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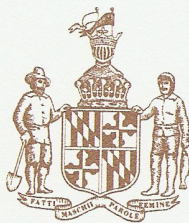
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House Bill 836 – COVID-19 Testing, Contact Tracing, and Vaccination Act of 2021

Testimony of Delegate Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (Favorable)

Chairman Pendergrass and fellow members of the Health and Government Operations Committee, I am pleased to present House Bill (HB) 836, the COVID-19 Testing, Contact Tracing, and Vaccination Act of 2021.

COVID-19 has deeply affected the State of Maryland. According to the State's website, as of February 17th, we have approximately 373,000 confirmed cases and close to 7,700 deaths. Prince George's and Montgomery counties are seeing the highest caseloads. Over the past few months, the utilization of ICU and acute care beds has been high. Compared to the rest of the country we are doing better in terms of cases per 100,000 people. However, there is a need for improvement in all aspects of the pandemic response, starting with testing, contact tracing, and vaccine distribution.

HB 836 proposes a systematic approach to tackle COVID-19. Currently, there are various sites that offer testing. However, the public might not be informed about choosing the appropriate option. This bill allows for better coordination between state, county, and private health providers to maximize testing capacity in Maryland. As a result, we will be able to more efficiently use our resources and offer tests to our most marginalized communities, which include people of color. While 29% of Maryland's population is Black, they make up 35% of deaths due to COVID-19. The Maryland Latinx community comprises 11% of the population but 19% of its COVID-19 cases.

In addition to testing, contact tracing plays a vital role, especially during periods of slower virus spread. Contact tracers are a key component to this response. Ensuring an adequate staff of tracers who can be utilized during COVID-19 case surges is critical. To bridge staffing needs, this bill will establish the Maryland Public Health Job Corps, consisting of a reserve of health service providers.

Furthermore, an effective blueprint for vaccine distribution is crucial. Proper determination of priority groups and implementation of an efficient timeline will protect our residents and curb mortality rates. Currently, our residents are struggling to schedule vaccine appointments and lack clear guidance on how to sign up. Our current system is disproportionately impacting our vulnerable communities. Maryland's vaccine data shows only 16% of first doses have been administered to African Americans and just 4.6% to the Latinx population.

An equally important component of this bill is reducing the cost burden. Maryland residents should not be inhibited from getting tested due to financial reasons. Our goal is for cost not to be a barrier. Insurance companies will cover the costs of those individuals who have insurance, while the state covers the rest. The bill also allocates strong financial support to local jurisdictions to maximize efforts for testing, tracing, and vaccine distribution.

Under this bill, a work group consisting of policymakers and stakeholders will assess the private and public sector COVID-19 testing and contact tracing infrastructure, while establishing monthly goals to ensure access for all residents. Goals include achieving a capacity of 100,000 tests per day in 2021 and local jurisdictions establishing at least six public/private testing sites per 100,000 persons. Moreover, determining the optimal number of contact tracing per 100,000 persons in each local jurisdiction, and including a mechanism for monitoring the efficacy of contact tracing will be required.

Additionally, COVID-19 tests will be made available without barriers for students attending institutions of Higher Education and for residents and staff of home health services, nursing homes, and assisted living programs. With a resilient framework and with strong financial support, we can address the demands of this unprecedented public health crisis.

This is a very difficult time. Our constituents are looking to us for answers. HB 836 is part of the solution. By introducing a systematic approach for testing we can be better at getting individuals the appropriate treatment when necessary. By making contact tracing more efficient we can mitigate the spread of the virus. By implementing a thorough plan for vaccine distribution we can protect our residents who are most vulnerable.

Thank you for the opportunity to present House Bill 836. I respectfully request a favorable report.