

Testimony to the Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee for HB 606 ▪ June 30, 2020

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Chair Eklund, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Thomas, and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 606, which recognizes the need for protections for Ohio businesses and employers in the age of COVID-19.

The Ohio Hotel & Lodging Association represents owners, operators, managers, and employees across the state, as well as hundreds of companies that rely on a strong lodging market for their businesses. Our industry appreciates the productive steps taken to limit the spread of coronavirus/COVID-19 in Ohio. We are partners in working with local, state and federal authorities to protect the health and safety of travelers, guests, employees and all Ohioans.

Hotels are essential businesses. In addition to providing necessary accommodations for travelers and local residents who may be temporarily displaced, hotels serve essential government travelers, first responders, and others who are necessary to fighting the spread of disease or otherwise responding to disasters. Hotels are also housing hospital workers and volunteering to be temporary health-care related facilities and are servicing at-risk and homeless clients, as well as those engaged in essential businesses and operations, including transportation, logistics and others critical to the state's response to the public health emergency.

The hotel & lodging industry comprises many franchised businesses as well as many entrepreneurial small business owner-operators. These businesses are largely locally owned and operated, even when they are affiliated with a national brand. A large percentage are family-owned companies.

Our owners, operators and associates are understandably concerned about the threat of liability, even though they have always followed some of the strictest standards and protocols for cleaning and sanitization, and have taken steps to increase those practices in response to current challenges.

The Ohio Hotel & Lodging Association is partnering with the American Hotel & Lodging Association on the launch of new, enhanced industry-wide cleaning standards and accompanying trainings and certifications. Hotels are updating their procedures and bringing new technologies online, including UV systems, in response to the need to fight the transmission of all disease.

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As we approach July 1, hotels are still experiencing low occupancy rates, often less than half compared to normal operations. Revenue is even lower due to the loss of meetings and events business. To allow our economy to recover, it will be critical to protect these severely distressed businesses and employers from lawsuits related to the exposure of contraction of an illness in environments that are taking these responsible measures.

Our industry has suffered an historic setback, with more than 70 percent of our workforce idled and economic losses in the hundreds of millions of dollars to date. The onset of frivolous lawsuits would be an obstacle to getting our businesses back to more regular operation and bringing these employees back to work.

Based on our experience, we believe that our industry will be a target for meritless lawsuits, because our businesses helped serve the state's response efforts, because every guest and customer is a potential plaintiff, and because the nature of COVID-19 means that every public space entails some risk. This very real threat is one of our biggest obstacles to recovery for an industry that will face other lasting economic challenges well into 2021 and possibly beyond.

Ohio's hotel & lodging industry is positioned to help lead the way to overall economic recovery. To accomplish this, we must have some basic protections from the inevitable opportunistic efforts to use litigation or the threat of litigation to extract financial gain from local businesses.

We add our voice in respectfully asking for your thoughtful consideration of House Bill 606 and your support of its provisions that address concerns for Ohio businesses and employers.

Thank you.



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