



Testimony in SUPPORT of HB 577 (Delegate Stewart) to Protect Maryland's Farm Workers from COVID-19 and Ensure Adequate Workplace Housing Conditions

Presented before the House Economic Matters Committee
February 2, 2021

On behalf of Marylanders for Food and Farm Worker Protection, thank you for the opportunity to express our support for HB 577, the Healthy Farmworkers Act, which will require the Maryland Department of Labor (DOL) to adopt COVID-19 workplace housing guidelines with which all H-2 employers, migrant farm employers, and camp operators must comply.

Marylanders for Food and Farm Worker Protection is a coalition that formed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate for the health and wellbeing of workers in the agriculture, meatpacking, and seafood processing sectors who have continued to work in high-risk environments over the course of the pandemic. Food and farm workers are the backbone of our food system. Yet despite their integral contributions, these workers and their families face entrenched poverty, an unjust immigration system, and dangerous working and living conditions. Food and farm workers have been intentionally excluded from basic labor and employment laws like the right to organize, safe and healthy working conditions, minimum wage, and paid sick leave. COVID-19 has turned what was already a crisis into a mega-crisis.

Many essential food and farm workers are migrant workers or on a temporary work visa, such as the H-2A visa. These workers tend to live in housing arranged by their employers. Among the problems plaguing food and farm workers in this industry, their employers often transport them to work in crowded vehicles and provide shoddy housing that forces workers to sleep in crowded bunks and barracks. Under some circumstances, these living conditions are not only inhumane but create a high-risk environment for COVID-19 illness. For instance, when workers contract COVID-19, they often must continue to share housing with other workers, exposing an entire household to the coronavirus, and needlessly jeopardizing these workers' lives, especially for those who are older and are at severe risk of complications. Likewise, many of these workers are forced to sleep in crowded bunks and barracks, with no potable water, adequate bathing facilities, and soap. For some workers, this housing is inspected only sporadically and for other workers, it's never inspected. For H-2B and migrant workers, there are no guidelines or protections in place to ensure adequate housing conditions.

All workers across our great state who live in employer-provided housing should have the right to safe and healthy living conditions regardless of their immigration or visa status. Passing this emergency bill would put in place commonsense standards that would dramatically improve housing conditions and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 among our critical food and farm worker communities. This emergency bill would improve conditions for workers and help reduce the spread of COVID-19 in employer-provided transportation and housing. It would require the Maryland Labor Department to develop consistent and enforceable workplace housing guidelines for employers, require employers to develop plans for complying with those guidelines, and follow up on compliance by conducting inspections of employer-provided housing. More specifically, the bill would:

- Provide workers with separate living space away from other workers if they have or are suspected to have COVID 19;
- Provide workers who have underlying health conditions and workers who are over the age of 60 with a separate living space away from other workers;
- Provide cleaning and disinfecting supplies and develop schedules for their use;
- Avoid housing or transporting workers in situations where social distancing cannot be maintained;
- Ensure all housing is ventilated and meets basic standards of habitability;
- Notify workers of COVID-19 symptoms and prevention protocols, emergency contact information, legal rights and protections from eviction, and contact information for key personnel; and
- Ensure workplace housing inspections and enhanced enforcement and penalties for violations of the COVID-19 housing guidelines.

Maryland's essential food and farm workers are working tirelessly during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure we continue to have food available on our store shelves so that we can feed our families. We must protect these workers by ensuring they have safe and healthy workplaces and living conditions. Passing this emergency bill would improve housing conditions and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 among our critical food and farm worker communities.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge a favorable report of HB 577.