

Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act

Bill Sponsor: Delegate Davis

Committee: Economic Matters

Organization Submitting: Lower Shore Progressive Caucus

Person Submitting: Jared Schablein, LSPC Chair

Position: FAVORABLE

I am submitting this testimony in favor of HB0581 on behalf of the Lower Shore Progressive Caucus. The Caucus is a political and activist organization on the Eastern Shore, unaffiliated with any political party, committed to empowering working people by building a Progressive movement on the Lower Eastern Shore.

A large segment of the membership of the Lower Shore Progressive Caucus is essential workers. Our members work in healthcare, retail, food, poultry, and many of the industries most at risk due to Covid-19. Despite being called “heroes” by many, almost every single one of them has come to us with a horror story about unsafe conditions or subpar pay for their work, keeping everything going during the pandemic.

Since March 2020, there have been over 333,000 positive cases, nearly 6,700 deaths, and roughly 25,000 people hospitalized in Maryland. These stats are made even more concerning to us on the Eastern Shore with the release of the CDC study that found Rural Americans are at a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 because we are typically older than non-rural populations, have higher rates of underlying chronic disease even after adjusting for age, and often have a lower standard of care than Urban areas. These numbers are more than just numbers, it is drastically affecting our rural way of life and is causing many of our members and their families to face daily levels of extreme stress due to the risk of catching covid and dying from it.

To make matters worse, many of our workers are forced to use their personal leave or go unpaid when they are quarantining or mourning a family member's loss. This reality is cruel and entirely preventable. No working person in Maryland from the Eastern Shore to Western Maryland and everywhere in between can afford to go without pay for weeks to be in quarantine or mourn family loss. This legislative body must require employers to provide 14 days of paid quarantine leave and three days of paid bereavement leave to help workers cope with their financial and health burdens.

Another issue that has arisen from this pandemic is that many of our frontline workers are struggling to make it financially. If calling our frontline workers “heroes” is more than just a performative gesture to make ourselves feel better, then we must ensure that employers pay their workers who are risking both their own and their family’s lives fairly during this pandemic.

To ensure that frontline workers are paid fairly, the state must mandate hazard pay for workers on the frontlines during this health emergency. Hazard pay of \$3/hour will compensate workers for the harsh conditions they are working in and will help them take care of their families during the financial crisis we find ourselves in. In addition to regular pay, this hazard pay should also be given for shifts worked during the State of Emergency.

Finally, the state should allow employees to enroll in insurance through Maryland’s Health Benefits Exchange to ensure they get the health care they need. Doing this will help workers and their families and slow the spread of the coronavirus by keeping workers healthy and on the job.

The Maryland Essential Workers Protection Act is a common-sense bill that would not only help our workers survive the finance and health crisis we face now but also help our state better prepare for the next crisis. For that reason, the Lower Shore Progressive Caucus urges legislators to stand with workers by supporting this bill and giving it a FAVORABLE report in committee.