June 21, 2021

The Honorable J.B. Pritzker
Governor
State of Illinois
207 State House
Springfield, IL 62706

Dear Governor Pritzker,

On behalf of the Illinois Restaurant Association (IRA), I’m writing to request that the state of Illinois consider a series of proposals that would provide critical tools and opportunities for our hardest hit restaurants struggling to attract talent and to find a new normal. Right now, eating and drinking establishments have lost more than 90,000 jobs since February 2020. As we have reached Phase 5 and full capacity, our restaurants and bars are eager to fully reopen their businesses, hire back team members, and serve our communities and visitors alike.

The below proposals would undoubtedly help address some of the industry’s long-term obligations and the recruitment challenge, which is expected to continue into the busiest months this summer.

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Establish an Illinois-based Restaurant Grant Fund
As part of the American Rescue Plan, the federal Restaurant Revitalization Fund (RRF) program has provided grants to eligible restaurants who show significant financial loss as a result of the pandemic. Restaurants plan on utilizing this critical aid to help pay existing expenses as well as expenses that may come due in the coming weeks, such as back rent payment. However, the RRF has quickly run out of money well before providing grants to a majority of eligible applicants. To help meet the demand, the state of Illinois should use relief funds to create their own state-based restaurant grant program for struggling restaurants. Utilizing the RRF as a model, Illinois can streamline the application process and save time and money for eligible applicants and for agencies administering the program. We also ask that you advocate to replenish the RRF at the federal level.

Reactivate and Streamline the Business Interruption Grant (BIG) Program
The hospitality industry greatly appreciates the state’s BIG program that has provided funding to struggling businesses. We understand that the program will soon be replenished. Previously, we often heard from operators about delays in processing applications and awards in addition to a lack of communication from groups facilitating the program. New businesses or those that restructured due to COVID-19 were also excluded. The program should be streamlined with input from industry stakeholders, and should allow for expanded qualifications for relief.

Summer Employee Recruitment and Retention Bonus for Restaurant & Hospitality Workers
To reduce unemployment and address workforce shortages, the state of Illinois should offer a recruitment and retention bonus for restaurant and hospitality workers. This pay can be retroactive for
any restaurant and hospitality employee working a consecutive 12-week period from May 1 to October 1, 2021. Employers can apply for conditional approval for the recruitment and retention bonus at the beginning of the time period. These funds would be transmitted to the employer at the end of the 12-week period and processed to the eligible employee.

**Expand Access to Child Care for Hospitality Workers Who Cannot Work from Home**
The pandemic continues to disrupt child care and in-person schooling, making it very difficult for working parents who cannot work from home. In light of the federal relief dollars allocated for child care, the state of Illinois should expand access to child care, with a particular focus on industries like hospitality that have been devastated by the pandemic and need workers to return in-person in order to rebuild.

**COVID-Related Unemployed Hiring Tax Incentive**
The state should create new tax incentives for businesses that hire someone who was unemployed for 24 consecutive weeks or longer. This would provide hospitality businesses additional incentive to hire those who were displaced by the pandemic and need help reentering the job market.

**Additional Funding for Workforce Development Programs**
To address employment struggles, the state should use relief funds to create new workforce development programs for the restaurant industry. While such programs will not address all of the immediate employment challenges, they would better position the industry to meet employment needs in the future. Pandemic shutdowns have reduced opportunities to grow in the restaurant industry. Additional training programs that set people up for long-term success in hospitality would reverse this trend.

**Enact Third-Party Delivery Protections for Restaurants Based Upon Transparency and Permission**
Third-party delivery platforms provided essential revenue to restaurants throughout the pandemic, and will continue to have a critical relationship with the industry going forward. Earlier this year, the IRA worked with Senator Melinda Bush on legislation (SB 672) that would prohibit delivery services from delivering a restaurant’s food or using their name or likeness without consent/an agreement from the restaurant. This policy aligns with public policy principles developed by the major third party delivery services and the National Restaurant Association in December 2020. We ask you to support this legislation as the IRA works to pass the bill during veto session this year.

**Safe Dining Awareness Campaign**
Throughout the pandemic, restaurants made the health and safety of employees and customers a top priority by following federal, state, and local guidance. As local economies reopen, the state should partner with the IRA via local ad campaigns and public events to highlight the safety of dining out to encourage customers to return to restaurants. The National Restaurant Association mounted a similar campaign last summer that can be used as a model.

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These actions will not eliminate the impact of the COVID-19, but these relief measures from the state of Illinois will bolster restaurants at a time when they need it most. We remain ready and willing to collaborate with you and your team on solutions for restaurants, the people they employ, and the communities they serve.

Thank you for your consideration, and we stand ready to assist as you need.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Sam Toia
President & CEO
Illinois Restaurant Association

Cc: Sylvia Garcia
    Cara Bader
    Sean Rapelyea
    Derek Blaida