



MARYLAND LEGISLATIVE LATINO CAUCUS

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TO: Senator William C. Smith, Chair
Senator Jeff Waldstreicher, Vice Chair
Judicial Proceedings Committee Members
FROM: Maryland Legislative Latino Caucus
DATE: January 31, 2023
RE: SB0126 Freedom to Serve

The MLLC supports SB0126 Freedom to Serve

The MLLC is a bipartisan group of Senators and Delegates committed to supporting legislation that improves the lives of Latinos throughout our state. The MLLC is a crucial voice in the development of public policy that uplifts the Latino community and benefits the state of Maryland. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to express our support of SB0126.

Police departments across the state are facing severe staffing shortages as they struggle to recruit and retain officers. The Baltimore City Police Department reported that it lost more officers than it hired in the first seven months of 2022.¹ The Montgomery County Police Department reported that they are eight percent shy of reaching their staffing goal.² The Prince George's County Police Department is short more than 300 officers for which they are authorized.³ The shortage of officers in the Ocean Pines Police Department has led to high officer burnout.⁴ Federal law permits preferences in hiring for public positions that favor citizens over LPRs. Accordingly, most jurisdictions nationwide require that law enforcement officer candidates be U.S. citizens, however a growing number have removed citizenship as a requirement for candidates, allowing departments to consider lawful permanent residents (LPRs).⁵

This bill aims to open up the ranks to more people who would otherwise be eligible to serve by changing the certification requirements for becoming a Maryland police officer. Making the occupation more accessible to a greater number of Maryland residents and responding to the shortage of police officers across the state. SB0126 will remove the requirement of a permanent legal resident of the United States and an honorably discharged veteran of the United States to necessarily apply for and obtain citizenship status in order to be certified as a police officer in the state of Maryland. Instead, permanent legal residents who are honorably discharged veterans will not be required to apply for or obtain citizenship in order to become certified as a police officer.

¹ Ashwell, A. (2022, August 22). *Baltimore "does not have the luxury of waiting" for new officers, says FOP*. WBFF.

² NBC4 Washington. (2022, October 10). *Montgomery County Police Address Staffing Shortages With Higher Salaries, Student Programs*.

³ Hockaday, N. (2022, August 9). *DMV police departments experience staffing shortages*. Wusa9.Com.

⁴ Hooper, B. (2022, August 3). *Pines Chief Looks To Address Police Recruitment, Retention*. News Ocean City Maryland Coast Dispatch Newspaper.

⁵ Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force. (2021, August 17). *Backgrounder: Jurisdictions Permitting LPR Hiring - Law Enforcement Immigration Task Force*.

Obtaining citizenship is a lengthy, complex, and expensive endeavor. The initial application (N-400) requires 20-pages of detailed background information, and many wisely seek legal assistance. On average, it takes 18 months to 24 months to complete the naturalization process and become a U.S. citizen⁶, and there may be incidental costs associated with applying for citizenship such as travel for interview appointments or paying for a service that offers personalized naturalization support.⁷ Honorably discharged veterans have already demonstrated their dedication to our country; whether or not these veterans choose to seek citizenship, they should be allowed to serve in their own neighborhoods. Allowing veterans who have honorably served our country to seek service in our communities will help police departments combat critical staffing shortages. Additionally, ethnic and linguistic diversity among these new officers will enhance law enforcement's relationships with neighborhood residents.

For these reasons, the Maryland Legislative Latino Caucus respectfully requests a favorable report on SB0126.

⁶ Petts, J. (2022, May 27). *U.S. Citizenship Processing Times*. Immigration Help.

⁷ *Naturalization and the Military*. (n.d.). Boundless.