

## Testimony of Gino Renne, President of UFCW Local 1994 MCGEO on SB431 – Home of the Brave Act (Long Covid Occupational Disease Workers’ Compensation Presumption)

My name is Gino Renne, President of UFCW Local 1994 MCGEO and I am here today representing the members of UFCW Local 1994 MCGEO. I am speaking in support of SB 431, also known as the HOME OF THE BRAVE ACT, which establishes a Long COVID workers' compensation presumption for essential workers in our state.

During the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Hogan rightly declared a "State of Emergency" from March 2020, through July 2021. Throughout this period, a significant number of Local 1994's members were deemed essential. They heroically reported to work despite the heightened risk of infection and related conditions.

These workers spanned various sectors. Our members in public safety and public health and social services, transit operations, and park services reported to work as necessary and ensured the continuity of critical government operations for well over a year. They showed unprecedented dedication to the citizens of Montgomery and Prince Georges' Counties and to the City of Cumberland and to the government agencies employing them. Unfortunately, some of them did not survive. We lost quite a few to this dreadful disease. Others, like our member Kenneth Jenkins who is here to testify today, have to deal with the aftermath of having Long Covid.

SB 431 recognizes the occupational risks faced by these essential workers by establishing a Long COVID workers' compensation presumption. This is crucial legislation that acknowledges how workers who contract COVID-19 on the job may also face other risks like the risk of experiencing prolonged symptoms that impact their ability to work and lead fulfilling lives.

Long COVID presents a myriad of devastating symptoms that persist for months to years after the acute phase of COVID-19 has resolved. From respiratory and heart disorders to neurological and digestive issues, the list of chronic illnesses and conditions linked to Long COVID is extensive and severe. Moreover, affected individuals, including those in the workforce, may experience prolonged periods of disability or reduced productivity, posing significant challenges to their livelihoods.

SB 431 is not just about recognizing the plight of affected workers; it is about providing them with the support and assistance they urgently need. By establishing a workers' compensation presumption for Long COVID, this bill ensures affected individuals have access to medical treatment, wage replacement, and vocational rehabilitation if necessary. It removes barriers that workers might otherwise face in accessing benefits and proving the connection between their illness and work-related exposure to COVID-19.

Furthermore, SB 431 incentivizes employers to prioritize workplace safety measures and adhere to public health guidelines to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission. By promoting safe working environments, we can prevent future cases of COVID-19 and reduce the prevalence of Long COVID among workers, thereby safeguarding public health and ensuring the well-being of our workforce.

I urge you to support SB 431 and take decisive action to protect the essential workers who selflessly served our communities throughout the pandemic. By prioritizing the health and well-being of workers, we can create safer workplaces, promote economic stability, and ensure that individuals with Long COVID receive the care and assistance they need to recover and return to work.