

Testimony Supporting House Bill 5721: Public Health Disaster Emergency Hazard Pay.

To the Honorable Members of the House Committee on Labor,

My name is Sam Wallace and I am testifying as a citizen of Providence, RI, and as a former tipped employee and current youth worker, in support of House Bill 5721.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has devastated our communities here in Rhode Island, isolating us from our friends, and families, and heightening our risks in our day-to-day activities.

Our workplaces and communities come with threats and conditions to which employees didn't initially agree. When I agreed up to work at my job, I did so under the understanding that I worked in an environment that was safe. During the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, workers in essential industries have risked their health and safety to continue in their work environments, showing up even despite the risks, and allowing for a significant portion of Rhode Islanders to work and live safer from home or with significant decrease to their time spent outside of their homes. These essential workers have bore the stress not only from COVID itself, but from also increased workloads and less employee/teammate availability (from quarantine, jobs shifting to working remote, layoffs due to loss of profit etc).

HB 5721 provides these workers much deserved additional compensation for their labor and for the risk they take on as a result of it.

As a tipped employee working in Boston, I am often on the front lines communicating to folks wearing masks incorrectly, unaware of their personal space or distances from others. My role has shifted dramatically from simply food service to healthcare advocate, communicating and de-escalating customers who do not understand the importance of wearing a mask. Not only have essential workers continued to work "normally"/in-person, while those in higher-paying positions are able to work safely from the comforts of their homes, the jobs of essential workers have taken on additional physical, mental, and emotional tolls in addition to the health risk of exposing oneself to COVID.

In conclusion, I humbly ask you support HB 5721. It is needed to protect and compensate our fellow Rhode Islanders for their sacrifice in keeping us safe as a community.

In support,

Sam Wallace

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