



February 3, 2021

Dear Legislators:

Four Seasons Hotel Baltimore stands in opposition of HB 581. While we understand that the intent is to benefit the working population of Maryland who have been negatively impacted by the impacts of the pandemic, this bill will be financially and operationally devastating to businesses who are already struggling to maintain revenues and keep people employed.

Our hotel was deemed an essential business and remained open since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. It was important that we continued to serve our long-term medical stay guests and keep our staff employed. Due to the pandemic, we lost 61% of revenue and 96% of gross operating profit. We are down \$12MM in net profit as compared to 2019. Our payroll cost as a percentage of total revenue increased 10% vs 2019 with fewer employees on staff. Nevertheless, we made several drastic changes to our operating guideline and employee facilities to make sure our staff were kept safe. Every employee was immediately given the proper PPE to do their jobs. Around-the-clock cleaning was increased to every 15 minutes in public guest and employee spaces. We have been accommodating to employees who have been unable to work due to onset of symptoms, difficulty with childcare and other challenges presented by the pandemic. Our active employees have had personal struggles making them unable to maintain the usual 40 hours of work required to keep benefit coverage in place due, yet we have not dropped benefits for any of them. The FFCRA Sick Leave and EMFLA laws providing 80 hours of sick leave, accumulated sick leave for non-COVID issues and 10 weeks of FMLA due to loss of childcare are in practice within this hotel. We also offer short-term disability pay to eligible employees out sick for more than 6 days.

We believe we represent many businesses in the Baltimore area who already have paid time off plans, financial assistance with healthcare costs, accommodation for employees unable or uncomfortable to return to work and strict workplace protocols to ensure employee safety. Employers like us should be supported in an effort to keep the citizens of Maryland employed. Adding more costs in the form of back hazard pay and mandatory plans that are duplicative to what we already offer is quite the opposite. It will penalize us and could cost us the health of our business and the job security of our employees.

We suggest that this bill be turned into a set of minimum requirements that businesses must meet in order to employ essential workers. We disagree with the requirement for hazard pay, as paying employees more does not ensure their safety in the workplace. These funds should be directed toward costs of ensuring employee safety. Hazard pay should instead be changed to require that all employers who have essential workers must 1) provide all necessary PPE, 2) follow cleanliness and social distancing protocols in the workplace, 3) enforce health screening upon building entry and 4) maintain written and defined guidelines for employee safety during the health emergency.

The bill should also enforce minimum health insurance requirements for businesses who employ full-time essential workers. The MD Sick and Safe Leave Act, combined with the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act provides sufficient and fair time off requirements to cover employees who have health needs related to the pandemic. We support the requirement for 3 days of bereavement leave for full-time employees.

Finally, the right to refuse work should be turned into a voluntary personal leave of absence policy, which would allow employees the ability to request a defined period of unpaid time away from the workplace with guaranteed job protection and healthcare coverage, in order to handle personal matters, settle fears/anxiety or recuperate mentally from the stress of working through the pandemic. This would not be the same as a medical leave, as it is meant to benefit the need for recuperation and personal care to keep employees resilient. The dates and length of time off must be agreed to by employer and employee and approved in writing by the employer.

We appreciate your consideration of our testimony. We can be reached for further information at the contact information below.

Warmest Regards,

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