

February 2024

Dear Honorable Members of the Maryland House,

My name is Abigail Bulens. I am 23 years old and the program coordinator for the Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders.

I am writing to express my support for Maryland House Bill 0739 and Senate Bill SB1137. If passed, this legislation will require Maryland to develop and regularly update a list of often predatory over-the-counter diet pills and dietary supplements that claim to promote weight loss. This legislation is a crucial first step in protecting the health of Maryland youth. As you may know, the supplement industry is continuing to rapidly grow and is largely under-regulated. Along with the overwhelming amount of supplement advertisements that flood the social media feeds of young children, sharing deceptive claims that are too good to be true, children continue to buy and use these products in hopes of achieving an unattainable body without understanding the risks that come with these claims. Even more troubling, weight-loss and muscle-building supplement use is linked to many poor mental health outcomes. For instance, people who struggle with eating disorders, which are already among the deadliest of any mental health condition, are at a greater risk of using weight-loss and muscle-building supplements. Yet, this relationship is two-sided, women who start taking weight-loss supplements are four times more likely to be diagnosed with an eating disorder within several years, emphasizing the need for greater regulation.

As a teen growing up in the age of social media, retouched photos, glamorized depictions of eating disorders in movies, and supplement promotion by influencers trying to make a quick buck constantly surrounded me. It is no wonder that I began to struggle with my body image. I remember sitting with my friends at lunch, comparing our lunches, wondering if I was overeating or eating the wrong thing. So when I heard my favorite influencer promote supplements that claimed to de-bloat or magically shave off a few pounds, I jumped at the prospect. After purchasing one of these weight-loss supplements at Target without prior research, I implemented the supplement into my morning routine, like clockwork, at 7 AM. It took months to realize that I was wasting my money and time while risking my health. Luckily, I realized the brainwashing and the deadly supplement spell before facing any detrimental health outcomes. Others are not as lucky and face dangerous repercussions like heart, liver, or kidney dysfunction. Even after stopping my supplement use, I occasionally adhere to the rigid beauty standards that these products perpetuate, including what is attractive or unattractive and how much space someone is “allowed” to take up. And, at times, I almost fall into their trap again and buy whatever new weight-loss supplement my favorite celebrities promote.

Children should not be responsible for understanding the risks of these harmful products that are readily available on grocery store shelves. Yet, companies that sell these products continue to prey upon vulnerable youth, targeting their insecurities for profit. If passed, this legislation would be a vital first step in stopping the sale of predatory over-the-counter diet pills and weight-loss supplements to children and protect their health and well-being.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my story and concerns.

Please vote in favor of HB0739/SB1137 to protect Maryland youth's physical and mental health.