



Testimony on HB581
Maryland Essential Workers Protections Act
Position: FAVORABLE

Dear Mr. Chair and Members of the Economic Matters Committee:

My name is Ricarra Jones, and I am the Political Director with 1199SEIU- the largest healthcare union in the nation, where we represent over 10,000 healthcare workers in Maryland. To date, **Maryland has lost over 7,000 residents due to COVID-19, and over 350,000 Marylanders have contracted this deadly virus.** According to the Maryland Department of Health, the worksite is a primary location for COVID-19 contraction. This virus has not only impacted healthcare workers across the state, but all essential workers that put their lives at-risk every day to serve the public. For this very reason, it is incontrovertible that the state passes the Maryland Essential Workers Protection Act.

For most essential workers, they must conduct their work at a worksite where many employers have failed to provide sanitary environments or PPE, resulting in COVID-19 contraction and death. As reported by the Baltimore Sun, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland **262 workers contracted COVID-19** due to the lack of safety measures where workers reported to work despite feeling ill, standing shoulder to shoulder, and crowding around in break rooms. Nursing homes among many other worksites in Maryland have also been detrimentally affected with over 27 nursing home staff deaths. This bill mandates that employers provide safe and hygienic working conditions to combat this issue.

Presently, **there are nearly 300,000 uninsured Marylanders**, the majority of whom are adults who work essential jobs and therefore are at a higher risk to contract COVID-19. According to an article by the Washington Post, Steve Collins, a 33-year veteran of the Prince George's Fire Department, almost died from COVID-19 and upon his recovery, he had to spend 4½ months in and out of the hospital in rehab to care for his damaged body. This like other similar situations with essential workers is reason why healthcare coverage is needed. This bill provides the necessary relief for these healthcare disparities by opening the healthcare exchange during a pandemic.

Throughout this pandemic, **Maryland companies received 1.9 billion** in loan relief through agencies such as the Federal Reserve, Small Business Association, and the Treasury Department. According to a report by the Brookings Institution, profits from large retail

companies- **including McDonald's, Walmart, Albertsons, and Target- have all soared in an excess of 16.7 billion compared to last year**, while essential workers have seen little of this payout. In recognizing the amazing effort and risk these workers endure, some of these companies offered \$2.50 in additional pay but later canceled this compensation, even though workers are still dealing with pandemic-related challenges.

While we cannot ever put a price tag on the life of any worker, we must at least value workers not with awards, accolades, or words, but by providing them with hazard pay. Retail workers at large drug store chains have gone the longest (243 days) on average since receiving hazard pay and received the least at an average of \$300, while grocery workers followed, with a modest average of \$1,175 since hazard pay ended for these companies.

Lack of hazard payments for essential workers in Maryland remains a humongous problem, particularly for Black and Brown residents who make up most essential workers. Hazard pay is needed for various reasons including increased costs associated with food purchases, quarantine-related expenses, as well as other socio-economic needs. Another large expense that many essential workers have had to worry about is childcare. While workers are at work risking their lives and due to the shutdown of schools, childcare has been an expense many workers struggle to meet. Moreover, transportation costs have also increased for essential workers given the lack of public transportation during this pandemic, coupled with the need to work additional shifts. In sum, it cost more today to be a frontline/ essential worker than it did before the pandemic and these expenses must be met with hazard pay.

According to public health experts, **healthcare providers have the highest risk of exposure due to COVID-19 coupled alongside grocery store workers who are less likely to have paid sick leave, or the financial means to take time off if they feel ill**. Due to lack of paid leave during pandemics, workers have lost their own lives as well as the lives of their beloved family members. To aid with this, this bill allows for quarantine leave for workers to try to mitigate pandemic-related contractions from worksites. At the start of the pandemic, the CDC recommended that an individual who has or experiences symptoms of COVID-19 quarantine for two weeks to avoid spreading COVID-19. This effort helped slow down the spread of COVID-19 but some workers also contracted COVID-19 multiple times and have exhausted their personal leave. This has left workers to either reporting to work while sick or forcing them to take unpaid sick leave. Examples like this show that this bill is vital in preventing people who have been exposed to COVID-19 from returning to work and exposing others. Lastly, while some opponents of this bill believe that leave during pandemics is not necessary, a new study by Cornell University showed that **emergency paid leave reduced COVID-19 contractions by 15,000 cases a day**.

In keeping Maryland essential workers safe, the need to be able to refuse dangerous work is just as vital as the needed to keep families safe. According to a Washington Post poll, it found that in more than 8,000 surveyors, **6 in 10 Americans working at an essential worksite feared that they may bring COVID-19 home**. On a statewide level, although workers have the right to refuse work, MOSH regulations nor any current local laws ensure workers can securely turn down work. MOSH submitted a letter to state legislators where they have received 492 complaints since March 1, 2020, but had only conducted 30 on-site

inspections. Moreover, nearly 1/3 of cases are referred to county health departments where they lack the resources to take appropriate action.

As provided by the CDC, guidelines are put in place to allow workers to work in safe environments. Some of these conditions include access to PPE, safe distancing, ventilated areas, sanitation procedures, and more. When these conditions are not maintained or violated, the conditions of the workplace become dangerous. Hence, without worksites being able to properly maintain these safety standards, workers must have a right to not put their lives in danger. In practice, this provision will allow workers to no longer fear risking their lives and consequently, spreading COVID-19 to their families and communities. Simultaneously, this provision protects workers from management abuse by preventing the firing or any other forms of retaliation due to unsafe conditions.

One of the last major provisions in this bill is the notification of test results that benefits both employers and employees. In practice, this measure allows employers to notify other workers of positive COVID cases which assists in decreasing COVID-19 contractions. Furthermore, this measure also allows the Maryland Department of Health to collect this information to keep COVID-19 data by industry to monitor the overall spread of this or any other pandemic.

For these reasons, we adamantly believe that this Act will create the necessary protections that all essential workers need at a worksite to remain safe and healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic and any other future pandemics. We respectfully ask this Committee for a favorable report in supporting the Maryland Essential Workers Protections Act.

Respectfully,

Ricarra Jones
Maryland/DC Political Director
1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers- East
Cell: [443-844-6513](tel:443-844-6513)