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Testimony

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

Economic Matters

February 5th, 2021

Support

AFSCME Council 67 representing county and local governments across the state stand in supports of HB 581. If anything, the pandemic has exacerbated the need for improvements in protecting essential workers, those that keep our state moving. Some of these needs are immediate, such as better worker health and safety protections during the pandemic.

The pandemic has made the need for better worker protection more urgent and apparent, and recent policies have been insufficient to address these problems. COVID-19 has created significant and widely documented problems for those essential workers in local and state government agencies, healthcare facilities and our schools. Although federal actions – including the Families First Coronavirus Response Act Tax Credit and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, both signed into law in March 2020 – provided some financial support, it has neither been sufficient nor effectively distributed. Moreover, the ongoing pandemic continues to put workers at risk and policies have done little to support essential workers.

HB581 simply ask Maryland to take care of those essential worker who have been keeping our state and local governments and healthcare facilities running during this pandemic, while trying keep themselves and their families safe. We need provisions ALL essential workers with hazard pay. Workers who put their lives, and the lives of their families at risk are not being adequately compensated and often are not provided—or cannot afford the healthcare coverage they need. Safe working conditions continues to be an issue. Maryland Essential Workers are forced to perform their duties outside of their homes, often without protocols, procedures, or proper protective equipment to ensure their health and safety. Last year, Council 67 lost one of our who worked at the Prince George’s County Health Department due to COVID 19, contracted at work. No one was prepared for a major catastrophic event like Covid-19, but there were no procedures in place for logistics, shift changes, telework, safety or sanitation. We must ensure that this doesn’t happen again, and no family should have to lose a family member due to their employers’ ability to keep their work environment safe.

HB 581 is the right step toward acknowledgement that essential workers should be treated fairly during this pandemic and every day.

AFSCME Council 67 asks for a favorable report of HB 581.