



January 28, 2022

Dear Walters Art Museum Leadership and Board of Trustees,

We hope this letter finds you well. We are writing to express our concerns regarding the current handling of COVID-19 safety protocols at the Walters Art Museum. We acknowledge that the Walters has taken some necessary precautions that adhere to current COVID regulations, but a number of employees—including our most vulnerable—are in need of your help.

As you are aware, we are in the midst of a surge in COVID cases, primarily due to the highly infectious Omicron variant. Governor Hogan recently declared a state of emergency in Maryland, and the percentage of cases in the state continues to be well into the double digits.

We at the Walters have felt the impact of this surge. In just the last two weeks, 9 employees have tested positive for COVID. In the last month, many more have been absent from work as they developed COVID-like symptoms, awaited test results, or quarantined due to possible exposure. This impact on staff has, among other things, resulted in periodic closures of the Ford galleries and the Café. As dedicated employees, we want to ensure that the museum is open and accessible, but not at the expense of our co-workers' safety.

We believe the Museum's current COVID policies, while helpful, are not sufficient for dealing with the magnitude of this surge. In particular, the current policies relating to COVID-related absences increases risks for staff. As cases rise, so does the number of staff who must take time off from work to recover, quarantine, or get tested. Some members of staff have not had the ability to take such necessary time off due to their lack of PTO. There have been several instances where frontline workers have had to make the difficult decision between taking time off to get healthy or going to work in order to pay their bills. This group includes employees who have already run out of PTO, those who were recently hired and have not yet accrued PTO, and part-time workers who do not receive any PTO.

We have come together as concerned staff from various departments, to urge the institution to make the following necessary changes to ensure Walters' staff stay safe and protected. Below are reasonable solutions to resolve ongoing issues:

- **Expansion of HR staff, especially to assist in COVID-19 policies and procedures:** Currently, staff are advised to contact Human Resources with any questions or concerns related to COVID. However, there is only one Human Resources staff member at this time, and having one person dedicated to all COVID-related matters is neither effective nor sufficient. We need additional personnel to support current staff and to be able to respond quickly in order to keep up with rapidly changing circumstances. This added support would also help prevent confusion over multiple conflicting documents about new and amended policies.

- **Adopt stricter procedures for returning to work after contracting COVID:** The newest institutional COVID guidelines allow employees to return to work 6 days after testing positive, as long as they do not have a fever, regardless of the ongoing presence of other symptoms. If an employee tests positive, they should be required to show a negative test result (at home rapid antigen test) before returning to work. This would prevent the spread of infection and maintain our productivity and safety.
- **Administrative leave allowance for COVID-related absences:** All staff should be allowed to take administrative leave in cases where a staff member has either contracted COVID-19, was exposed and needs to get tested, or requires a period of quarantine per the governmental and institutional guidelines. This would rectify the fact that the current COVID policy is inequitable (and unequally enforced). As mentioned above, per the current policy our most vulnerable staff, who do not have PTO, are forced to choose between coming into work with symptoms or potential infection, or taking time off without pay. We recommend establishing a system similar to the Baltimore Museum of Art's policy, wherein all staff have up to 10 days of COVID-related administrative leave that can be used for getting the booster, quarantining when exposed, or to recover from illness. This would minimize transmission and spread.<sup>[1]</sup> Alternatively, a more flexible system for COVID-related administrative leave would also be acceptable.

We look forward to working with you to ensure the safety of our staff, visitors, and artwork. We eagerly await your response by February 11, 2022.

In Solidarity,

Walters Workers United