

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 431
Economic Matters

(Delegate Stewart)

Civil Actions - Consumer Contracts - Limitations Periods

This bill establishes that any provision of a consumer contract that sets a shorter period of time to bring an action on or under the contract than otherwise required under State law at the time the contract is issued or delivered is void. The bill only applies prospectively and may not be applied or interpreted to have any effect on (or application to) any contract entered into before the bill's effective date. Violation of the bill is an unfair, abusive, or deceptive trade practice under the Maryland Consumer Protection Act (MCPA), subject to MCPA's civil and criminal penalty provisions.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill's imposition of existing penalty provisions does not have a material impact on State finances or operations. The Office of the Attorney General, Consumer Protection Division, can handle the bill's requirements with existing resources.

Local Effect: The bill's imposition of existing penalty provisions does not have a material impact on local government finances or operations.

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Bill Summary: "Consumer contract" means a contract involving the sale, lease, or provision of goods or services that are for personal, family or household purposes.

If a consumer contract contains a provision that is illegal under the bill (1) a court may not give effect to the provision and (2) a defense to liability under the consumer contract may not be based on the shorter limitation period.

Current Law: An unfair, abusive, or deceptive trade practice under MCPA includes, among other acts, any false, falsely disparaging, or misleading oral or written statement, visual description, or other representation of any kind which has the capacity, tendency, or effect of deceiving or misleading consumers. The prohibition against engaging in any unfair, abusive, or deceptive trade practice encompasses the offer for or actual sale, lease, rental, loan, or bailment of any consumer goods, consumer realty, or consumer services; the extension of consumer credit; the collection of consumer debt; or the offer for or actual purchase of consumer goods or consumer realty from a consumer by a merchant whose business includes paying off consumer debt in connection with the purchase of any consumer goods or consumer realty from a consumer.

The Consumer Protection Division is responsible for enforcing MCPA and investigating the complaints of aggrieved consumers. The division may attempt to conciliate the matter, issue a cease and desist order, or file a civil action in court. A merchant who violates MCPA is subject to a fine of up to \$10,000 for each violation and up to \$25,000 for each repetition of the same violation. In addition to any civil penalties that may be imposed, any person who violates MCPA is guilty of a misdemeanor and, on conviction, is subject to a fine of up to \$1,000 and/or imprisonment for up to one year.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: SB 413 (Senator Waldstreicher) - Finance.

Information Source(s): Office of the Attorney General (Consumer Protection Division); Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Department of Legislative Services

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