

Testimony presented to the Senate Majority Policy Committee

April 13, 2021 Virtual hearing

By Gina Martens, Senior VP of Member Relations, Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce

Good Morning, Senator Scavello and members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee. I am Gina Martens, Senior Vice president of Member Relations & Sales for the Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce. Thank you for the invitation to address you today regarding the impact of COVID-19 on business closures, and specifically how it has affected the Restaurant and Hospitality industry.

The Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber's mission is to improve the economy and quality of life for businesses and residents throughout the Lehigh Valley. We are the largest Chamber in Pennsylvania, and the 6th largest Chamber in the Country. We serve nearly 5,000 members and 280,000 employees.

We deliver superior value through our core deliverables: Network building, Marketing, Exclusive member programs, Public Policy advocacy, and The Chamber's Foundation which beautifies our downtowns and urban cores.

The Chamber immediately took action during the initial shutdown in March 2020.

We created #OpenWeStandLV promoting businesses offering new and creative ways to get their products and services to their customers. Primarily supporting curbside, take-out, and delivery while indoor dining was completely shuttered.

We created Vow of The Valley, where Lehigh Valley businesses sign the Vow which is a commitment to follow guidelines, keep guests and employees safe, and help our residents, visitors, and elected officials know the Lehigh Valley is ready to reopen with confidence and safety in mind.

In April 2020, The Chamber's COVID-19 Relief Fund distributed \$353,000 to 310 businesses when they needed it most. Approximately 80 Restaurants received funding from this round.

We Created a Restaurant Task Force which included Restaurant owners from across the Lehigh Valley to come together, share ideas, best practices, and resources to get through the restrictions and limitations. We also worked closely with the PA Restaurant Association and local Lehigh Valley Chapter on their advocacy efforts.

Lehigh & Northampton County Grants distributed approx. \$10.5 M back to Lehigh Valley businesses and The Chamber staff worked closely with our Counties to facilitate the grant application process, and in many cases going door to door letting business know about the funding opportunity. We made sure all communities were represented as well.

Our second Chamber fund, titled "Restaurant COVID-19 Relief Fund" gave another 115 restaurants funding in January 2021, during their December indoor dining closure.

We Set up a series of Restaurant Round Tables with area legislators, giving Restaurant owners an opportunity to address their concerns and ask for a yes vote on HB 2513; Save PA Restaurants. This Bill was introduced by a number of Republican legislators, and restores the hospitality and private event industry to the standards in place before July 15th.

The chamber worked closely with State Representatives Ryan Mackenzie and Gary Day to craft legislation that would suspend the remittance of sales tax on food and beverages for restaurants and bars until they are allowed to have 100% capacity again. This legislation was introduced last session and the Chamber is happy to see that it was reintroduced this session.

As business was opening back up, we recognized the needs of understanding the PPP, going back to work, vaccine mandates, and so many other questions and issues facing businesses. In partnership with our members, we set up Free Accounting Consultations and Free Legal Consultations. These are FREE 20-minute consultations to get the answers businesses need quickly.

All of this, while maintaining a vibrant membership, helping businesses through adverse times..

There is much that weighs on the minds of our Restaurant owners. As Pennsylvania restaurants can now accommodate bar seating and 75% indoor occupancy, our event, banquet, and private party industry continues to suffer. Capacity limitations on this segment have a domino effect on the business of vendors and suppliers like dj's, limo companies, florists, and so many others.

The Industry has an image problem which equates to a workforce problem. People are still fearful of going to work in a restaurant or hotel and getting the virus. " We're hiring and we need help" are common requests by our members in this industry.

Our restaurant members voice concern about the high costs and fees charged by the third -party delivery companies like Uber Eats and Grubhub. We would like to see the fees restaurants incur by these delivery services reduced.

Lehigh Valley restaurants are begging for relief. Some have closed their doors for good. Within our membership, we have 12 Lehigh Valley restaurants that closed as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, The Renaissance Hotel, a prominent, full-service hotel in downtown Allentown closed in March of 2020, and is looking to finally re-open this month. This closure effecting the livelihoods of many workers for over a year.

The Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce has a passion to help them succeed and an obligation to support them and provide any and all resources available. The American Rescue Plan signed into law by President Biden is much needed relief funds for the Restaurant and Hospitality Industry, but until they are open at 100% without restrictions, there is risk of more business closure, loss of workforce, and loss of community and quality of life. These restaurants owners have said they do not want more handouts, and what they want is to operate at full capacity. They have been compliant and now they want to get back to business!

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today on behalf of The Chamber, our members, and our Lehigh Valley community.