



MARYLAND STATE & D.C. AFL-CIO

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**HB 581 – Labor and Employment – Employment Standards During an Emergency
(Maryland Essential Workers’ Protection Act)
House Economic Matters Committee
February 5, 2021**

SUPPORT

**Donna S. Edwards
President
Maryland State and DC AFL-CIO**

Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony supporting HB 581 – Labor and Employment – Employment Standards During an Emergency (Maryland Essential Workers’ Protection Act). My name is Donna S. Edwards, and I am the President of the Maryland State and District of Columbia AFL-CIO. On behalf of 340,000 union members, I offer the following comments.

For the past year, one group of people has kept our economy afloat. Every single day, in the face of personal threat to their own health and safety, and in direct defiance of the coronavirus, workers have shown up, done their jobs, and provided all of us with the food we eat, the buses and trains we ride, the government services we rely on, the health care needs that must be met, and nearly every other facet of our lives. Countless articles have been written, extolling the sacrifices of essential workers, and politicians across the political spectrum have given heart-rending speeches honoring them. The “Essential Worker” was a finalist for Time Magazine’s “Person of the Year” for 2020, and even won the reader’s poll¹. Public sentiment is clearly behind those who make our economy run: The Workers.

Honoring essential workers for their grit and determination in the face of global pandemic is admirable and welcomed, but to truly express our appreciation, we need to change public policy in Maryland so that our deeds reflect our words.

HB 581 is the change in public policy that Maryland’s Essential Workers need. The bill mandates safe and hygienic working conditions, with employer provided PPE and written safety and health protocols. It mandates hazard pay for low-income workers in tough jobs as well as financial assistance for health care costs and re-opening the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange

¹ <https://time.com/5917600/person-of-the-year-reader-poll-results-2020/>

Program for enrollment during an emergency. These provisions, alone, would make HB 581 a great bill, but it goes further in setting solid policy to protect Essential Workers during an emergency with following changes to law:

- 14 days of paid health leave and 3 days of paid bereavement leave.
- The right to refuse dangerous work.
- Notification and reporting of positive test results on the jobsite.
- Employer paid testing costs.
- Whistleblower protections for workers
- Prohibition on misclassification of essential workers, to avoid following the rules.
- Expanded legal recourse for workers whose employers have violated these provisions.

It is not enough to praise Essential Workers, verbally or in print, while doing nothing to provide them with the support they need to continue their work. HB 581 provides tangible support for Maryland's Essential Workers in myriad ways.

For all the Essential Workers in Maryland who have gone above and beyond, who have put their health and indeed their lives at risk, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we ask for a favorable report on HB 581