

February 20, 2020

Testimony on SB 970
Public Ethics- Disclosures and Fines and Penalties-Revisions
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland is in support of SB 970 which would increase fines for violating lobbying provisions under Maryland Public Ethics Law and increase daily and maximum total fees for late-filed lobbying reports and financial disclosure statements.

Currently, any entity may file a complaint with SEC alleging a violation of the Ethics Law. In addition, SEC may issue a complaint alleging a violation. However, we are concerned that the penalties for violating the law and untimely disclosure are not strong enough to have a deterrent effect. This legislation speaks to that concern.

Lobbying is important and can be an educational tool for legislators. It is an inherent part of participatory democracy because it allows citizens to inform legislators of the interests, needs, and desires of the people. Lobbyists represent the interests of citizens who do not have the opportunity or access to represent them personally to the government. They influence legislative action that affects all Marylanders. This is why their needs to be protection to make sure that lobbying that is taking place is ethical.

An ethical and transparent government is critical to ensure that special interests do not hold special influence, and for building voter trust and confidence in the political process. Unethical lobbyists look for loopholes and ways to avoid compliance, this is disrespectful and harmful to the public. We need to be sure that the people who impact the lives of everyone are adhering to ethics laws.

Strong ethics and transparency laws are essential to building a foundation of trust in government action and provides the public with the tools to provide oversight. SB 970 would be another step forward for ethics and transparency in Maryland. We urge a favorable report.