

Family suing Verizon over death of worker sent into high-risk locations without protective equipment

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The family of a Verizon employee, who died of COVID-19 after repeatedly being sent into nursing homes and other high-risk locations without any personal protections, is suing the telecommunications giant.

Alfred Salvatore, a 47-year-old service technician who worked for Verizon in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area for over 20-years, died on April 24 from the coronavirus.

“Communications were considered essential work, but I’m still confused why he wasn’t given any kind of PPE,” his wife Natalie Salvatore told the *Guardian* newspaper. “They were sending him into nursing homes, where he would be the only one there with no protections. It’s bizarre to me.”

In addition to Natalie, Alfred left behind two daughters, Samantha and Gabriella and brother Paul and sister Karen.

Natalie is now suing Verizon. She has filed a fatal claim petition with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, saying the company failed to take measures to protect her husband while he worked throughout the pandemic.

“He was constantly telling me he put in several complaints to his immediate supervisor and even above them, that when he went to his hub there was no hand sanitizer, there was no disinfectant spray, there was nothing to take with him to do his job,” Natalie told the *Guardian*. “Communications were considered essential work, but I’m still confused why he wasn’t given any kind of PPE,” added Natalie. “They were sending him into nursing homes where he would be the only one there with no protections. It’s bizarre to me.”

“My husband was a healthy 47-year-old man with no

prior health conditions, and it took his life,” Natalie said. “To say my daughters are devastated is an understatement. It’s heartbreaking. It’s a true loss for our family and for everybody who knew him.”

Headquartered in New York City, with major centers in New Jersey as well as Philadelphia and other East Coast cities, Verizon was fully aware of the dangers presented by the pandemic and the steps needed to protect its workers.

In early April, New York was the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis and got most of the news coverage. Pennsylvania was one of the hardest hit states, with the pandemic centering in the Philadelphia area.

Case numbers in Pennsylvania began to skyrocket in mid-March, and by April 10, two weeks before Albert died, Pennsylvania already had 20,000 cases and over 400 deaths. At the time only three other states had more.

The dangers in nursing homes were also well known. In the first week of April, three patients at a Pittsburgh-area nursing home had died, and the pandemic was so out of control that the nursing home considered that all 800 of its staff and patients had become infected.

Similarly, a Delaware County nursing home near Philadelphia had to call in National Guard nurses and medics to assist in caring for patients.

On April 24, the number of cases in Pennsylvania had nearly doubled to 38,000, and the number of deaths had gone up almost five times to nearly 2,000.

In a two-page filing, Verizon is challenging Natalie’s petition. Without giving any justification, the company is requesting that the fatal claim be dismissed or disallowed. Under Pennsylvania workers compensation law, the spouse and children of a worker killed on the

job are entitled to their expected wages.

While not providing workers with proper safety equipment and continuing to cut jobs, Verizon continued to make record profits during the pandemic. Its second quarter results show that Verizon took in \$30.4 billion, down 5.5 percent from the same quarter in 2019, but through cost cutting cash flow increased, and the company paid out \$1.13 per share to stockholders and paid down \$4.9 billion in debt.

The company is in the third year of a \$10 billion cost reduction plan and is reporting a \$7.2 billion cumulative savings.

“Verizon didn’t do anything when he was in harm’s way, and they didn’t do anything when he died. Now they are contesting the fact that his death was caused by being exposed to COVID-19, despite knowing the overwhelming evidence will indicate he was in nursing homes and in public spaces with no protection,” Samuel Pond, the attorney representing the Salvatore family, told *The Guardian*. “They’ve been consistent in their response through this whole tragedy, and it’s been inhumane and heartless,” Pond added.

“It doesn’t surprise me,” said a technician in the Pittsburgh region who works for Verizon and asked to remain anonymous. “I haven’t heard of his case, but we’ve been working throughout the pandemic. The company talks safety, but all they care about is FIOS, FIOS and FIOS (fiber optic telephone and television service).

“We go into people’s homes, businesses, out here on the streets. The company doesn’t care about us; they just care about money.”

President Trump issued an executive order that workers at meatpacking plants had to return to work and that the companies could not be sued. Thousands of meat and other food processing workers have been infected and many have died. Trump’s order is being challenged in the courts.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has made one of his priorities the passing of a law that would protect companies from being sued if workers contract COVID-19 while working.

For their part, Democrats have said they are opposed to any such measure, but privately have indicated that they would be willing to negotiate the issue as part of a COVID relief bill. Congress adjourned in August for vacation without passing a relief bill.



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