

Good day, esteemed committee members. I appreciate the chance to speak before you today, and I want to extend my gratitude to the senators collaborating with us on this important initiative. I am Evan Avnet, President of the Maryland Investigators and Security Association, representing private investigative and security agencies across our state.

Let's take a moment to clarify the roles of special police officers and security officers. A special police officer is a sworn individual licensed by the Maryland State Police, possessing arrest authority, albeit restricted to private property. In contrast, security officers, while also licensed by the Maryland State Police, do not have any arrest power. Special police officers are already active throughout Maryland and are required to complete 80 hours of initial training as mandated by the Maryland Police and Corrections Training Commission, in addition to undergoing comprehensive background checks. If they carry weapons, further specialized training is necessary.

The legislation we are discussing empowers security agencies to hire and manage special police officers, allowing them to be assigned directly to clients' properties instead of being limited to positions as in-house security at those properties. Currently, the law restricts this hiring capability solely to property owners, which brings about several significant challenges. Other jurisdictions, such as the District of Columbia, allow special police officers to work for security companies so this is not a novel or new idea.

Firstly, only large properties that have the capacity for a dedicated security manager can truly provide the oversight required for managing special police officers. This includes handling scheduling, training, compliance with Maryland State Police regulations, and enforcing policies. Most smaller properties—such as apartment complexes and shopping malls—lack the resources or expertise necessary to manage special police officers effectively. This issue is especially pronounced in lower-income and culturally disadvantaged areas, where funding is insufficient to afford off-duty police officers at rates of \$100 per hour or to employ a full-time, in-house security manager. This bill is crucial in addressing that gap, providing these communities access to essential security services.

Secondly, the bill allows security agencies, already licensed by the Maryland State Police, to hire and manage special police officers. By law, these licensed security agencies are required to have either five years of prior law enforcement experience or five years of experience as licensed investigators, ensuring they possess the necessary expertise to oversee these officers effectively.

Moreover, this change does not only benefit security agencies but also creates new revenue opportunities for our members and the state through licensing and fingerprinting fees.

Thirdly, we know that police departments are currently facing significant staffing shortages, resulting in delayed responses to nuisance issues. This bill will enable special police officers to handle these situations—such as trespassing, disorderly conduct, and individuals under the influence—allowing our dedicated police officers to focus on more serious crimes that demand their immediate attention.

Additionally, the bill enhances liability protections. The accountability for the actions of special police officers will lie with the security agency, and subsequently the property owner, establishing an additional layer of insurance that does not exist for properties employing their own special police officers.

In conclusion, special police officers already serve an essential role in Maryland, with required training and licensing regardless of employment context. By supporting this bill, you empower security agencies to better manage these officers and deploy them to client properties where they are needed most. By doing so, we not only enhance safety and security across Maryland but also bridge critical gaps in our communities—especially those in need. Thank you for your attention and consideration.