



**Testimony in Support of House Bill 581 (Chairman Davis)
Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act
FAVORABLE**

February 5, 2021

Dear Chairman Davis and Members of the Economic Matters Committee:

On behalf of Strong Future Maryland, we write in strong support of House Bill 581. Strong Future Maryland works to advance bold, progressive policy changes to address systemic inequality and promote a sustainable, just, and prosperous economic future for all Marylanders.

Currently, in the state of Maryland, essential workers are in a crisis. The COVID-19 Pandemic has exposed the limitations of worker protections in many industries within Maryland, and the need to equip workers with more rights and protections in the workplace. Essential workers are the foundation of Maryland's COVID-19 response. As the state, we are responsible for ensuring that essential workers have the security they need, the protections they are entitled to, and the benefits they deserve. According to The Economic Policy Institute, there are roughly 55 million essential workers in the United States. In Maryland, 39.35% of the labor force works in essential industries, one of the largest sectors being food and agriculture. Within the food and agricultural industry, it is vital to ensure workers are protected from the threat of COVID-19 every day, as they interact with the public and other workers on an everyday basis. Food and agriculture are not the only industry needing to preserve their essential workers. We can refer to Maryland's Interpretation Guidance, which establishes essential sectors in the state for the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic.

For nearly a year, essential workers have been jeopardizing their health and safety to ensure the population's needs are met during the COVID-19 Pandemic. With the Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act, the state would provide the necessary guidelines and procedures to protect essential workers' health and safety. Essential workers are required to work outside of their homes, which increases their exposure to the virulence of COVID-19. Under this act, employers are required to provide a safe workplace; essential workers will receive an additional \$3/hour pay, free testing, paid leave, and proper PPE and sanitation procedures. Lastly, If work is to be found unsafe, employees have the right to refuse to participate in the unstable condition.

House Bill 581 is necessary legislation that helps Maryland combat the strife caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The time of neglect towards essential workers is over, and Strong Future Maryland urges the committee to vote favorably on House Bill 581.

John B. King Jr.

Alice Wilkerson

Founder and Board Chair

Executive Director