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Subcommittees

Environment
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The Maryland House of Delegates
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB577

Healthy Farmworkers Act

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart

February 2, 2021 • House Economic Matters Committee

What the Bill Does

HB577 would require the Department of Labor to issue regulations to improve housing conditions for farmworkers and reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in employer-provided housing. During the pandemic, these regulations would require employers to isolate workers that test positive for COVID or are suspected to have COVID; clean worker housing; and post notices regarding health protocols. Longer term, the regulations would provide for annual inspections of employer-provided farmworker housing and for whistleblower protections.

Why the Bill Is Important

Last spring, poultry processing plants on the Eastern Shore played host to some of the largest COVID-19 outbreaks in the country. In Maryland, [Purdue University's Food and Agriculture Vulnerability Index](#) estimates that close to 2,200 food and farm workers died due to COVID-19, with 234,658 confirmed cases of COVID-19. This does not account for the families of farmworkers and the potentially thousands of other Marylanders who [may have contracted COVID-19 due to their contact with a farmworker](#). Out of 2,200 farm workers that have died in Maryland, 1,855 of them were workers in the poultry industry.

Since then, the industry has taken steps to create a safer workplace for farmworkers. At least [24 states](#) have issued either voluntary or mandatory requirements to protect farmworkers from COVID-19, including [Maryland](#). However, less action has been taken to ensure farmworkers' housing is sanitary, habitable, and COVID-safe.

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Many essential farmworkers are migrant workers or on a temporary work visa, such as the H-2A visa. These workers tend to live in housing arranged by their employers. Employers who provide housing often transport workers to and from the housing to the worksite in crowded vehicles. When workers contract COVID-19, they often must continue to share housing with other workers, exposing an entire household to the coronavirus, and needlessly jeopardizing these workers' lives, especially for those who are older are at severe risk of complications.

Since agricultural employment is seasonal, there's a clear public health urgency to pass this bill now to prevent the virus from further spreading, leading to another spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths in the spring and summer.

Why the Committee Should Vote Favorably:

The COVID-19 farmworker housing protections in this bill would turn Maryland Department of Agriculture's [guidance](#) from a recommendation into a requirement. At least [5 other states](#) (as of June 2020) have **mandatory** COVID-19 housing protections for farmworkers. This includes Washington, Oregon, Michigan, New York, and Colorado.

Maryland's farmworkers are working tirelessly during the pandemic so that we can eat. All workers deserve safe, healthy, and sanitary living conditions, regardless of their employer or immigration status. Passing this bill would create common-sense rules to improve housing conditions and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

I urge a favorable report.