What does normal even mean anymore?

By Julie Lind
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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to upend our lives and our economy. We are all longing for the day that things “return to normal,” even though we have no idea what normal is anymore. Hell, I barely know what day it is most of the time. For those of us with children, we’re trying to figure out how to be full-time workers as well as camp counselors, educators, sports coaches, playmates — all of the things our kids used to do outside of the home that we took for granted in a lot of ways.

For single parents/caregivers and for those who can’t work remotely, the only choice available to many is to stop working. While that was difficult enough with the extra $600 from the federal government to supplement pandemic unemployment, without that additional money the situation is even more devastating. I guarantee
you that none of those who complain about the amount of federal assistance are trying to live off of $1,050 a week or less, especially not in San Mateo County — we are tied with San Francisco for most expensive county in the entire country. If someone is earning more on unemployment than they are when employed, the issue is not the level of the benefit — it’s that their job doesn’t pay a living wage. Every worker would rather earn a paycheck than an unemployment check.

Our union workers have been on the front lines of this global health crisis since day one. We are your medical staff, grocery employees, airport workers, postal workers, delivery drivers, firefighters, emergency dispatchers and bus drivers. We work for the cities, the county and the courts. You see us fixing roads, servicing power lines and building critical infrastructure. We are your teachers and classified school employees, reluctantly trying to figure out how to educate remotely because it’s not safe to return to the classroom.

For too many of us who continue to report to work outside of the home, that simple act could mean getting sick or even losing our lives or those of our loved ones. Some of us struggle to get proper employer-provided PPE, suffer from a lack of compliance by employers with mandatory reopening protocol, and are endangered by colleagues or clients/customers not taking the mask orders seriously. While we may prefer to stay safe by staying home, our financial reality does not give us that option. For those of us who haven’t been able to work, we are trying to figure out how we are going to keep our homes, put food on the table and fund our basic living necessities on a maximum payment of $450 a week in pandemic unemployment insurance.

America faces crises on three critical fronts: a public health pandemic, an economic free-fall and long-standing structural racism. All three must be addressed with precision and purpose, and they are intrinsically linked; they cannot be fixed separately. Millions are unemployed across the country, with
low wage workers in our marginalized communities the hardest hit. Our senators must act with urgency to pass the HEROES Act, which will put our country on the path to recovery.

While this pandemic continues to unfold, our vital public services are being stretched to the breaking point. Congress needs to invest in our state and local governments, our public schools and the U.S. Postal Service. Any investments in corporations and industries must be contingent upon those same corporations and industries getting their employees back to work and keeping them there.

America is enduring a health crisis, yet the first thing millions of people are losing is their health insurance. We cannot have a healthy economy without a healthy workforce. We need to expand health care coverage by stressing the need to make COBRA benefits available and affordable for all workers who are now out of work, regardless of immigration status.

With the highest number of unemployed Americans since the Great Depression, we need to provide good jobs for all workers. This is a wake-up call to make long-overdue investments in a key pillar of the economy: our infrastructure. There is no better time than now to make that vital reinvestment, to protect our country and boost the creation of good jobs.

This is a moment that demands clear action and common purpose. Any meaningful recovery will require all levels of our government to prioritize working families, and our communities to come together to protect our most vulnerable. We will come out on the other side of this, we will create a “new normal,” but only if we do it together.

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