

Wes Moore
Governor

Usherla DeBerry
Director

Aruna Miller
Lt. Governor



TO: Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and the members of the Judiciary Committee
FROM: Governor's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
SUBJECT: RE: Testimony on HB 216/SB140 (Criminal Law – Benefits Exploitation)
Position: Favorable
DATE: January 23, 2026

Dear Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

We support HB 216/SB 140, Criminal Law – Benefits Exploitation, as an important safeguard against the financial exploitation of vulnerable individuals, including Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing people. Members of the DDBHH community are at heightened risk of benefits exploitation due to persistent barriers to communication access, information access, and qualified service providers. Exploitation is often facilitated by isolation, lack of accessible communication, and dependence on others to navigate benefits systems.

This legislation appropriately recognizes exploitation as a serious crime and helps close gaps that have allowed abuse to go unaddressed. To be fully effective for DDBHH individuals, implementation must include communication-accessible reporting mechanisms, qualified interpreters, and training for investigators and first responders on Deaf-centered languages, cultures, and communication needs. Protecting access to benefits is essential to protecting autonomy, safety, and civil rights.

We respectfully request a favorable report and thank the Chair, Vice Chair, and the Members of the Committee for their time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Usherla DeBerry,
Governor's Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing