

Testimony SB920
3/5/2026

Chairwoman, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Sharon Jackson Wilder, and I am the co-founder of The Oaks Hospitality Group, a boutique hospitality company rooted right here in Maryland. We own three properties, The Oaks in Bethesda, The Oaks Retreat Cottage in Cabin John and The Oaks Inn Annapolis, a historic bed and breakfast located in the heart of this beautiful and historic city. And, We are set to close on our fourth location in Baltimore next week. I know that our rapid growth over the last five years would not have been possible without the support of small businesses through the VLT program.

When my husband and I began restoring our Annapolis property, we weren't just renovating our home to delight and entertain our guests. We were reviving a piece of Annapolis history and creating a place where people could gather, celebrate, and experience the charm of this incredible city.

But restoration of historic properties like our 1830's home is expensive, and for many small businesses—especially women-owned and historically marginalized businesses—access to capital can be the hardest barrier to overcome.

The VLT program made it possible for us to move forward.

Because of that investment, we were able to hire local architects and local contractors, and the dollars we received flowed directly back into the Annapolis community. We also hired a part-time marketing coordinator who is helping us tell the story of our property and attract visitors to the city we love.

What you may not be aware of is that our properties are the only black-woman owned stand-alone B&Bs in each of the counties where we are based. And we built each one out of our own savings, retirement plans, and donations from friends and family. Not because we wanted to dip into our money that we were saving for retirement, but because we lacked access to traditional financing, even though we had a dream to build a stellar hospitality business.

So, programs like this do more than fund businesses. They validate that Maryland is the top place for small business, they restore historic places for the public to enjoy, they create jobs, and they strengthen communities. Across Maryland, the program has already helped hundreds of businesses access financing, creating thousands of jobs and driving millions in investment.

For entrepreneurs like me, these programs send a powerful message: that Maryland believes in small businesses and in the people willing to invest in their communities.

The support we received helped turn our vision into reality—and we are deeply grateful. Not only will we own and operate multiple properties throughout Maryland but with the support of programs that the State has to offer, we are launching our Luxe Brunch food and beverage retail operation and our event venue booking hospitality technology division this Spring.

Thank you for your continued commitment to Maryland's small businesses.

Sharon Jackson Wilder, CEO
The Oaks Hospitality Group