

By now, you've probably seen the message from Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy, COVID-19 Campus Announcement, which was sent at 4:51 p.m. on Friday, March 13.

We are pleased that the Chancellor has taken more drastic steps to protect the health and safety of our UMass community, including by “suspend[ing] all in-person classes, including laboratory, studio, capstone, and graduate courses, until the end of the semester... [and] effective Monday, March 16 [requiring that] only weather-designated essential personnel ... report to campus in accordance with their regular work schedule. All other employees will begin working remotely until further notice. Next week, supervisors will be in contact with all employees to determine work capabilities and assignments.” These welcome changes come after PSU and USA union leadership sent an appeal on March 12 to Chancellor Subbaswamy and Vice Chancellor Brady.

While this is a radical (but necessary) change, and sad in many ways, we believe that this is a better approach to the crisis at hand.

In addition to these measures, the union leaders felt strongly that our campus has a moral obligation to show more concern for those essential workers deemed at high risk for infection based on the national recommendations and make sure they are kept safe from unnecessary harm. These employees, many in positions that might not allow for remote work, still deserve the right to stay home safely without loss of pay or benefits and without being charged for earned time. The University was responsive to our concerns following the release of the Chancellor's letter. To that end, any essential employee who identifies as high risk, including employees over 60, employees with compromised immune systems and certain other health issues like diabetes, asthma, and other respiratory conditions, and pregnant employees, or those employees living with or providing primary care for a high risk person, should contact the office of Human Resources by calling 413-687-2283 or emailing Covid19HR@umass.edu. You may also contact your union representative if there are further concerns.

Nonetheless, there are some additional concerns we think the Chancellor should still address:

Spring break should be extended from one week to at least two weeks, following the lead of many other universities and colleges. This will allow more time for faculty and the staff who are supporting them to move course content online; this will also ensure that students are better able to take these courses in an alternate format.

Health and safety measures for the protection of the workers required to remain on campus to care for students and animals—and keep essential functions running—are paramount, and UMass Amherst must release a plan with protocols to keep them safe. Many of us are prepared to volunteer to do tasks above and beyond our regular assignments to serve our community on campus.

We hope that the administration of UMass Amherst will continue to provide the leadership our campus and community need and deserve by immediately putting these additional protections into practice.

Given the evolving changes to our work conditions, we have already put in a request to bargain over the administration's ongoing response to COVID-19. We have been told they will be reaching out to us to schedule something next week. While we have received some guidance on who essential employees currently are (i.e., "weather-designated"), we will be in close consultation with management and members as positions considered essential may evolve and change over time to include other members of our campus community. We are also trying to get clarity on where all employees are located. We know that UMass employees are flexible and dedicated to ensuring student success and getting the job done, and we know that this is a drastic shift for every member of our community.

Your union leaders are always available to provide assistance and share your concerns, particularly when we are facing a crisis. We ask that members remain a little flexible about remote assignments for the next week or so, but contact us immediately if there is a concern about being required to come to campus due to health issues or concerns or perform a function that seems problematic.

As Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy put it well, "the patience, resourcefulness, and dedication exhibited by our community members during this difficult time is nothing short of inspiring. We are a resilient and caring community." To our many union members and colleagues who reached out to us and expressed your concerns and volunteered to assist with advocating for the health and safety of our workers: THANK YOU!

We fought for ourselves, our families, our students, and our community.

When workers stand together, we are strong.

In Solidarity,

Leslie Marsland, President USA

Risa Silverman and Brad Turner, PSU Amherst Co-Chairs