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Budget and Taxation Committee

Public Safety, Transportation,  
and Environment Subcommittee



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## THE SENATE OF MARYLAND ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Senator Brian J. Feldman

Senator Cheryl C. Kagan

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Miller Senate Office Building

Annapolis, Maryland 21401

To the Chair, Vice Chair and Committee Members of the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee:

I express my gratitude to the Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee for allowing me to address Senate Bill 612, which is cross filed with Delegate Metzgar as House Bill 1234. This bill consists of enabling legislation that will allow all local Boards of Education across Maryland and Baltimore City to use a chaplain as a volunteer aide in schools to provide services to students and staff.

Chaplains play a vital role in fostering a sense of community and inclusivity within the school. They organize events, such as multicultural celebrations or interfaith dialogues, that promote understanding, respect, and cooperation among students from diverse backgrounds.

Chaplains collaborate with guidance counselors to provide holistic student support, referring them for mental health assistance when necessary. This partnership grants chaplains' access to various resources, ensuring a comprehensive support system. Together, they foster a nurturing environment that promotes student well-being.

During times of crisis or tragedy, such as the loss of a classmate or a natural disaster, chaplains can offer immediate support and counseling to students and staff. They provide comfort, empathy, and spiritual guidance to help individuals cope with difficult circumstances. Chaplains can provide a safe space for students to discuss their emotions, fears, and concerns. They offer spiritual guidance and comfort to those who may be experiencing personal or familial difficulties.

This bill does not specifically address background checks, risk assessments, situational awareness training, and similar measures, because Maryland Code stipulates that all personnel engaging in direct contact with students must undergo these essential training programs to maintain their eligibility to offer their services.

I have drafted an amendment that will add the term “spiritual advisor” to accompany the use of “chaplain” in the bill. I have also added an amendment that will explain the definition of a chaplain as “a minister, rabbi, priest, imam, lay leader, or similar functionary of the faith group that is qualified spiritually, morally, intellectually, and emotionally to serve as a chaplain in a school district.” I have also added an amendment that will state that a chaplain must be “sensitive to religious pluralism and be able to provide for the free exercise of religion by all students.”

I would like to make it clear that this bill does not require students to use a volunteer chaplain's services; it's entirely their choice. This bill will not infringe on the rights of students or parents who want to openly practice the faith of their choosing. As stated previously, all chaplains must not disparage any religion, belief, lack of belief, or faith group.

In closing, the presence of a school chaplain can offer invaluable support to students, providing a safe space for emotional and spiritual guidance.

Once again, thank you for considering the importance of this proposal, and I trust that the committee will urge a favorable report after carefully weighing the potential benefits of Senate Bill 612 in shaping a positive and nurturing environment to all Maryland students.

Sincerely



Senator Johnny Ray Salling