
BILL NO: Senate Bill 486
TITLE: Labor and Employment - Employment Standards During an Emergency
(Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act)
COMMITTEE: Finance
HEARING DATE: February 5, 2021
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

Senate Bill 486 seeks to address the ever increasing risks and inequities suffered by front line, essential workers, during the course of the current pandemic or in the event of a future state of emergency. The bill enumerates which industries and occupations are deemed essential during an emergency. It then ensures a special enrollment period for purposes of health insurance during an emergency; addresses the issue of hazard pay; requires employers to provide workers with safe and hygienic workspaces, personal protective equipment, and paid health leave; requires employers create emergency preparedness plans that include sanitation protocols and addresses shift-changing capabilities; and give employees the ability to refuse dangerous work without fear of retaliation. These are all actions necessary to protect the essential workers who are unable to telework or pause their workload during health emergencies and natural disasters.

One in three jobs held by women are deemed as essential, putting them at the center of the frontlines during the current pandemic. In fact, 52% of essential workers are women, despite women only making up 47% of the total workforce¹. Women make up a disproportionate percentage of health care workers, grocery store and fast-food employees, and social workers. Many of these industries are also considered low-wage occupations, compounding the challenges these women face as they work to care for themselves and their families. The health risks of being an essential worker during the pandemic are real. Sadly, women make-up 73% of the health care workers who have been infected with the coronavirus, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention². These industries have failed their workers in many ways, while demanding more and more from them. As operators of one of the only statewide employment law hotlines, we have received frequent calls related to workers who have not been provided their own PPE, who have not been provided reasonable accommodations despite medical documentations that they are high risk, and who literally fear for their lives every time they go to work, but have no choice but to continue to do so in order to support their families. The convergence of all of these issues creates an urgency as the pandemic has hit critical mass for working women. This legislation would address these emergent matters, providing safety and security for the same people who have worked so hard throughout the pandemic to provide for us.

Because SB486 will help protect essential workers lives, health, and economic stability, the Women's Law Center of Maryland, Inc. SUPPORTS Senate Bill 486.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, legal services organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change, working to ensure physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy for women in Maryland.

¹ How Millions of Women Became The Most Essential Workers in America, The New York Times, April 18, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>

² Characteristics of Health Care Personnel with COVID-19 0 United States, February 12 – April 9, 2020.
https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6915e6.htm?s_cid=mm6915e6_x