



Testimony of Montgomery County Young Democrats to House Economic Matters Committee in Support of HB 581-Maryland Essential Workers Protection Act

February 5, 2021

Chair David, Vice Chair Dumais, members of the Committee, thank you for receiving our testimony. My name is Andrew Saundry and this testimony is on behalf of the Montgomery County Young Democrats. This moment in our history has laid bare the profound economic disparities that exist in our nation. In the best of times, it is unconscionable that so many should work so hard for so little, especially in the wealthiest nation on earth. It is long beyond time for the working class to receive the dignity that they deserve in the workplace.

From caring for the most vulnerable in hospitals and nursing homes, to cooking and serving the food that we all rely on every day, to facilitating the very economic transactions that keep small businesses afloat, these essential workers are the lifeblood of our economic and physical wellbeing. Service providing industries constituted over \$335 million of Maryland's GDP in 2019, while working for a far smaller share of the economic pie than others.^{[i][ii]} The mean hourly wage for food preparation and serving related occupations is a mere \$13.26 and for healthcare support occupations it is \$16.04. At the same time, a living wage for a single parent with only one child is \$24.56. If you add a second working parent in the home, it's \$13.59 per parent. And that's just in the cheapest county in Maryland. In our own Montgomery County, it's far higher. For a single adult with no children, like most of us young Democrats it is \$16.84,^[iii] which is well above what most in the service sector earn hourly. Likewise, low-wage, frontline workers constitute a disproportionately large share of the more than 300,000 uninsured in Maryland. These folks have been living paycheck-to-paycheck since long before 2020 while serving as the backbone of our social, economic, and physical wellbeing.

Because of their front-facing role in the economy and their long-term reliance on what are essentially poverty wages, they have been the most directly impacted by this COVID-19 pandemic.

But this isn't just abstract for me. Like many young people, I've spent much of my career working in the service sector. In fact, some 55% of young people work in these industries nationwide, constituting a sizable share of the more than 300,000 workers in the service sector.^{[iv][v]} It is often said that "old men make wars and young men fight in them." Never had this been more true than in the war on COVID-19. From direct exposure to the virus to financial burdens, young people frequently bear the brunt of the ongoing health and economic crisis.

When the pandemic first appeared in Maryland, I was waiting tables in Gaithersburg—a progressive city, in a progressive county, in a progressive state. I saw co-workers panicking about the possibility of a lockdown because they knew that without that minimum wage job, they would never be able to make rent or put food on the table. Many had young kids or student loan debt and were desperate to remain employed, even as risks to their own health rose. When inevitably it came time to close, many sought employment elsewhere or pushed to return as quickly as possible, anything they could do to keep their heads above water financially.

At first, many employers provided hazard pay and PPE, rushing to appear cognizant of those they now publicly called "Heroes." But as the fanfare faded over the summer, so too did many of these benefits. Of course, there were also things like paid time off to quarantine and grieve the loss of family or friends in the largest mass casualty event in American history, that were never afforded to those doing these essential jobs.

Even as supermarket chains raked in massive new profits – increasing by an average of 39% according to one study by the Brookings Institution – and lauded their employees as "teammates" and "heroes," they looked for ways to cut corners and costs at those workers' expense.^[vi]

The working class, like all people in this country, have certain inalienable rights to live a life of safety, dignity, and economic freedom. No one should be left hungry, forced to work in unsafe conditions, or denied the opportunity to grieve. The Maryland Essential Workers Protection Act, HB 581, would be a huge leap in guaranteeing these rights throughout the state.

This bill would require employers to provide their essential workers with personal protective equipment (PPE), an increase in hazard pay, free COVID-19 testing, clean and safe workplaces, paid leave for health concerns and bereavement, action plans with sanitation protocol, and the right to refuse work in unsafe conditions without retaliation.^[vii] These new workplace standards are a crucial first step in protecting the fundamental rights and dignity of working people across the state. The Montgomery County Young Democrats urge the passage of this legislation.

^[i] [May 2019 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates Maryland](#) – United States Bureau of Labor Statistics

- [ii] [Real value added to the Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\) of Maryland in 2019, by industry](#) – Statista
- [iii] [Living Wage Calculation for Montgomery County, Maryland](#) – Living Wage Calculator, MIT
- [iv] [Employment and Unemployment Among Youth Summary](#) – United States Bureau of Labor Statistics
- [v] [Current Employment Statistics \(CES\) - Workforce Information & Performance](#) – Maryland Department of Labor
- [vi] [Food retailers see 'eye-popping profits' during pandemic. But frontline workers get crumbs.](#) – Chicago Tribune
- [vii] [Labor and Employment - Employment Standards During an Emergency \(Maryland Essential Workers' Protection Act\)](#) – Maryland General Assembly