

Maryland House Hearing
HB0685 – Maryland Secure Wage Act Testimony
Feb. 9, 2021



My name is Peter Dooley MS, CIH, CSP, and I am the Safety and Health Senior Project Coordinator for the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health. I am also currently a member of the Occupational Health and Safety Section of the American Public Health Association [APHA].

I am submitting testimony in support of HB0685, the Secure Maryland Wage Act. The Maryland Secure Wage Act is critical for public health, especially in a pandemic. It would help over a thousand frontline workers who could be deterred from seeking treatment for COVID-19 because they lack affordable health insurance.

Contracted airport workers are overwhelmingly immigrants and people of color, who are two to three times more likely than our white counterparts to contract COVID-19 and nearly three times as likely to die from the virus. Record-breaking COVID-19 rates exacerbated by holiday travel, combined with a workforce that lacks affordable health insurance, despite being among the most vulnerable to contracting COVID-19, is a recipe for disaster that this bill seeks to remedy.

There is even greater urgency with the threat of more contagious and dangerous variants, especially knowing that our airports and train stations are ground zero for where these variants can enter and spread. That's why we must pass this bill as part of the overall effort to help prevent the spread. It would give the travelling public greater peace of mind at a minimum.

Additionally, while COVID-19 is today's most pressing challenge, more mundane illnesses like influenza also represent significant threats to workers' well-being and stability of airport staffing. The CDC estimates that between 12 and 51 thousand people have died of causes associated with influenza annually since 2010.

A 2015 study by the Government Accountability Office stated that "more than any other mode of transportation, air travel creates the potential for an infection to move quickly from one part of the world to another."¹ The study raised concerns that employees of contracted aviation services firms face particular risks of exposure to communicable disease. Airport workers such as cabin cleaners and wheel chair attendants are frequently exposed to bodily fluids, making them particularly vulnerable. Research suggests that uninsured individuals are less likely than others to receive the yearly influenza vaccine,

¹ The GAO interviewed aviation service workers employed in airport and aircraft cleaning and passengers services (including wheelchair attendants) and reviewed OSHA filings related to: inadequate communicable disease training, challenges accessing appropriate personal protective equipment, cleaning equipment, and cleaning supplies. GAO 2015. Air Travel and Communicable Diseases: Comprehensive Federal Plan Needed for U.S. Aviation System's Preparedness. Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/674224.pdf>, accessed 23 October 2019.

putting workers at even higher risk for illness and transmission to others. A 2015 study showed that influenza vaccination coverage overall among adults with health insurance was 44 percent, compared to 14 percent among those without health insurance.²

These exceptional risks compound the everyday hazards facing baggage handlers, cleaners, wheelchair attendants, and many others.³ Research shows that uninsured people are less likely than others to receive preventative care⁴ or vaccines, like the flu shot.⁵ An airport worker without insurance is less likely to visit a doctor, if she believes she is ill. She is less likely to receive care before her symptoms become severe or debilitating.⁶ Research also shows that workers with health insurance are less likely to miss work and miss fewer days of work than those without insurance, even after taking into account underlying differences in health between the two groups.⁷

Health care is critical not just to safety of workers and travelers, but also to instill the confidence necessary to get the public back to the airport and to keep them up and running again. These men and women are essential to helping us all receive vital goods that help sustain us during extended homestays and quarantines. They will also play a vital role in helping to transport and deliver COVID-19 vaccines to help us and our economy recover from the pandemic.

For these reasons, health insurance for airport workers must be prioritized as a crucial measure for the region's safety and prosperity, and I urge you to support this bill.

Sincerely,

Peter F Dooley

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5826635/>

³ A 2015 study from the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health found identified hazards related to chemicals, blood borne pathogens, diesel emissions and carbon monoxide, and musculoskeletal disorders, which "left untreated, can be debilitating." See NYCOSH 2015. "Airport Safety Starts with Safer Working Conditions." Available at <http://nycosh.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Airport-Safety-Starts-with-Safer-Working-Conditions.pdf>. Accessed October 22, 2019.

⁴ Tolbert et al., December 13, 2019. Key Facts about the Uninsured Population. Kaiser Family Foundation, available at: <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/issue-brief/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population/>

⁵ Lu et al (2015). Impact of Health insurance status on vaccination coverage among adult populations. Am J. Prev Med. 2015 Jun; 48(6): 647-661. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5826635/>

⁶ Tolbert et al. December 13, 2019. Key Facts about the Uninsured Population. Kaiser Family Foundation, available at: <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/issue-brief/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population/>

⁷ Lucia et al (2017). Which California Industries would be most Affected by ACA Repeal and Cuts to Medi-Cal? Data Brief: UC Berkley Center for Labor Research and Education. <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2017/Which-CA-Industries-Most-Affected-by-ACA-Repeal-and-Cuts-to-Medi-Cal.pdf>