

Delores G. Kelley, Chair
Brian J. Feldman, Vice Chair
3 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

SB 521
Supporting

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and Members of the Finance Committee,

During these difficult times, I am writing to you from a precarious position. I have spent the last few weeks reckoning with the State of Maryland Benefits office over a clerical error. At various times I have been asked to confirm that I am a state employee. I have yet to come up with a response that satisfies. I am a state employee in some regards and not in others. I have health insurance subsidized by the state, but I cannot take paid sick leave should I need to use it. This contradiction organizes my experience with graduate student employment in the University System of Maryland (USM) over the past six years.

The inexplicable loopholes around graduate student labor has caused incalculable confusion and strife in my home department. A pregnant colleague struggled to navigate starting their TA contract a week after giving birth. A colleague caring for a disabled partner felt unable to take leave, while another liberally asked fellow grads to cover their assignments without consequence. I co-authored an article with a colleague pointing out that as graduate student employees we are mandatory reporters under Title IX. However, that role demands us to act as agents of the State of Maryland and the University without receiving full recognition and protections as employees of those institutions. These confusions are commonplace. I have been fortunate to not experience overburdensome assignments; random termination; and dangerously obtuse regulations for lab workers during COVID-19.

I urge the Members of the Finance Committee to consider not only the enormous productivity and labor that graduate students provide to USM, but also the human cost of such a large sector left in precarity. Though we contribute through our labor to the local economy, we struggle to participate in it. Low income relative to cost of living; contingent employment; and limited or non-existent leave policies have a clear impact on our fiscal and physical health.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that so many of our fellow Americans are more insecure than we knew. Granting graduate student employees the right to collectively bargain is an important component of our local, state, and national recovery.

Sincerely,

Jonelle Walker
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Teaching Assistant

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