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Amazon facing scrutiny in Mass. after employees file complaints about working conditions

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 17, 2020, 3:56 p.m.



People protested about working conditions outside of an Amazon fulfillment center on Staten Island May 1. MICHAEL NAGLE/BLOOMBERG

Employee protests and sick-outs. A top executive's resignation in solidarity. Demands for details on coronavirus infections among workers.

The retail giant Amazon has come under fire in recent weeks like few other businesses. And as the pandemic stretches on — and housebound consumers wait anxiously for their packages — the company finds itself facing intensifying scrutiny of [workplace conditions](#) at its busy warehouses.

Despite calls for more transparency, the company has declined to release details on the breadth of disease in its ranks. Several deaths have been reported at its facilities across the country.

While there haven't been any publicly reported coronavirus fatalities among Amazon workers in Massachusetts, recently released records from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration show that workers have levied several complaints about conditions at Amazon facilities in the state.

Three were filed in late March and early April against an Amazon warehouse in Dedham. That's among the highest total number of known complaints at any single facility in Massachusetts, records show.

A "few hundred" employees sort packages at the 60,000-square-foot warehouse, according to Amazon.

One complaint said the company had not disinfected work areas after an employee tested positive for the virus. Another alleged employees were showing up to work with symptoms because they did not have enough sick time. Also, masks allegedly were not provided until weeks after they were promised, and hand-washing and glove changes were limited, the complaint alleged.

A third complaint said employees were going to work sick at the encouragement of the employer and that the company hadn't provided hand sanitizer or cleaning products.

A separate complaint centered on the Amazon warehouse in Stoughton. The April 21 complaint alleged there was no soap or sanitizer and that employees were unable to social-distance. The worker said employees were concerned that the company was “hiding” positive cases from workers.

These complaints were among 3,500 COVID-19 complaints filed nationwide with OSHA, closed by the agency, and made available for review. Complaints are closed after OSHA informs an employer of the alleged complaint and receives a satisfactory response in writing about steps taken to address the issue.

Amazon currently faces two complaint-based OSHA inspections: at a facility in Washington state and at another in Oregon, records show. OSHA has not released details about thousands of coronavirus-related complaints it is still reviewing.

Amazon spokeswoman Rachael Lighty said the claims outlined in the OSHA complaints “are simply not true.”

“Nothing is more important than the health and well-being of our employees, which is why we are doing everything we can to keep them as safe as possible,” Lighty said in a statement. “We were earlier than most when rolling out broad protective measures for our teams and we’ve adapted every day to make improvements. We believe our efforts are working — from temperature screenings, masks, social distancing, disinfectant fogging, and the hundreds of other process changes we’ve implemented.”

The company has refused to provide information about how many of its workers have been infected and killed by the virus. However, information has trickled out through media reports.

There have been at least six deaths, according to [Bloomberg News](#), and fear among workers is widespread, with some warehouses seeing high rates of absenteeism of late.

The company has been accused of retaliating against some employees for protesting the conditions, including by firing workers. That [led](#) one Amazon executive to quit, [calling](#) the firings “evidence of a vein of toxicity running through the company culture.”

Amazon says it notifies all employees in a particular facility via text message when a worker tests positive, and any colleague who came in close contact is sent home to self-quarantine. Infected and quarantined workers are given up to two weeks of paid leave, in addition to regular time off. The company also said the rate of infection at almost all of its facilities has been at or below that of the surrounding community.

Last week, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey led attorneys general from 11 other states and the District of Columbia in calling on the company to provide details about its health and safety measures, data about infections and deaths among workers, and evidence of compliance with the state’s paid sick leave law.

The letter also called for the same from Whole Foods Market, the grocery chain Amazon owns.

“Amazon and Whole Foods are occupying a unique space during this crisis, providing millions of Americans with groceries and necessary supplies,” said the [letter](#), addressed to Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos, the wealthiest person in the world, and the head of Whole Foods, John Mackey. “We understand that both companies are seeing a significant increase in sales as well, as consumers rely even more on online shopping and buy more groceries as they stay at home.”

“It is incumbent upon Amazon and Whole Foods as businesses and employers not to worsen the emergency by failing to take every possible step to protect their employees and their customers,” the letter continued.

In Massachusetts, there have been at least two complaints to OSHA about Whole Foods.

One, filed in mid-April against a store in Swampscott, noted [a worker there had contracted the virus and died](#). It said the company was slow to report that death to OSHA and was not following Centers for Disease Control guidelines to protect workers.

Whole Foods [said](#) it had temporarily closed its Lynnfield store after employees there tested positive for coronavirus. The store was undergoing “professional deep cleanings and disinfections,” the company said, adding that it would pay workers who miss shifts due to the closing. The company did not say how many people tested positive.

A spokeswoman said safety is Whole Foods’ “top priority” and that it has implemented measures including daily temperature checks of employees and requiring them to wear masks. It has also installed plexiglass barriers at the checkouts.

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