

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 486:

Labor and Employment - Employment Standards During an Emergency (Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act)

TO: Hon. Delores G. Kelley, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee

FROM: Christopher Dews, Policy Advocate

DATE: February 11, 2021

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates for policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. JOTF supports Senate Bill 486 as a means to ensure worker protections during public health emergencies.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, essential workers are those who conduct a range of operations and services that are typically essential to continue critical infrastructure operations. This includes, but is not limited to, firefighters, police officers, doctors, nurses, bus drivers, grocers, sanitation workers, mechanics, and more. All are required to maintain Maryland's economy during the pandemic and all have to put their health and safety at risk every day they go to work.

Nearly 300,000 Marylanders lack health insurance and the majority of these are low-wage essential workers. Worse, current Maryland law only allows for up to (5) five days of paid sick or safe leave annually and that benefit only applies to businesses with more than 15 employees (14 or fewer employees receive up to five days of *unpaid* leave.) Combining these two points, it is clear that the vast majority of essential workers in Maryland are *not* adequately equipped to handle the international COVID-19 Pandemic, which has slain 7,148 Maryland residents- a disproportionate amount being low-wage essential workers of color. There is not enough time in statute for a 14-day quarantine and no financial coverage for medical treatment.

Additionally, many companies that provide essential services have no set procedures in place for public health emergencies or proper personal protective equipment to protect the health and safety of workers. 50% of the COVID-19 deaths in Maryland are caused by the lack of personal protective equipment at places of employment. The CDC also reported last Fall that the virus is primarily contracted in the workplace- yet, outside of the Governor's temporary executive orders, there is *no* statute designed to protect workers in this crisis.

Senate Bill 486- known as the "Essential Workers Protection Act" moves to resolve the vast

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majority of these legislative oversights and sets the standard for how essential workers should be treated and compensated during public health emergencies. The bill ensures that during public health emergencies, essential workers: (1) are allowed to work in safe and hygienic working conditions; (2) receive hazard pay; (3) are privy to their employer's emergency action plan; (4) have access to 14 days of paid sick leave and three days of paid bereavement leave; (5) are given the right to refuse dangerous work conditions; (6) and access to free testing and reporting of positive test results during a viral pandemic.

Essential workers are the heroes that keep our state running; they deserve to be protected and compensated for their work in these dangerous times. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 486.