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Patrick Moran - President

Testimony
HB 581 – Labor and Employment – Employment Standards During an Emergency
(Maryland Essential Workers’ Protection Act)
Support

AFSCME Council 3 represents 30,000 State and Higher Education employees in Maryland. We support HB 581. Throughout this pandemic, our members have been on the frontline providing services to Marylanders and ensuring that our state continues to run. Our members have been reporting daily to correctional facilities, state hospitals and juvenile facilities, to our courthouses, on college campuses, and in our communities investigating child abuse, monitoring violent offenders, and assisting motorists on our highways. Thousands of state employees have been contracted COVID-19, and sadly, nine of our members have lost their lives to this terrible virus.

Had the protections guaranteed in HB 581 been in place prior to 2020, many of these illnesses and deaths could have been prevented. Our members would have had the freedom to speak up about their concerns without a fear of retaliation and they would have been able to file complaints to Maryland’s Occupational Safety and Health Agency; rather than just being told to call their local health departments which were already understaffed and focused elsewhere. We represent employees at over 1000 worksites in Maryland. With no central authority guiding the minimum protections employees should receive, the implementation and enforcement of safety protocols during this pandemic has been inconsistent at best, and non-existent at some of our worst worksites. For instance, early on in the pandemic, some managers in the Maryland Department of Health, the agency responsible for providing guidance to the rest of the state, prohibited their staff from wearing PPE right when the Department of Corrections began mandating masking for their staff. In MVA locations, managers weren’t informing staff or the public of positive cases leading to several branch outbreaks. At Frostburg State University, shower curtains were being hung from the ceiling in offices as “barriers” for staff prior to the outbreak that occurred there. And today, in Courthouses across Maryland, social distancing is still not being enforced.

Every essential employee who has been showing up to a physical work location deserves hazard pay for themselves and their families who they risk exposing every time they return home from work. The hazard pay policy the Department of Budget and Management issued unilaterally excludes many employees who are reporting daily under these dangerous conditions. AFSCME Council 3 also believes that additional paid pandemic leave is a critical administrative control in preventing outbreaks as many of our members are now quarantining for the third and fourth time. They are now running out of their personal leave while trying to protect those around them from this virus. Safer workers equal safer communities.

For all of these reasons, we urge the committee provide a favorable report on HB 581. Thank you.

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An employee has the right to a union representative if requested by the employee.
800.492.1996

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