

Senate finance committee, I am writing to urge you to support Maryland Healthy Working Families Act – Revisions and Public Health Emergency Leave. This measure is more than a financial support. It is an important public health measure that will protect workers, their families, and communities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Here’s why: isolation of people who are sick, quarantine of people who are exposed, and testing of suspected positive people with or without symptoms, are critical elements of disease control. Paid sick leave gives people the option to follow these public health measures.

Even before the pandemic, researchers have studied the public health benefits of paid sick leave: people with paid sick leave do not have to choose between staying home and earning money.³ Studies have demonstrated that people with paid sick leave are more likely to take time off for illness and to seek the necessary medical care.⁴ As one home health provider explained it, people often feel like they “can’t afford not to work,”⁵ and, during the pandemic, may choose to work even if they have symptoms of COVID-19. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that people who may have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 should quarantine for at least a week with a negative test or up to 14 days without testing.⁹ Isolation is particularly important during the first few days of infection when people are most likely to infect others with the virus.⁶ The two days prior to the onset of symptoms are also times of high viral shedding and infectivity.⁷

Let’s look at the numbers to put this in context. At least half of all COVID-19 cases are the result of infection by an asymptomatic person.⁸ When workers become infected, they can bring COVID-19 to their homes and communities. Even one case can lead to many serious illnesses and deaths. For example, there have been at least three recent outbreaks at food processing plants in Maryland, resulting in upwards of 250 cases.¹⁷ This higher risk of COVID-19 infection is present in nearly every essential industry. Yet, these workers often lack adequate personal protective equipment,¹² social distancing protocols in their workplaces,²⁰ have lower wages,²¹ and are less likely to have access to paid sick leave.²² In addition, workplace exposure, in addition to myriad systemic factors, has resulted in higher rates of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths among Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people.

Thus far, paid sick leave has been effective at reducing spread during the pandemic. One study estimated that where people gained access to paid sick leave, there were 400 fewer COVID-19 cases per state per day.²

Paid sick leave is a public health measure at all times, but particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, I urge you to enact this important measure to provide paid sick leave

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