

Industry torn on whether real estate is an essential service

At a time when people are staying home en masse to combat a global health crisis, many in the real estate industry question whether or not their jobs should be considered essential



Wutthichai Luemuang / EyeEm / Getty Images

BY [LILLIAN DICKERSON](#) |

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At a time when the danger of severe illness seems to lie around every corner, some real estate professionals have called for agents to put a halt to business and [stay home](#). The different aspects of an agent's

job require too many risky interactions to be worth the gamble, they argue.

Others beg to differ.

As a thread on Thursday posted by Brad Inman on [Inman's Coast to Coast](#) Facebook page seems to indicate, the industry is [torn](#) about whether or not it provides an essential service. In a bout of soul searching, hundreds of Inman readers posted more than 400 comments weighing in on the matter, and frequently at an emotional pitch.

"We are NOT essential," wrote Dawn Olson, a real estate agent in Bourbonnais, Illinois. "Selling is essential to US and our finances. Select sellers and buyers NEED to buy or sell more than others, but at what risk? Putting OUR needs above public safety will backfire later, if we put MONEY over SAFETY. The public is keeping tabs on who is doing what. So if you insist on selling, I wouldn't brag about it to the public. It will make you look like a jerk."

Although one legal definition of essential services includes "energy (electricity, oil and gas), transport (air, rail, water and road), banking, financial market infrastructure, healthcare (hospitals and clinics), drinking water and digital infrastructure," according to the [National Law Review](#), individual countries and states can define what they deem as essential services for their region.



Dale Chumbley

Regardless of legal or governmental definitions, though, the topic is clearly a fraught one.

“Perhaps a better question would be, ‘Is real estate more essential than stopping this pandemic and the lives of your loved ones?’” Dale Chumbley, Realtor at Real Living The Real Estate Group, said on Inman Coast to Coast.

Many others echoed Chumbley’s sentiment, emphasizing the necessary health precautions individuals must take during this time.



Anna Abbatemarco

“Are we really all so self-absorbed and so incapable of dealing with this setback that we think our personal displeasure or temporary inconvenience trumps the welfare of others, including their own kids?” Anna Valenti Abbatemarco, team leader of the Anna Abbatemarco Team at eXp Realty, said.

“I wonder if when this initial climbing crisis is behind us, if we could trace deaths back to their point of contact and find they happened during ‘essential real estate’ activities, how many deaths would there have to be to change our minds on the work being essential,” Amy Curtis, Realtor at Sold by Amy Curtis at Coldwell Banker, said.



Amy Curtis

Despite the strong response from those who clearly see real estate as non-essential during this time, there's an equally robust group who firmly believe that real estate is very much essential to everyday life, particularly for clients who have been caught mid-sale or in-between leases.

"Contracts, and people losing their places to live," Eric Stegemann, CEO at Tribus, said. "This week we had an employee who was moving, and then with the stay-in-place order, they are stuck in limbo — can they move? What happens when they are required to be out of their old place?"



Eric Stegemann

"I don't know how people can say no," Barbara Gatewood Sgueglia, director of the Military Relocation Team Hampton Roads, said. "People need shelter as much as they need food and water."

“We have a lot [of military professionals] coming from overseas, and all they want right now is a place to quarantine, we have to help,” said Amina Basic, CEO and team leader of Keller Williams McLean/Great Falls.



Barbara Sgueglia

With select individual states issuing guidelines on what workers are essential versus inessential, some of the legal gray areas are being clarified, at least. However, some states, like [New Hampshire](#), have not yet defined what constitutes an essential service, leaving people wondering how they'll proceed if a shelter-in-place order is issued in the near future.



Amina Basic

However, some states have already named real estate as a non-essential business, and the classification may have come as a blow to passionate [agents](#).

“There seems to be hurt feelings because your jobs aren’t considered ‘essential.’” said Jay Thompson, former director of industry outreach at Zillow and current Inman contributor. “Get over it. The vast majority of

jobs out there don't have life and death consequences. It doesn't mean what you do isn't important. Of course it is."



Jay Thompson

"Some could be truly homeless," Thompson added. "Those should be helped. Many more will be greatly inconvenienced. Some will lose their livelihood. It all sucks, but that doesn't make selling a house an [essential](#) service."

Amidst all this uncertainty, one thing seems clear: The coronavirus pandemic has left the real estate industry soul-searching. How the industry emerges on the other side of it all will be revealing.