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Committee: Finance

Testimony on: SB486 – “Employment Standards During an Emergency (Maryland Essential Workers’ Protection Act)”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: February 11, 2021

The Maryland Sierra Club urges a favorable report on SB486. This bill would provide much needed protections for Maryland’s essential workers as our state continues to struggle to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting damage to public health and the economy.

The Sierra Club’s mission is to enjoy, explore, and protect the planet. In this regard, the Sierra Club is a strong proponent of environmental justice, and social and racial justice overall. We know that many people and communities cannot appreciate the outdoors and benefit from a healthful environment when they lack basic economic stability and safety.

In support of this legislation, we would like to explain its importance by offering a personal perspective from Clint Sobratti, Jr., a member of the Executive Committee of the Maryland Sierra Club’s Montgomery County Group. Mr. Sobratti also is one of the Vice Presidents of UFCW Local 1994 MCGEO. Mr. Sobratti’s testimony is as follows:

I am a resident of Legislative District 39 in Montgomery County, Maryland. I am a devoted father and husband, and a Montgomery County Transit Coordinator, who has been an essential worker for the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (Ride On) for the last ten years. As a Transit Coordinator, I am tasked with monitoring bus reliability, including mechanical malfunctions, on-time performance, and customer engagement.

As an essential worker, I can personally attest to risk factors our transit operators are facing. When the global pandemic first emerged., transit operators were not provided with adequate safety protections, such as masks, gloves, hand sanitizer, and partitions between drivers and passengers. Instead, transit employees were responsible for obtaining their own PPE. This placed drivers at risk for exposure to COVID-19.

There have been two fatalities in our transit family. On April 15, 2020, Mr. Michael Miller, a Prince George’s County resident and a nine-year motor pool attendant, was Montgomery County’s first essential employee who succumbed to COVID-19. Recently, Mr. Nelvin Ransome, a retired bus operator and former recorder who was a member of UFCW Local 1994, died as a result of COVID-19 complications.

Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 75,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.

Although essential workers have been mandated to report to work during the state of emergency, there has not been hazard pay to compensate for that risk. Many of my colleagues have experienced significant psychological distress, including anxiety, frustration, and paranoia. Studies indicate that job satisfaction increases and frontline workers are more likely to report to work if there is a pay incentive, as well as other protocols in place to ensure their health and safety.

I am proud to be providing service to our community during this state of emergency. I only ask that transit employees and other essential workers be fairly compensated and be provided the health protections needed to do their work safely.

In sum, this legislation will improve wage and working conditions for essential employees. They will be eligible for hazard pay and bereavement leave, and will have the right to refuse to engage in work in an unsafe environment. The Maryland Sierra Club urges a favorable report to better protect frontline workers who risk their lives and their families' lives every day for the greater good of our state.

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