

March 12, 2024

Health and Government Operations Committee  
Room 241  
House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chair Peña-Melnyk, Vice-Chair Cullison, and honorable members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

My name is Conner Wolfe and I am writing in my personal capacity to express strong support for House Bill 179 which proposes the replacement of Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day in Maryland law.

Growing up in the territories claimed by Niagara County, New York, adjacent to the federally recognized Seneca Nation of Indians reservation, afforded me a profound appreciation for Seneca history and culture. Upon relocating to St. Mary's County, Maryland, I observed a stark contrast in the representation of American Indian communities. In my previous home, the Seneca Nation was a vibrant and sovereign presence, significantly contributing to the cultural tapestry of the region. However, in Maryland American Indians constitute only 0.7% of the state's population with no federally recognized tribes or sovereign land.

Now residing on Piscataway lands claimed by St. Mary's County, Maryland, I firmly believe that House Bill 179 is pivotal for fostering a more inclusive and historically accurate representation of our shared past and present.

Cultural traditions wield immense influence in shaping our identity, values, and narratives. However, it is our responsibility to critically examine and evolve these traditions when they perpetuate historical inaccuracies and reinforce systems of oppression. Christopher Columbus' legacy, once celebrated for initiating European contact with the Americas, is now understood in the context of devastating consequences wrought upon indigenous populations. While recognizing the importance of honoring Italian heritage, the association of Columbus Day with the whitewashing of history and the attempted systematic extermination of Indigenous communities necessitates a reevaluation of its celebration.

The proposed replacement of Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day signifies a crucial acknowledgment of diverse cultures and histories that have shaped and continue to share our great state. Maryland is home to a rich tapestry of indigenous communities, including the Accohannock Indian Tribe, Assateague People's Tribe, Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians, Choptico Band of Indians, Lenape Tribe, Nanticoke Tribe, Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians, Piscataway Conoy Tribe, Piscataway Indian Nation, Pocomoke Indian Nation, Susquehannock Indians, Youghiogheny River Band of Shawnee, and others residing here in diaspora and that have seemingly vanished since the coming of

colonialism. American Indians have left an indelible mark on Maryland's landscape and play integral roles in its economic, social, and environmental growth.

20 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and several counties in Maryland, including Montgomery County, Prince George's County, and Baltimore City, have already recognized the importance of Indigenous Peoples' Day. This national and local trend underlines a collective acknowledgment of the need for historical accuracy and inclusivity.

The acknowledgment of Indigenous Peoples' Day must extend beyond a symbolic gesture; it should mark the beginning of a broader commitment to decolonization and the celebration of American Indian histories and cultures. Governor Wes Moore's remarks at the 10th annual American Indian Heritage Month kickoff at Bowie State University emphasized the need for "No more broken promises." This shift in commemorative practices offers an opportunity to restore treaty rights, decolonize and steward land, and revise educational curricula, promoting a more accurate and nuanced understanding of our shared history. It challenges us to actively support and uplift American Indian communities, addressing historical injustices and working towards a more equitable future.

I urge you to consider the profound impact that supporting House Bill 179 can have on Maryland's cultural landscape. This measure goes beyond a simple adjustment to the calendar; it signifies the ongoing struggle for decolonization and a meaningful recognition of the rich histories and cultures of American Indian communities in Maryland. By supporting this legislation, we rectify historical inaccuracies and acknowledge the vibrant contributions these communities have made to our state. Embracing Indigenous Peoples' Day is a substantial stride towards fostering a more inclusive, just, and equitable Maryland.

I respectfully request that you give House Bill 179 a favorable report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Wolfe". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and a stylized "W".

Conner Wolfe