

**Criminal Law - Benefits Exploitation  
Hearing on January 20, 2026, Judicial Proceedings Committee  
Position: Favorable**

*Maryland Legal Aid submits written testimony in support of SB 140.*

Maryland Legal Aid is a non-profit law firm that provides free legal services to low-income and vulnerable Maryland residents. Each year, we assist thousands of individuals who rely on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Disability Assistance Program (TDAP), Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA/TANF) and all forms of Social Security benefits. Many of our clients are living with disabilities, and most also depend on Medicare, Medicaid, Veterans benefits, and other essential supports. These programs form the “safety net” that provides life-sustaining assistance to people living below the poverty line.

This testimony is offered at the request of Senator West. We are fortunate that people in the United States are living longer, but the reality is that the number of people, especially older adults, who become victims of abuse and financial exploitation is growing.<sup>1</sup> SB 140 will, for the first time, make it illegal to obtain another person’s benefits through isolation, deception, coercion or exploitation for personal gain. In other words, SB 140 would finally make benefits trafficking illegal in Maryland.

One only has to watch the news or read a newspaper to know that benefits exploitation is real and widespread. It causes profound harm to low-income individuals, especially older adults. Maryland Legal Aid has seen this firsthand. In one case, we represented a woman in her 80s with disabilities, whose own granddaughter brought her to Maryland for a “visit,” then isolated her, hid her government identification, and stole her Social Security benefits, and her small pension and rental income. This continued for 18 months. Our client, 82 years old, without money or identification, was unable to escape and return home to Arkansas. She was even forced to perform household chores for her granddaughter’s family against her will. The case was brought to our attention only because the granddaughter filed a petition for guardianship over our client, in a nefarious and unscrupulous attempt to permanently seize her income through a court order.

This conduct involved deception, isolation, transportation of a vulnerable adult, and the theft of government benefits by someone who neither earned nor deserved them. It falls squarely within the scope of SB 140.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blcv5CbO-WE>; <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/elder-fraud-in-focus>; <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/stop-elder-fraud/providing-help-restoring-hope>; <https://vawnet.org/sc/elder-abuse-growing-problem>.

Maryland Legal Aid strongly opposes benefits trafficking and exploitation, particularly when it targets older adults, and we once again urge passage of SB 140.

If you have questions please contact Cornelia Bright Gordon, Director of Advocacy for Administrative Law, Maryland Legal Aid, at [cbgordon@mdlab.org](mailto:cbgordon@mdlab.org), or Jessica Spraker, Co-Chair, Aging and Law Task Force, [jspraker@mdlab.org](mailto:jspraker@mdlab.org).

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