



Testimony in SUPPORT of HB 124 (Delegate Valderrama) to Protect Maryland’s Workers from COVID-19 through Enforceable Standards from Maryland Occupational Safety & Health

Presented before the House Economic Matters Committee

January 28, 2021

On behalf of Marylanders for Food and Farm Worker Protection, thank you for the opportunity to express our support for HB 124, which will require Maryland Occupational Safety and Health to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to create mandatory and enforceable workplace protections for essential workers impacted by COVID-19, and to create a permanent aerosol transmissible disease standard for any future pandemics.

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 are the backbone of our food system. Yet despite their integral contributions, these workers and their families face entrenched poverty, an unjust immigration system, and dangerous working conditions. 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.

Our coalition, alongside many others – including the Democratic members of Maryland’s Congressional delegation – called on Governor Hogan to issue an Emergency Temporary Standard to protect workers from COVID-19 as more than a dozen states have done, including Virginia. He declined to act. We urge the General Assembly to step up now with an emergency standard, and to create a permanent standard so that workers are immediately protected now and in any public health crisis in the future.

HB 124 is timely and is needed now to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in worksites throughout Maryland. 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].” These workers also reported that their employer required them to pay for their own face masks. Two employee complaints with Amick Farms were filed with MOSH, and they were closed without an on-site inspection or citation. At least three workers from the plant subsequently died.

As it stands today, there are Maryland workers – including food and farm workers – who still are not provided adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), who are forced to stand shoulder to shoulder on poultry slaughter lines or lose their paychecks, who are being asked to return to work when they are still sick, and who are too fearful to speak out for fear of retaliation from their employers. Without any enforceable and mandatory workplace safety and health standards in place for COVID-19, these employees have no recourse. And until our food and farm workers are protected, our food supply chain remains at risk and community spread of this virus will continue.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report of HB 124.

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