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Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) is the key to fight Covid-19 at the workplace

While we have gone through the realities of Covid-19, being under pressure for the last two years, we recognize the importance of Covid-19 Safety and Health regulations, but it may be necessary to provide supplementary and related solutions, interventions and builds on the current Safety and Health practices as legal compliances to eliminate the risk of exposure to Covid-19 in the workplace. This may become even more critical if another round of vaccines/boosters become necessary.

One area is the physical space of offices that should be separated with room dividers/partitions or cubicles to minimize the spread of the Covid-19 virus in the workplace. The installation of such barriers blocks face-to-face pathways between individuals in order to prevent direct transmission of respiratory droplets. In areas where there is heavy foot traffic, having office doors closed would better protect employees in offices from exposure.

It is generally accepted that vaccinations help with fighting many diseases, and employees should be entitled to time-off to get vaccinated, as well as recover from any side effects (this seems to be neglected in many environments). In the future, this time-off can also be extended to facilitate employees in accompanying household members to a vaccination center, should it be required. This is needed particularly with families that are facing economic challenges, as well as those who have elderly and disabled household members who need assistance to reach a vaccination center. Where possible, employers should attempt to provide the vaccine onsite.

Currently, there are protocols in place to deal with incidences of direct contact with infected persons, but as we learn more from the experiences, we need to review these protocols as future strains of the virus may be more aggressive, especially in an environment which exhibits such vaccine hesitancy.

An area that must receive our attention is offices which that use air conditions, as this environment contributes significantly to the circulation of virus particles within

an enclosed space. This system recirculates indoor air which is inadequate ventilation and simply circulates the air carrying Covid-19 virus particles. Ventilation is critical, especially if we encounter another surge in the spread of the virus. Windows should be opened and all vents/air passages should not be blocked, and in an unventilated work area with the provision of an A/C system installed for cooling, it is recommended to open windows for at least 5 minutes every 1 to 2 hours to bring in fresh air from the outside. The use of an air cleaner and air sanitizer will reduce the concentration of Covid-19 virus in the air therefore improving air quality.

As Trinidadians, we love to congregate and old talk. From the inception of the protocols that have been applied to the virus, we know that we need to keep a safe distance from others in order to reduce its spread. To assist in this matter, offices can stagger break times, workers' arrival and departure times; and in the event that congregation is inevitable, a queuing system will facilitate social distancing.

We also need to be careful, as past experience has taught us that employers should have policies to deal with issues of mask wearing for individuals who have special issues related to religion, health and other issues. One example is the making available of special face masks with transparent coverings over the mouth to facilitate lip-reading in situations where an employee may have hearing impediments. These policies need to be enforced and training of the staff can benefit all, and this training should ensure that they understand the importance of the protocols, enforce the science of the virus and how it affects their families, the workplace and the community in general.

The unions have a part to play in the fight against Covid-19 and any future pandemic. The terms and conditions in a Collective Bargaining Agreement should be amended to enforce a new leave called "Covid-19 leave" for employees who contracted the Covid-19 virus and are required to quarantine that will affect

the employee's work attendance and productivity.

This type of leave will cover the employee from unsatisfactory attendance and guide employers when attendance evaluations and performance appraisals are conducted. Furthermore, unions should negotiate for time-off for employees for those needing time off to get vaccinated.

As Covid-19 continues to plague workplaces on a global scale, these additional solutions, interventions and improved safety practices should be considered. Due to the progressive threats and changing nature of the Covid-19 such as its variants, it is concluded that Covid-19 safety regulations and practices at the workplace needs to be regularly updated.

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