

Testimony of Amber Stevens

Before the House Economic Matters Committee

In Support of HB 1018, the Maryland Economic Stabilization Act-Revisions

February 25, 2020

Chairman Davis, Vice Chairwoman Dumais and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you in support of HB 1018, the Maryland Economic Stabilization Act and most of all Thank you Chairman Davis and Delegate Fischer for introducing this bill.

I have worked at Shoppers Food & Pharmacy #2669 in Forestville, Maryland, for the past 11 years. Unfortunately, the last 16 months have been a living nightmare.

In October 2018, a company based in Providence, Rhode Island called UNFI purchased the Shoppers chain and immediately announced it was getting out of the business of running retail grocery stores. I cannot understand the economic logic of buying these stores to get rid of them, but that seems to be the way our rigged economic system works these days.

Ever since, it has been very hard on me and on all Shoppers workers — not only knowing that our stores were targeted for sale or closure, but not hearing one word from UNFI about what was coming next. We are hard workers and decent human beings who deserve to be treated with respect. But UNFI left us twisting in the wind. The company was not doing bad financially and they were providing affordable grocery store options to many communities who desperately need them.

Then the company added insult to injury in December by announcing that it would close four stores and sell 13 others. And it gave us less than 60 days notice, much less the 90 days we deserve. What a way to say Merry Christmas!

That's why we need the Maryland Economic Stabilization Act. Because an out-of-state corporation driven by greed could care less about voluntary guidelines. We need requirements.

Now, I am fortunate that my store remains open for now. But I still don't know if or when it will be closed or sold or what my fate will be.

Because of our union, UFCW Local 400, we were able to use our bargaining power to negotiate a severance agreement that provides employees at closed or sold stores with the opportunity to either transfer to a store that remains open or to accept separation pay and four months of continuing health care coverage.

But most Maryland workers in similar situations don't have the power of collective bargaining and need the protection that HB 1018 will provide.

The fact is this: when someone has given years of her life to making a company successful, she should receive some compensation when that company chooses to leave their community in order to make more money somewhere else. We hope that Maryland will also look into requiring companies to pay severance for an employee's years of service, like New Jersey and Maine.

Chairman Davis and Delegate Fischer, I thank you for your leadership on this bill. Because of your support and the support of other elected officials Shoppers knew that they had someone else to answer to besides the workers. I urge members of the committee to vote in favor of HB1018 so what happened to us doesn't have to happen to anyone else.

Thank you