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SENATE PRESIDENT TIM ASHE STATEMENT ON EXPLORING STRATEGIES TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT ESSENTIAL WORKERS

“Many employees in our society are now labeled ‘essential’ though their work has long been unnoticed, undervalued, or unappreciated - custodians, store clerks, child care workers, mental health group home staff, hospital cleaning staff, shelter workers, and so many more.

Many of these Vermonters are being asked to work during the COVID-19 crisis. We cannot deny that their work puts them at heightened risk of exposure despite all the precautions we’re taking in our workplaces. Nor can we deny that for many of them the risk they are taking and the pay they receive are quite at odds.

Since the President signed the latest relief bill into law on Friday, the Legislature has been working to understand how it translates for Vermont employees and business owners. The substantial relief is welcome, but may also create unintended and unfair consequences.

In particular, it appears that many lower paid “essential” workers may actually earn less by showing up at work each day than they would if they did not and instead choose to apply for the new enhanced federal unemployment benefits. In light of that, and factoring in the heightened risk many essential workers face at their jobs, I worry that it will be hard to sustain the workforce needed to perform essential functions if the current state of emergency lasts into late spring or early summer.

Put simply, an essential employee should not be compensated less for working than for not working.

This morning I asked several Senators to explore methods to provide essential workers a pay bump to recognize their critical contributions to Vermont during this crisis, and to ensure they are not worse off financially for working. Considerations include: the extent to which federal relief funds can be used for this purpose, who should be eligible for such payment or wage enhancement, and how compensation of this type could be administered in the simplest manner.

When this crisis is over, I hope our appreciation for the value and honor of all workers will remain. In the meantime, we must find a fair remedy to compensate their work at least as much as, and hopefully more than, they’d get by not working.”