' health insurance coverage in the middle of the pandemic. Because the reopening requirements have no safety provision requiring continuity of health insurance, many workers in non-union hotels will return to work with no health insurance.

This is not the picture of an industry that is adequately prepared at this time to protect public health. By excluding our members' experience, LADPH's process to determine the reopening timeline and the content of the safety protocols was deeply flawed.

Third, we do not believe that the hotels will enforce these new protocols. Hotels already violated previous orders by allowing tourists and leisure guests into their hotels. Hotels lobbied against a proposed ordinance at the City of Los Angeles to provide regular paid time for hand cleaning. Hyatt Hotels recently announced a double standard for cleaning: elite guests will have daily room cleaning with the right to opt out, but "regular," non-elite guests will have to request daily room cleaning. Other hotel CEO's have described the "silver lining" of pandemic is the opportunity permanently to cut operating costs, which will inevitably mean that less—rather than more—cleaning takes place. And, if the restaurant compliance to LADPH protocols are a harbinger of hotel compliance, hotels—especially at this accelerated pace—will not maintain the necessary safety standards.

Think of how this looks to our membership. Your decision to reopen early will force a workforce of the lowest-paid workers, predominately people of color and immigrants, to choose between risking their safety or giving up their right to return to their jobs permanently and losing their unemployment benefits as employers report their refusal to return to the state unemployment officials. COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting the health of African

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American and Latino people.¹ The rushed hotel reopening will put a predominately low-income Latino and African American workforce at risk to serve predominately white and wealthy customers.

For these reasons, we beseech you to pause the reopening of hotels for tourism and leisure guests. The decision to reopen was made hastily, without proper input, and relies on an unreliable, resistant industry to enforce safety standards. We need to do this right. Hotels are risky. They are large buildings packed with transient visitors and scores of frequently touched surfaces. Mistakes will result in outbreaks, and possible deaths. We should not place hospitality workers or the public at large at risk. We must not repeat the mistakes made in grocery stores and factories.

We believe the County should instead double down on its authority to repurpose hotel rooms for Project Roomkey. At three union hotels which have contracted with the County for Project Roomkey, we have achieved written, enforceable agreements that exceed LADPH and State health and safety guidelines. The County's supervision and supplemental service-providers who work alongside our members, who are trained to follow health and safety guidelines, provide both a safe working environment and home for the previously unhoused. LADPH's order has undermined this life-saving program. At least two hotels that were close to participating in the project recently changed course, citing their desire to take advantage of the reopening Order. We can and should save more lives with Project Roomkey.

We believe that tourism can and will come back. But we believe its return should be guided by a thoughtful, inclusive process and an appropriate degree of realism and caution. It is time to reset this process.

Sincerely,

Ada F. Briceño

Ada F. Briceño
Co-President

Susan Minato

Susan Minato
Co-President

Kurt Petersen

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¹ Maria Gadoy and Daniel Wood, *What Do Coronavirus Racial Disparities Look Like State By State?*, NPR, May 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state> (“Nationally, African-American deaths from COVID-19 are nearly two times greater than would be expected based on their share of the population. In four states, the rate is three or more times greater. In 42 states plus Washington D.C., Hispanics/Latinos make up a greater share of confirmed cases than their share of the population. In eight states, it's more than four times greater.”)

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