

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
Third Reader - Revised

Senate Bill 1023

(Senator C. Jackson)

Finance

Economic Matters

**Employment Discrimination - Fire and Rescue Public Safety Employees - Use of
Medical Cannabis**

This bill prohibits an employer of a fire and rescue public safety employee, on the basis of the employee's possession of a valid written certification for medical cannabis or a positive test for cannabis components or metabolites while holding a valid written certification, from (1) disciplining, discharging, or otherwise discriminating against the employee with respect to the employee's compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment or (2) limiting, segregating, or classifying its employees in any way that would deprive or tend to deprive the employee of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect the employee's status as an employee. However, if a fire and rescue public safety employee reports for work while impaired by cannabis, the employer must report the incident to the State Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Board. The bill's prohibitions are subject to additional restrictions on applicability.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: General fund expenditures for the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights (MCCR) increase by \$64,100 in fiscal 2026; future years reflect annualization and inflation. Potential additional fiscal and operational impact on the State as an employer, as discussed below.

(in dollars)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030
Revenues	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
GF Expenditure	64,100	74,400	77,800	81,300	84,700
Net Effect	(\$64,100)	(\$74,400)	(\$77,800)	(\$81,300)	(\$84,700)

Note: () = decrease; GF = general funds; FF = federal funds; SF = special funds; - = indeterminate increase; (-) = indeterminate decrease

Local Effect: Potential fiscal and operational impact on local governments, as discussed below.

Small Business Effect: Minimal.

Analysis

Bill Summary: The bill does not require an employer to commit an act that would violate federal law or regulations or cause the employer to lose a monetary or licensing-related benefit under federal law or regulations. The bill also does not prohibit an employer from adopting policies and procedures that prohibit the employee from performing the employee's duties while impaired by cannabis, or prohibiting an employee's use of cannabis while on duty.

"Fire and rescue public safety employee" means a firefighter, an emergency medical technician, a cardiac rescue technician, or a paramedic employed by (1) a municipal corporation; (2) a county; (3) the State; (4) the State Airport Authority; or (5) a fire control district.

Current Law:

Discrimination in Employment – Generally

Under § 20-602 of the State Government Article, it is State policy to assure that all persons have equal opportunity in employment and in all labor management-union relations. As such, State law generally prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, ancestry or national origin, sex, age, marital status, military status, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information, or disability (unrelated in nature and extent so as to reasonably preclude the performance of the employment).

Subject to limited exceptions, on any of these bases or because of an individual's refusal to submit to or make available the results of a genetic test, an employer may not (1) fail or refuse to hire, discharge, or otherwise discriminate against any individual with respect to the individual's compensation, terms, conditions or privileges or (2) limit, segregate, or classify its employees or applicants for employment in any way that deprives or tends to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect the individual's status as an employee. An employer is also prohibited from failing or refusing to make a reasonable accommodation for the known disability of an otherwise qualified employee or an applicant for employment; however, State law does not require an employer to reasonably accommodate a disability if the accommodation would cause undue hardship on the conduct of the employer's business. Furthermore, an employer may not (1) engage in the harassment (including sexual harassment) of an employee or (2) discriminate or retaliate against an employee or applicant because the employee/applicant has opposed any practice prohibited by State law relevant to employment discrimination or made a charge, testified, assisted, or participated in an investigation, proceeding, or hearing related to such laws. Additional prohibitions –

including those specific to interns, employment agencies, and labor organizations – are also specified in statute.

In general, the above prohibitions are applicable to employers that have 15 or more employees (based on the number of employees working in each of 20 or more calendar weeks in the current or preceding calendar year). Provisions relating to harassment allegations apply to employers with 1 or more employees. Statute also specifically prohibits units, officers, or employees of the State, a county, or a municipal corporation from engaging in these discriminatory acts.

Employment Discrimination Complaints – Initial Process, Administrative Proceedings, and Civil Actions

Initial Process: MCCR is the independent State agency charged with the enforcement of laws prohibiting discrimination in employment. An individual alleging employment discrimination may file an inquiry with MCCR, which initiates the intake process. Once a complaint has been properly filed, the case is assigned to an MCCR investigator to determine whether there is probable cause that discrimination has occurred. If at the conclusion of the investigatory stage, MCCR believes there is probable cause that discrimination occurred, MCCR issues a finding and attempts to resolve the matter through conciliation. If an agreement to remedy and eliminate the discrimination cannot be reached, the matter is certified for litigation and may proceed in a number of ways, including being heard before an administrative law judge.

A complaint alleging an unlawful employment practice other than harassment must be filed within 300 days after the alleged act (a complaint alleging harassment must be filed within two years). However, complaints filed with a federal human relations commission or a local human relations commission within specified timeframes are deemed to be in compliance with these requirements.

Administrative Proceedings: At an administrative hearing, MCCR's Office of the General Counsel presents the case on behalf of the complainant. Remedies available on a finding by an administrative law judge that the respondent (employer) is engaging or has engaged in an unlawful employment practice include (1) enjoining the respondent from engaging in the discriminatory act; (2) ordering appropriate affirmative relief (including the reinstatement or hiring of employees, with or without back pay); (3) awarding compensatory damages; and (4) ordering any other equitable relief that the judge considers appropriate.

Compensatory damages that are awarded (for future pecuniary losses, emotional pain, suffering, inconvenience, mental anguish, loss of enjoyment of life, or nonpecuniary losses) are in addition to back pay, interest on back pay, and any other equitable relief that

the complainant may recover under any other provision of law. The maximum amounts of compensatory damages that may be awarded are as follows:

- \$50,000 for respondents with 15 to 100 employees;
- \$100,000 for respondents with 101 to 200 employees;
- \$200,000 for respondents with 201 to 500 employees; and
- \$300,000 for respondents with 501 or more employees.

If back pay is awarded, the award must be reduced by any interim earnings or amounts earnable with reasonable diligence by the person discriminated against. In addition to any other authorized relief, a complainant may recover back pay for up to two years preceding the filing of the complaint if the unlawful employment practice that has occurred during the complaint filing period is similar or related to an unlawful employment practice with regard to discrimination in compensation that occurred outside the time for filing a complaint.

Civil Actions: A complainant or a respondent may elect to have the claims asserted in a complaint alleging an unlawful employment practice determined in a civil action brought by MCCR on the complainant's behalf if (1) MCCR has found probable cause to believe the respondent has engaged or is engaging in an unlawful employment practice and (2) there is a failure to reach an agreement to remedy and eliminate the practice. MCCR may also elect to have the claims asserted within the complaint determined in a civil action brought on its own behalf under the same conditions. On a finding that discrimination occurred, the circuit court may provide the same remedies that an administrative law judge is authorized to provide (described above).

A complainant may also file a private civil action in circuit court against the respondent if (1) the complainant initially filed a timely administrative charge or a complaint under federal, State, or local law alleging an unlawful employment practice by the respondent and (2) at least 180 days have elapsed since the filing of the administrative charge or complaint. In addition, the civil action must be filed within two years after the alleged employment practice occurred (or within three years for a harassment allegation), however, these time limitations are tolled while an administrative charge or complaint is pending. The filing of a civil action automatically terminates any proceeding before MCCR based on the underlying administrative complaint.

In addition to the remedies described above, a circuit court may also award punitive damages in a private civil action if the respondent is not a governmental unit or political subdivision, and the court finds that the respondent is engaging or has engaged in an unlawful employment practice with actual malice. If the court awards punitive damages, the sum of the amount of compensatory damages and punitive damages may not exceed

the applicable limitations on compensatory damages (as shown above). If a complainant seeks compensatory or punitive damages in a circuit court action, any party may demand a jury trial, and the court may not inform the jury of the statutory limitations on compensatory and punitive damages.

Pursuant to § 20-1015 of the State Government Article, a court may award the prevailing party reasonable attorney's fees, expert witness fees, and costs.

Medical Cannabis Use

Chapter 403 of 2013 authorized use of cannabis for medical purposes. For more information on legal cannabis use in the State, see the **Appendix – Cannabis**.

“Written certification” means a certification that (1) is issued by a certifying provider to a qualifying patient with whom the provider has a *bona fide* provider-patient relationship; (2) includes a written statement certifying that, in the certifying provider's professional opinion, after having completed an assessment of the patient's medical history and current medical condition, the patient has a condition that meets the inclusion criteria and for which potential benefits of the medical use of cannabis would likely outweigh the health risks for the patient, as specified; and (3) may include a written statement certifying that, in the certifying provider's professional opinion, a 30-day supply of medical cannabis would be inadequate to meet the medical needs of the qualifying patient.

Prohibited Conduct and Enforcement by the Emergency Medical Services Board

Under State regulations, an individual may not provide emergency medical services while (1) under the influence of alcohol or (2) using any narcotic or controlled dangerous substance, as defined in the Criminal Law Article, that is in excess of therapeutic amounts or without valid medical indication.

If, after procedural requirements have been satisfied, an EMS provider or applicant is found to have engaged in prohibited conduct, the EMS Board may (1) reprimand or place a provider on probation; (2) suspend or revoke the provider's license or certificate; (3) deny a license or certificate to an applicant; or (4) refuse to renew an applicant's license or certificate.

State and Local Fiscal Effect:

Maryland Commission on Civil Rights

General fund expenditures for MCCR increase by \$64,123 in fiscal 2026, which accounts for the bill's October 1, 2025 effective date. This estimate reflects the cost of hiring

one civil rights officer to investigate an anticipated increase in complaints due to the bill. It includes a salary, fringe benefits, one-time start-up costs, and ongoing operating expenses.

Position	1.0
Salary and Fringe Benefits	\$56,754
Operating Expenses	<u>7,369</u>
Total FY 2026 State Expenditures	\$64,123

Future year expenditures reflect a full salary with annual increases and employee turnover as well as annual increases in ongoing operating expenses.

MCCR advises that current staff are already working at capacity and unable to absorb additional complaints expected under the bill. MCCR further notes that it receives federal reimbursements for investigating complaints related to employment discrimination from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), but that any employment discrimination complaints filed under the scope of the bill are not eligible for reimbursement under MCCR's contractual relationship with EEOC, because federal statute does not afford the same protection as the bill. Accordingly, MCCR needs to ensure that investigating any additional cases under the bill does not negatively impact its case closure rate and potentially impact federal funding.

Maryland Institute of Emergency Medical Services Systems

The Maryland Institute of Emergency Medical Services Systems (MIEMSS) can likely implement the bill using existing budgeted resources. EMS employers already report prohibited conduct of clinician impairment to the EMS Board, through MIEMSS, as specified by State regulations.

State and Local Governments as Employers

Both the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) and the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) advise of an indeterminate fiscal and operational impact based on the State's role as an employer. According to DBM, even with the bill's exclusions permitting employers to continue prohibiting impairment at work (and the use of cannabis while on duty), the bill presents challenges for the employing entity to determine when the use of cannabis occurred and the level of any impairment of an employee on the job. The State may experience increased costs to the extent that employees challenge disciplinary or other adverse actions based on alleged violations of the protections afforded under the bill. DBM and MDOT further note that there may be an increase in litigation against the State (and enhanced exposure to liability) if a public safety employee is found to be

impaired during the provision of services. Some local governments may experience similar impacts.

In addition, both Baltimore City and Prince George's County advise of the potential loss of significant federal grant funding, noting generally that grantees are required to maintain a drug free work environment (including the use of cannabis, even when medically prescribed). The Department of Legislative Services notes, however, that the bill explicitly states the following: (1) employers are *not* prohibited from adopting policies that ban employees from performing duties while impaired; (2) employers are *not* prohibited from banning employees from using cannabis while on duty; (3) employers *are* required to report employees who report to work while impaired to the EMS Board; and (4) employers are *not* required to commit acts that would violate federal law or cause the employer to lose monetary or other benefits under federal law. Thus, while there may be operational impacts on employers to develop and implement related policies under the bill, it is assumed that revenues are not impacted.

Additional Information

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

Designated Cross File: HB 1408 (Delegate Boafu) - Economic Matters.

Information Source(s): Maryland Commission on Civil Rights; Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems; Baltimore City; Harford, Montgomery, Prince George's, and Talbot counties; Maryland Municipal League; Alcohol, Tobacco, and Cannabis Commission; Maryland Cannabis Administration; Office of the Attorney General; Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Department of Budget and Management; Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services; Office of Administrative Hearings; Maryland Department of Transportation; Maryland Institute of Emergency Medical Services Systems; Department of Legislative Services

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Appendix – Medical and Adult-use Cannabis

Chapters 254 and 255 of 2023 established the adult-use cannabis industry in the State by, among other things, (1) attributing cannabis-related duties to the Alcohol and Tobacco Commission and renaming it the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Cannabis Commission (ATCC); (2) establishing the Maryland Cannabis Administration (MCA) as an independent unit of State government that is responsible for the regulation of adult-use and medical cannabis; (3) creating a licensing framework for the regulated sale of cannabis; (4) requiring all medical cannabis licensees to either convert to adult-use cannabis businesses or cease operating by July 1, 2023; and (5) establishing a 9% sales and use tax on the sale of adult-use cannabis. As required under Chapters 254 and 255, in June 2023, ATCC and MCA entered into a memorandum of understanding providing that both parties agree to collaborate on enforcing provisions regarding unlicensed cannabis operations in the State.

Maryland Cannabis Administration

MCA's responsibilities generally include promulgating cannabis industry regulations, licensing and registering cannabis businesses in the State, and enforcing the statutes and regulations related to the cannabis industry. MCA adopted permanent regulations governing the cannabis industry in the State that went into effect July 22, 2024. (See DLS Control No. 24-019P).

Adult-use Cannabis

The sale of adult-use cannabis began on July 1, 2023. A person at least age 21 may use and possess the personal use amount of cannabis, while the possession of the personal use amount of cannabis by a person younger than age 21, as well as the possession of the civil use amount of cannabis, are subject to civil penalties. Possession of more than the civil use amount of cannabis by anyone is subject to a criminal penalty.

Medical Cannabis

MCA is responsible for the State's medical cannabis program, which is intended to make medical cannabis available to qualifying patients in a safe and effective manner. There is a framework to certify health care providers, qualifying patients, and their caregivers to provide qualifying patients with medical cannabis legally under State law via written certification.

Social Equity in the Cannabis Industry

The Office of Social Equity (OSE) is an independent office functioning within MCA, established to promote and encourage full participation in the regulated cannabis industry by people from communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs in order to positively impact those communities. OSE has several responsibilities in furtherance of its purpose, including consulting with other agencies, providing recommendations to and working with MCA, assisting businesses to obtain financing through the Capital Access Program, and managing the Social Equity Partnership Grant Program (established to promote qualifying partnerships between operational licensees and social equity licensees).

Cannabis Licensing

To operate a cannabis business in the State, a person must obtain a cannabis license from MCA. A license is valid for five years on initial licensure and five years upon renewal. MCA must issue licenses for growers, processors, dispensaries, incubator spaces, and on-site consumption. Additional licenses include micro licenses for growers, processors, and dispensaries. Licensing and renewal fees are established by MCA and range from \$5,000 for social equity applicants for certain licenses to \$50,000 for standard grower licenses. Pursuant to Chapters 254 and 255, medical licensees (growers, processors, and dispensaries) were required to pay a conversion fee based on the licensee's gross revenues for calendar 2022 to convert to medical and adult-use cannabis business licensees of the same type. Essentially all medical licensees (18 grower, 23 processor, and 96 dispensary licensees) converted to cannabis business licensees.

First- and Second-round Social Equity Licenses: Social equity applicants are those with at least 65% ownership and control held by one or more individuals who meet certain criteria, such as living in or attending a public school in a disproportionately impacted area (*i.e.*, determined to have had above 150% of the State's 10-year average for cannabis possession charges). MCA conducted its first-round lottery on March 14, 2024, and a second-round lottery on June 28, 2024, awarding a total of 205 (174 in round one and 31 in round two) social equity cannabis business licenses across the micro and standard grower, processor, and dispensary categories.

Subsequent Licenses: MCA may issue additional cannabis licenses up to the maximum limit authorized per statute based on the results of a market demand study. Future applications for licenses may be limited to social equity applicants and employ remedial measures based on the results of the disparity study.

Advisory Board on Medical and Adult-Use Cannabis

Chapters 254 and 255 also established the Advisory Board on Medical and Adult-Use Cannabis. The advisory board must (1) consider all matters submitted to it by OSE, the Governor, MCA, or the General Assembly and (2) study and make recommendations on a number of issues related to the medical and adult-use cannabis industry in the State. The advisory board began meeting in May 2024, and has established three subcommittees: Federal, Medical Cannabis, and Adult-use Cannabis.

Cannabis Sales and Tax Revenues

In the first year of adult-use cannabis sales (July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024), total cannabis sales topped \$1.0 billion, with adult-use sales making up \$709 million of the total. Retail sales of adult-use cannabis are subject to a 9% sales and use tax rate and generated approximately \$63.8 million in sales and use tax revenues during the first year of sales. Adult-use cannabis sales and use tax collections for the first quarter of fiscal 2025 totaled \$18.3 million.

Local Authority to Regulate Cannabis

A “political subdivision,” defined as a county or municipality, is authorized to establish zoning requirements for cannabis businesses, allocate cannabis tax revenues, and adopt ordinances that reduce statutory requirements related to specified location restrictions for cannabis businesses. However, a political subdivision is prohibited from taking certain actions specific to cannabis businesses, including imposing a tax on cannabis and establishing restrictions related to transporting cannabis within the political subdivision or fees or requirements on cannabis businesses that are more burdensome than for other businesses.

Additionally, an on-site consumption establishment may not operate in a location unless the political subdivision affirmatively authorizes the operation by issuing a permit or license. The political subdivision may also place restrictions on or prohibit the operation of on-site consumption establishments.

Public Health Actions Related to Adult-use Cannabis

The Cannabis Public Health Advisory Council was established to study and report its findings and recommendations by December 1 each year on specified public health impacts of cannabis legalization. The Cannabis Public Health Fund was also established to generally support the council’s work. The fund receives 5% of the tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis.

Cannabis-related Special Funds

The Cannabis Regulation and Enforcement Fund is administered by MCA to cover its operating costs and the costs to administer and enforce the Medical and Adult-use Cannabis Title of the Alcoholic Beverages and Cannabis Article. The fund generally consists of fees collected by MCA (including application and registration fees) and tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis sufficient to defray the entire cost of operating the administration.

The Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund is administered by the Comptroller to provide funds to community-based organizations that serve communities determined by OSE (in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General) to have been the most impacted by disproportionate enforcement of the cannabis prohibition before July 1, 2022. The fund receives 35% of the tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis, distributed on a quarterly basis.

The Cannabis Business Assistance Fund is administered by the Department of Commerce (in consultation with OSE) to assist small, minority-owned, and women-owned businesses entering the adult-use cannabis industry through the award of grants and loans. The fund receives 5% of the tax revenues from the sale of adult-use cannabis, distributed on a quarterly basis.