

House Committee on Transportation  
Hearing on HB 279

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

On behalf of Secretary Redding, I appreciate the opportunity to join you today to speak in favor of the concepts contained in House Bill 279, a bill for non-citizens and undocumented individuals in Pennsylvania to apply for a Pennsylvania driver's license.

As of 2021, Pennsylvania agriculture is a \$81.5 billion industry. The importance and impact of the agriculture industry on Pennsylvania communities led to food and agriculture being declared an "essential" sector of Pennsylvania's economy early in the COVID-19 pandemic period last year. Over the ensuing months, it became increasingly clear how essential food manufacturing and availability is to Pennsylvania families and how fragile the system is that produces it. Thousands of farmers lost their institutional markets overnight and had to resort to destroying food and products that could not make to processing, packing, and suppliers on time. Meat-packing and other food processing plants experienced delays and challenges as they implemented COVID-19 safety precautions in work environments that were not conducive to social distancing requirements. The stress and setback of farmers and manufacturers echoed through Pennsylvania's food system as thousands of consumers lost their jobs and tuned to the state's food pantries and soup kitchens for food assistance.

The Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Food Safety collaborated with the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency to distribute tens of thousands of masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) to regulated processors and manufacturers. The Bureau also worked with the Department of Health to help employers gain access to COVID-19 testing for employees. The Bureau of Food Safety also regulates farm labor camps, where they assisted in distributing PPE supplies to farms that use migrant and seasonal labor. Agriculture stepped up to fulfill its designation as an essential industry and agriculture labor in all sectors strove to meet the challenge of keep Pennsylvanians safe and fed.

The resiliency of Pennsylvania agriculture relies on access to farm and agriculture processing labor. As the national labor shortage continues to be a daily discussion as the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs and flows, Pennsylvania needs to begin exploring and implementing policies to keep the Pennsylvania labor force solid and stable. In Agriculture, this means not only figuring out how to best protect and support our agriculture workforce now, but also how to grow and foster a new wave of agriculture labor as the industry faces an opening of 75,000 jobs in the next decade.

Migrant and seasonal labor are essential to Pennsylvania, not only for the agriculture industry but for the communities the agriculture industry feeds, builds, and protects. Ensuring that all workers in Pennsylvania, regardless of immigration or citizenship status if qualified, can apply and be issued a legal Pennsylvania driver's license is a logical step to sustaining Pennsylvania's labor force.

Neighboring states of New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware have all passed legislation in recent years to offer licenses to immigrants and non-citizens using documentation other than

documents secured and provided to United States citizens. Agricultural states such as California, Illinois, Virginia have also passed legislation to do the same and Vermont enacted a similar piece of legislation in 2020. It is time for Pennsylvania to join these states by implementing a law of its own to enable able farm laborers to legally drive under a Pennsylvania issued driver's license. If we are to compete with other states for labor resources, migrant and seasonal farm workers must be able to come to Pennsylvania safely, get back and forth between housing and labor sites, and meet their own families' basic needs for things like buying groceries, clothing, and medicine or attending doctors' visits.

Transportation and agriculture work closely due to the shared goal of safe traveling of agriculture workers and the safe hauling of agriculture products. Many Pennsylvania farm operations depend on rented fields in addition to the land a farmer owns, and that frequently requires moving farm machinery like tractors and trucks from one field to another over a public road. Farm workers who can legally take on those moving tasks are a valuable asset to the farm. It is in everyone's best interests for the operators of that equipment to have earned a driver's license by demonstrating an understanding of the rules of the road.

Farm laborers and agricultural workers who are unable to utilize their own transportation face daily challenges. There is virtually no public transit available in rural areas of Pennsylvania, and ride-sharing services can be expensive. Employer-provided transportation is often limited to getting to and from the farm fields where work will be done that day and is provided typically in the form of a multi-passenger van or vehicle that makes social distancing impossible, further increasing the risk of farm laborers becoming ill which, at an elevated level as we saw last year, can cause disruptions in the food supply of Pennsylvania. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the incentive for migrant and seasonal farm workers has been to drive their own cars to minimize the risk of community spread while meeting their own essential needs. However, that has only created additional risk of being ticketed for driving without a license and has the higher the risk of being turned over to immigration services, which can be costly and traumatizing to individuals and families

We all depend on farm workers to ensure that crops can be planted, harvested, and taken direct to market or to further processing. Agriculture organizations such as MILPA, PA National Young Farmers, and the Driving Forward Coalition have all cited the importance in safety and humanity that will come with offering drivers' licenses to immigrants and non-citizens. We believe these fellow Pennsylvania workers deserve an opportunity to receive a Pennsylvania driver's license as opposed to taking chances with their health and safety just so they can make it to work and run the daily errands all of us take part in keeping our families and communities secure.

I appreciate the opportunity to be on the panel today and look forward to any additional discussion.