



FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS Testimony for the Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act – SB 486 (Senator Augustine)

Presented before the Senate Finance Committee

February 11, 2021

On behalf of Marylanders for Food and Farm Worker Protection, thank you for the opportunity to express our support for SB 486, the Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act. This legislation would require employers to provide workers with safe and hygienic workspaces, personal protective equipment, emergency pandemic action plans that include sanitation protocol and changes in shift hours, paid health and bereavement leave, free COVID-19 testing, an additional \$3 an hour in hazard pay and the ability to refuse dangerous work without fear of retaliation. In line with achieving these goals we recommend an amendment that incorporates HB 124 to include an Emergency Temporary Standard (ETS) from Maryland Occupational Safety and Health (MOSH).

Marylanders for Food and Farm Worker Protection is a coalition that formed last summer to advocate for the health and wellbeing of workers in the agriculture, meatpacking, and seafood processing sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Food and farm workers have been intentionally excluded from basic labor and employment laws like the right to organize, minimum wage, and paid sick leave. COVID-19 has turned what was already a crisis into a mega-crisis. In Maryland, and throughout the country, we have witnessed meatpacking and other food production facilities become COVID-19 hotspots.

Workers have expressed fear of coming forward publicly with their concerns and complaints, with some reporting that they are facing pressure to sign Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs). Still, advocates and media have heard disturbing stories. Two anonymous workers employed by Amick Farms in Hurlock, MD, shared, "They are calling people and asking them to come back within maybe a couple of days [of testing positive for COVID-19]." They also reported that their employer required them to pay for their own face masks¹. Two employee complaints with Amick Farms were filed with Maryland Occupational Hazard & Safety (MOSH), and they were closed without an on-site inspection or citation. At least three workers from the plant subsequently died. Perdue poultry workers reported that their employers urged them to consume ice cream and Tylenol in order to pass temperature checks prior to going into work. Right now, these workers have no recourse.

We urge the General Assembly to step up so that workers are immediately protected now and in any public health crisis in the future. Marylanders for Food and Farm Worker Protection supports SB 486 with a sponsor-supported amendment to incorporate an Emergency Temporary Standard from MOSH consistent with HB 124. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹ <https://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2020/04/30/maryland-eastern-shore-poultry-plant-coronavirus-outbreak-latest/>

Marylanders for Food and Farm Worker Protection includes the following organizations:

CATA – the Farmworkers Support Committee

Center for Progressive Reform

Centros de los Derechos Del Migrante

Chesapeake Physicians for Social Responsibility

Clean Water Action Maryland

Fair Farms

Farmworker Justice

Food & Water Action

Friends of the Earth

Maryland Pesticide Education Network

Migrant Clinicians Network

Public Justice Center

Smart on Pesticides Coalition representing 105 organizations, businesses and institutions