



SEIU MARYLAND & DC STATE COUNCIL

1410 Bush Street, Suite F, Baltimore, Maryland 21230

Testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 581

**Labor and Employment – Employment Standards During an Emergency
(Maryland Essential Workers’ Protection Act)**

House Economic Matters Committee

February 5 2021

11:00 am

Presented to: Dereck E. Davis, Chairman

By: Terry Cavanagh, Executive Director

SEIU Maryland & DC State Council urges a **Favorable Report to HB 581.** We thank the Chairman for sponsoring this much needed legislation.

SEIU is the largest union in North America. We unite workers in health care, public service, including public education, and property services to improve lives and the services we provide. We represent over 50,000 workers in the Maryland/DC/Virginia region. Many of our members are poorly paid, but essential.

The past 300 plus days of the COVID-19 Pandemic has shown how woefully prepared we were, and continue to be, to win the war against this foe, which has now slain over 7,000 of our fellow Marylanders.

Many of us have been able to protect ourselves by having little contact, other than the endless number of zoom calls, with people outside our protective pods. Though it may present challenges, we have been able to alter our workplaces and work styles in order to protect ourselves, our family members and lessen the number of hosts needed for this enemy to thrive.

Essential workers are not able to protect themselves in the same way. They also may face another foe. Unscrupulous, ignorant, careless or naïve employers. We don’t have to look too far back to review evidence. Supermarket checkout workers told to NOT WEAR MASKS, because it wasn’t a GOOD LOOK. Packing house workers being forced to work in close proximity to one another which resulted in thousands becoming infected and scores dying, in order to production up. Nurses told to report to work, EVEN IF THEY TESTED POSITIVE, if they

weren't symptomatic, because health care facilities were at the breaking point. Perhaps the most dangerous job in America in the last year has been NURSING HOME WORKER. They were the most exposed, most likely to become infected, most likely to have patients die, and late to receive PPE.

There's not too much we can do about the past, although some would like to apply blanket immunity to employers – retroactively. That would be a mistake.

We can, however, pass HB 581. During an emergency such as we have now, this bill would:

- Create an enrollment period Maryland Health Benefit Exchange for essential workers
- Require employers to grant Hazard Pay to essential workers
- Force employers to adopt measures to keep essential workers safe
- Provide proper and timely testing to essential workers
- Allow essential workers to take paid bereavement and health leave

All of these measures would help in defeating our common enemy – this deadly virus – and the next deadly virus. By doing so, it helps all of us, because as bad as things have been over the last year, without these HEROES, things would have been a lot worse – for all of us.

We urge a Favorable Report on HB 581. Thank you.