

**Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee  
SB 486: Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act  
Position: Favorable**

February 11, 2021

The Honorable Delores Kelley, Chair  
Senate Finance Committee  
3 East, Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401  
cc: Members, Senate Finance Committee

Honorable Chair Kelley and Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition (MCRC) is a statewide coalition of individuals and organizations that advances financial inclusion and economic justice for Maryland consumers through research, education, direct service, and advocacy. Our 8,500 supporters include consumer advocates, practitioners, and low-income and working families throughout Maryland.

We are writing today in strong support of SB 486.

SB 486 would provide much needed protections for essential workers on the frontlines during periods of state and local emergency. This bill is paramount in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and would ensure that Maryland is prepared to respond to similar crises in the future.

COVID-19 exposed many stark realities of our state and country, foremost, the inability to protect workers crucial to the operation of our society. Since March of 2020, there have been over 350,500 positive cases of COVID-19, over 7,000 deaths, and roughly 25,000 people hospitalized in Maryland.<sup>1</sup> Essential workers are at a higher risk of exposure to the virus while at work. The sectors with more hazardous working conditions do not uniformly guarantee standards such as hazard pay, proper sanitizing procedures or personal protective equipment (PPE), healthcare assistance, bereavement leave, or testing and reporting that provide necessary protections for these workers.<sup>2</sup> This has led to the loss of lives. Roughly 56% of MD COVID-19 deaths have occurred in Long Term Care facilities due to a lack of PPE.<sup>3</sup> Employers should be required to provide PPE and set clear safety protocols, procedures, and standards to ensure safe work environments for frontline workers.

Without these protections, essential workers are faced with the choice to ensure either their physical health or their financial health. Workers risk losing their jobs and falling behind on bills if they act safely and stay home, take time off work to recover from an illness such as COVID-19, or take leave to care for a sick family member.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/>

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<https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/covid-19-workers-compensation.aspx#:~:text=Workers%20deemed%20essential%20including%20health.workers'%20compensation%20in%20most%20states.>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://www.marylandmatters.org/2020/10/08/advocates-want-stability-for-nursing-homes-after-months-of-turmoil-from-covid-19/>

A recent study conducted by researchers at Princeton found that among low-income households, financial strain and debt accrual worsened significantly in the onset of COVID-19. Sixty-seven percent reported skipping paying a bill at the beginning of the shutdown, and in each survey wave between the end of April and mid-June, 77% of households reported missing a bill or rent payment.<sup>4</sup> The protections outlined in the bill, including guaranteed hazard pay, healthcare assistant, and bereavement leave would reduce both the threat to workers' physical and financial health.

Providing protections for essential workers would also act to reduce the racial, economic, and health disparities that have come to light during the pandemic. Essential workers are predominately people of color; people of color make up 50% of essential workers in food and agriculture and 53% in industrial, commercial, residential facilities and services.<sup>5</sup> The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has identified race and ethnicity as risk markers for other underlying conditions that affect health including socioeconomic status, access to health care, and exposure to the virus related to occupation like frontline, essential, and critical infrastructure workers.<sup>6</sup> Black Americans are 1.5 times more likely to contract covid than white Americans, 3.7 times more likely to be hospitalized, and 2.8 times more likely to die. Furthermore, low-income Black households experienced greater job loss, more food and medicine insecurity, and higher indebtedness in the early months of the pandemic compared to white low-income households.<sup>7</sup> Providing physical and financial protections for frontline workers would save lives and reduce the health and wealth gap between white Americans and Americans of color.

SB 486 provides a needed expansion of protections for frontline workers regarding their physical and financial wellbeing, particularly during this unprecedented health and wealth crisis and for crises of the future.

For all of these reasons, we support SB 486 and urge a favorable report.

Best,

Isadora Stern  
Economic & Tenants' Rights Organizer  
Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition

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[https://www.news-medical.net/news/20201130/Low-income-black-households-disproportionately-affected-by-Covid-19-shutdowns.aspx?fbclid=IwAR2Rfw5BNynhUu8Ra\\_zRN36EI0BBxdDc8HZCy7as5xw78ydIHYu7uxz7Bdw](https://www.news-medical.net/news/20201130/Low-income-black-households-disproportionately-affected-by-Covid-19-shutdowns.aspx?fbclid=IwAR2Rfw5BNynhUu8Ra_zRN36EI0BBxdDc8HZCy7as5xw78ydIHYu7uxz7Bdw)

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<https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates/#:~:text=People%20of%20color%20make%20up,not%20have%20a%20college%20degree.>

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<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>

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[https://www.news-medical.net/news/20201130/Low-income-black-households-disproportionately-affected-by-Covid-19-shutdowns.aspx?fbclid=IwAR2Rfw5BNynhUu8Ra\\_zRN36EI0BBxdDc8HZCy7as5xw78ydIHYu7uxz7Bdw](https://www.news-medical.net/news/20201130/Low-income-black-households-disproportionately-affected-by-Covid-19-shutdowns.aspx?fbclid=IwAR2Rfw5BNynhUu8Ra_zRN36EI0BBxdDc8HZCy7as5xw78ydIHYu7uxz7Bdw)