

KATHLEEN M. DUMAIS
Legislative District 15
Montgomery County

Vice Chair
Economic Matters Committee

Chair
Property and Casualty Insurance
Subcommittee

House Chair
Joint Committee on Legislative Ethics



The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 231
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3052 · 301-858-3052
800-492-7122 Ext. 3052
Fax 410-841-3219 · 301-858-3219
Kathleen.Dumais@house.state.md.us

The Maryland House of Delegates

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

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Testimony in Support of House Bill 1326 – Maryland Healthy Working Families Act – Revisions and Public Health Emergency Leave

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of **House Bill 1326 – Maryland Healthy Working Families Act – Revisions and Public Health Emergency Leave**.

The ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency has exposed deficiencies in the Healthy Working Families Act. House Bill 1326 is designed to remedy those deficiencies. It aims to do so by establishing public health emergency leave – which advocates originally intended to be included in the Maryland Healthy Working Families Act – and by expanding access to sick leave to more Maryland workers.

Through the darkest days of the pandemic, while many of us were fortunate enough to work from home, front-facing employees continued to work in-person. Many of these workers are currently exempt from Maryland's sick leave law. Lacking state protection, and having lost federal sick leave because the Families First Coronavirus Response Act expired at the end of 2020, many Marylanders feel financial pressures require them to work despite being ill.

COVID-19 has impacted everyone. It has, however, had compounding ramifications for Black, Latino, and other communities of color, as well as members of lower socio-economic groups. These are the same communities that have diminished access to work benefits, including sick leave. Advocates have relayed stories of workers whose employers told them they had no sick leave, could not take time off even if ill or exposed to COVID-19, and would be fired if they took time off. You will hear from one of those workers today.

This legislation makes the Healthy Working Families Act work better – especially during a public health emergency – in several ways:

- It covers more workers by removing exemptions for agricultural workers, temporary workers, and on-call health professionals.
- It broadens the definition of family member to reflect modern family structures.
- It allows covered workers – when necessary and only during a public health emergency – 14 additional days of paid emergency sick leave.

Current law allows businesses to cap earned sick and safe leave to 5 days (40 hours) per year, and caps use of such earned leave to just 8 days (64 hours) annually. By covering more workers and expanding the amount of paid time during an emergency, Maryland's workforce will be better able to comply with the Center for Disease Control's recommended isolation or quarantining protocols. These reforms will put us in a solid position to combat disease spread, thereby positioning Maryland for a healthier future and stronger economic recovery.

It is crucial to ensure that hard-working Maryland families have available leave to quarantine and recover during public health emergencies both now and in the future. Current law leaves too many workers unable to earn a single sick day. It is time to fix that. Workers must not be forced to choose between stopping the spread of and recovering from illness, and receiving a paycheck.

Tyra Robinson with the Public Justice Center will walk you through some of the technical aspects of House Bill 1326. I respectfully request a favorable report for this emergency measure.