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Environment and Transportation Committee

Chair
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Subcommittee



The Maryland House of Delegates
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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
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Delegate Luke Clippinger
Chairman, House Judiciary Committee
House Office Building - Room 101
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Mr. Chairman,

Maryland has been facing a serious shortage of police staffing, along with a continued decrease in the number of qualified candidates interested in becoming officers. In Montgomery County, resignations and retirements of police officers have increased by 64% in 2022 alone. Currently, the sworn vacancy rate is 10%, with 129 vacancies out of 1,281 authorized positions.¹ Police agencies are rapidly losing officers and the hire rate in Maryland is simply not enough to keep up with the loss. The President of the Fraternal Order of Police stated that if recruitment does not increase for police agencies, we will soon start to see a significant increase in crimes.²

The Freedom to Serve Act HB 8 will drastically increase the quantity of eligible law enforcement applicants to include military veterans who have been honorably discharged and are permanent residents in the United States. These veterans have exceeded the standards of duty and performance, reflecting a positive military service record. Considering that permanent residents authorized to work are allowed to serve in the U.S. military, law enforcement is a natural extension of this public service.

Many states have begun to pass laws to address the ongoing crisis in public safety employment. Recently, states including California and Colorado have enacted legislation that would permit noncitizens who are authorized to work in the U.S. to become police officers, while other states like New Jersey are considering similar legislation. California previously required that police officers be U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents who have applied for citizenship.³

¹ Steve Bohnel, "County Data Shows Ongoing Major Challenges with Police Staffing, Recruitment," MoCo360, February 10, 2023, <https://moco360.media/2023/02/10/county-data-shows-ongoing-major-challenges-with-police-staffing-recruitment/>.

² Vincent Hill, "Calls for Police in Reform Driving down Recruitment Statewide in Maryland," WBFF, November 30, 2023, <https://foxbaltimore.com/news/local/calls-for-police-reform-driving-down-recruitment-statewide>.

³ Janelle Griffith, "New Laws Remove Obstacles for DACA Recipients Who Want to Become Police Officers," NBCNews.com, July 16, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/new-laws-remove-obstacles-daca-recipients-want-become-police-officers-rcna93493>.

HB 8 provides an avenue for Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) who are honorably discharged to become certified police officers in Maryland. Becoming a U.S. citizen is an extensive, complex, and costly process. Currently, LPRs may work anywhere and are authorized to serve in the armed forces. While military naturalization has historically been an expedited process to citizenship, delayed waits of security clearance and background checks have strongly discouraged potential applicants. Cases are not straightforward and can be reviewed for years or lead to a denial of naturalization.⁴ The USCIS reported that in 2019, one in five military naturalization applications were denied, twice the rate for civilian denials.⁵ This is partly attributable to the suspension of the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI), which recruited legal non-immigrants with certain critical skills into military service.

Allowing veterans to continue their commitment to public service will address the critical staffing shortages while boosting trust with the immigrant community. To be clear, this bill does not state a department must hire everyone, it simply enlarges the pool of applicants. By providing a larger pool, departments will have the opportunity to hire better choices of applicants.

HB 8 is a vital step forward in creating a safer and better Maryland. A diverse police department that is reflective of the community they serve increases trust and understanding between civilians and officers. Military veterans, particularly those from various cultural backgrounds, may bring a heightened awareness for cultural sensitivity in their respective communities. By authorizing honorably discharged LPRs to serve as police officers, Maryland will help build a diverse, bilingual workforce thereby establishing stronger relationships and fostering open communication throughout the state. Legal permanent residents that have served in our country's military should be eligible to serve as police officers in their communities following an honorable discharge.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

Respectfully,



Delegate David Fraser-Hidalgo

⁴ Mary Harris, "The Faustian Bargain the U.S. Military Offers Immigrants," Slate Magazine, June 30, 2023, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/06/us-citizenship-military-immigrations-naturalization-deportation-faustian-bargain.html>.

⁵ Tara CoppMcClatchy Washington Bureau, "Immigrant Soldiers Now Denied US Citizenship at Higher Rate than Civilians," Fall River Herald News, May 17, 2019, <https://www.heraldnews.com/story/news/2019/05/18/immigrant-soldiers-now-denied-us/5123380007/>.