



July 8, 2020

Governor Gretchen Whitmer
P.O. Box 30013
Lansing, Michigan 48909

To the Honorable Governor Gretchen Whitmer:

Resilience Force is a national initiative to transform America's response to disasters by strengthening and securing America's resilience workforce—the millions of people whose work, heart, and expertise make sustainable recovery from disasters possible.

Please allow me to commend you and your administration on your COVID-19 response, and your courage in making public health of your constituents the number one priority.

We represent some of the more than 100 resilience workers, including the undersigned, who came to Michigan to support your community and assist in rebuilding efforts after the Edenville and Sanford dams were breached and thousands of residents of Midland were forced to evacuate. As you are aware, while they were working to repair the MidMichigan Medical Center and other buildings, dozens of the workers were infected with the coronavirus.

We write to help you better understand what happened when these workers were repairing a hospital and other buildings in your community and to invite you to meet with us and join us in demanding accountability from companies and protections for resilience workers.

On June 11, during your interview on WDET in Detroit, we were troubled to hear you say that the workers “brought COVID-19 with [them].” They arrived in Michigan healthy and ready to rebuild. The companies who hired the workers defied your executive orders and public health guidance and created conditions that allowed the deadly coronavirus to easily spread.

Resilience workers play an essential role in helping communities rebuild after climate disasters, as occurred when the Michigan dams failed. When resilience workers arrive in Michigan, whether to clean up and rebuild after floods, tornadoes, or wildfires, it is essential that enforceable standards are in place that protect them from COVID-19 both on the job and in their temporary

housing. Otherwise, we will see a repeat of what happened in Midland, as one crisis compounds the next, threatening the health of workers and the communities they have come to help.

A SERVPRO franchise in Michigan, which we believe to be SERVPRO of Saginaw, a franchise of a leading disaster restoration company, contracted BTN LLC, a Texas-based company, to hire more than 100 resilience workers from Florida and Texas to repair the MidMichigan Medical Center - Midland and other buildings.

While your shelter-in-place executive order prohibited non-family members from congregating, the companies required workers to crowd into hotel rooms--four to a room, two to a bed. One of the workers expressed concern to the owner of BTN about being crowded into hotel rooms during a pandemic. The owner responded that it was the decision of the SERVPRO franchise. The workers were also packed tightly into vans to be transported to and from the worksites and reported that they weren't able to safely distance during much of the day.

The company didn't conduct COVID screenings. The worksites didn't provide stations for workers to wash their hands with soap and water or provide proper breaks and encouragement to make sure they could regularly wash their hands. The workers often didn't have sufficient or appropriate PPE.

In these conditions, when a worker was infected with COVID, the virus was able to quickly spread among the group.

When many workers expressed that they had fevers or were experiencing other symptoms, a group got tested, and many of their tests came back positive. The health department, which we believe was the Bay County Health Department, lacked bilingual staff or access to interpretation services, and the owner of BTN was entrusted to interpret and to relay guidance for their recovery.

Despite clear instructions from the health department that the workers should quarantine and isolate in Michigan--and despite many of them asking to do so--the owner lied and told the workers that the public health department had instructed them to leave Michigan. The company made arrangements for the workers to be sent home to Florida and Texas in crowded vans, putting still healthy workers, their families, and entire communities at risk.

When communities are devastated by a natural disaster, these are the essential workers who come and help rebuild. Their work has never been easy, but the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the dangers they face. The floods in Michigan were the first climate disaster during the COVID-19 pandemic and must serve as an example to other governments who are bracing themselves for hurricane or wildfire season, while continuing to combat a surge of coronavirus cases.

We respectfully request the opportunity to meet with you to share more about the experience of resilience workers in Michigan and discuss how governments and companies can protect workers and communities after climate disasters during the pandemic.

Sincerely,



Saket Soni, Executive Director

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