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HB 581 Labor and Employment - Employment Standards During an Emergency (Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act)

**Favorable
February 5, 2021**

Good Morning Chairman Davis and members of the House Economic Matters Committee. I am Tammy Bresnahan, Director of Advocacy for AARP Maryland. As you know, AARP Maryland is one of the largest membership-based organizations in Maryland, encompassing almost 850,000 members. AARP MD overwhelmingly supports **HB 581 Labor and Employment - Employment Standards During an Emergency (Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act)**. We thank Delegate Davis for sponsoring HB 581.

AARP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, nationwide organization that helps people turn their goals and dreams into real possibilities, strengthens communities and fights for the issues that matter most to families such as healthcare, employment and income security, retirement planning, affordable utilities and protection from financial abuse.

HB 581 the Maryland Essential Workers Protections Act will provide much-needed standards and procedures that aim to protect the health and safety of essential workers during pandemics. If passed, when a State of Emergency is called, the following protections will be afforded to essential workers including: safe & hygienic working conditions, hazard pay & healthcare assistance, emergency action plans, universal health & bereavement leave, right to refuse dangerous work, and free testing and reporting of positive test results

According to AARP Public Policy Institute, among all workers ages 50 and older, nearly a third (30.1 percent) are designated as essential, equivalent to younger age groups. Twenty-nine percent of all workers age 65+ and 27 percent of workers age 75+ are designated as essential. Around 27 percent of all male workers have been designated as essential, compared to about 34 percent of all female workers; there are over 2 million more women than men in the essential workforce. Among workers ages 50 and older, there are over 750,000 more women in the essential workforce than men.ⁱ

Black/African American workers are the group most likely to be designated as essential. In the 50+ age group, White male workers are the least likely to be designated as essential and Black/African American female workers (42.3 percent) are most likely. Workers ages 50 and older are an important demographic within almost all the essential worker industries and occupations. In the health care sector, for example, 37 percent of workers are ages 50 and older and 15 percent are 60 and older. Workers 50+ also make up one third or more of the workers in transit, critical retail, postal, social services, and agriculture. The share of the essential workforce 50 and older varies across the country.

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It ranges from 35 percent in the West to 40 percent in the Northeast, suggesting some regions rely more heavily on older workers within their essential workforce.ⁱⁱ

In addition, twenty nine percent of low-wage workers have been designated essential, and they are most likely to be Black/African American workers. Among low wage workers age 50 and up: 28 percent are White; 28 percent are Hispanic; 30 percent are Asian; 30 percent are American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander; 37 percent are Black/African American. Despite their central importance to the health and well-being of the nation, many of the low-wage essential jobs lack sufficient benefits and protections.ⁱⁱⁱ

Workers ages 50 and older are an important part of the US essential workforce. But many of these workers, particularly those ages 60+, may face higher risks on the job because the health impacts of COVID-19 are generally more severe for older adults.

AARP MD believes that policy makers and employers must provide adequate sick leave as well as the personal protective equipment necessary to protect this essential workforce; they must also ensure that health and safety guidelines are enforced. For these reasons we respectfully ask the Committee for a favorable report on HB 581. If you have questions, please contact Tammy Bresnahan at tbresnahan@aarp.org or by calling 410-302-8451.

ⁱ [The US Essential Workforce Ages 50 and Over](#)

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid