



*The Senate of Maryland*  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401-1991

**SB 774 - Public Safety - Maryland Entertainment District Security Grant Program**

Testimony of Senate President Bill Ferguson

On March 21, 2024

Before the House Judiciary Committee

**Why This Bill Matters:**

Maryland has a number of entertainment districts where there is a high concentration of live entertainment and alcoholic beverage licensed establishments in a small geographic area. These entertainment districts, including Frederick, Ellicott City, Fells Point, and Hampden, provide an immense economic benefit to the State in terms of driving tourism, small business growth, neighborhood resilience, and tax revenue.

At the same time, these areas draw a disproportionate amount of local law enforcement resources away from surrounding communities at peak hours of operation. Although our law enforcement officers do their best to serve both these entertainment districts and surrounding neighborhoods, that can sometimes prove impossible when limited resources and personnel cannot be in multiple places at once.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck in my legislative district last year, when off-duty Howard County Sheriff Deputy Ryan Demby was killed while out in Federal Hill, one of the most vibrant entertainment districts in Baltimore City. This horrific incident demonstrates the need for additional security in areas where liquor can contribute to a situation needlessly escalating, thereby putting uninvolved bystanders at risk.

**What This Bill Does:**

Senate Bill 774 creates a Maryland Entertainment District Security Grant Program to be administered by the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services (soon-to-be the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention). As amended, designated entertainment districts throughout the State would be designated based on a high density of bars, live entertainment venues, or hookah lounges within a ½ square mile area.

Community organizations, nonprofit entities, and local governments could apply for funding from this grant program to assist with increasing security operations at peak hours when there is a high level of pedestrian traffic and calls for service. Additional criteria and the application process for funding

would be determined by the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services.

Given the State's budgetary constraints, Senate Bill 774 permits an appropriation into this special fund of up to \$1 million per year beginning in Fiscal Year 2026. As passed by the Senate, the Fiscal Year 2025 operating budget includes \$250,000 to fund the Entertainment District Security Grant Program contingent upon passage of this legislation.

**Why You Should Vote For This Bill:**

Entertainment districts like Bourbon Street in New Orleans provide a model for enhancing public safety in these unique areas while ensuring coverage in surrounding communities. Our entertainment districts throughout the State are invaluable to local economies, but we cannot allow for disputes to spiral into tragedy as alcohol combined with a proliferation of guns leads to arguments turning deadly.

This proposal is community-driven based on feedback with surrounding neighborhood leaders following the horrific killing of Deputy Demby. While it will benefit neighborhoods in the 46th Legislative District, its applicability touches many of our communities from the Ocean City to Frederick.

Thank you for your consideration of Senate Bill 774 and I urge the committee to move this bill with a favorable report.