

HOUSE BILL 356

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HB 1019/25 – HGO

6lr1171

By: **Delegates Schmidt and Rosenberg**

Introduced and read first time: January 19, 2026

Assigned to: Government, Labor, and Elections

A BILL ENTITLED

1 AN ACT concerning

2 **Human Relations – Protection of the Free Exercise of Religion**

3 FOR the purpose of prohibiting a governmental authority, under certain circumstances,
4 from burdening a person's exercise of religion; authorizing a person aggrieved by a
5 violation of this Act to obtain certain relief in a civil action; and generally relating to
6 the protection of religious freedom.

7 BY adding to

8 Article – State Government

9 Section 20–1301 through 20–1305 to be under the new subtitle “Subtitle 13.
10 Religious Freedom”

11 Annotated Code of Maryland

12 (2021 Replacement Volume and 2025 Supplement)

13 Preamble

14 WHEREAS, The framers of the U.S. Constitution and the people of this State,
15 recognizing free exercise of religion as an inalienable right, secured its protection in the
16 First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and in Article 36 of the Declaration of Rights of
17 the Maryland Constitution, respectively; and

18 WHEREAS, In *City of Boerne v. Flores*, the U.S. Supreme Court held that the
19 compelling interest test provided for in the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act to
20 protect the inalienable constitutional right of free exercise of religion must be adopted by a
21 state through legislative act or court decision in order to apply to state or local government
22 action; and

23 WHEREAS, The Senate of Maryland and the Maryland House of Delegates have
24 determined that the same compelling interest test provided for in the federal Religious
25 Freedom Restoration Act applies to the State and local governments in Maryland; now,
26 therefore,

EXPLANATION: CAPITALS INDICATE MATTER ADDED TO EXISTING LAW.

[Brackets] indicate matter deleted from existing law.



SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND,
That the Laws of Maryland read as follows:

Article – State Government

SUBTITLE 13. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM.

20–1301.

(A) IN THIS SUBTITLE THE FOLLOWING WORDS HAVE THE MEANINGS
INDICATED.

(B) “COMPELLING GOVERNMENTAL INTEREST” MEANS AN INTEREST
ARISING FROM A SUBSTANTIAL THREAT TO PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY, PEACE,
ORDER, OR GENERAL WELFARE.

(C) “EXERCISE OF RELIGION” MEANS THE PRACTICE OR OBSERVANCE OF
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, WHETHER OR NOT COMPELLED BY OR CENTRAL TO A SYSTEM
OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF, INCLUDING OBSERVANCE UNDER ARTICLE 36 OF THE
DECLARATION OF RIGHTS OF THE MARYLAND CONSTITUTION OR THE FREE
EXERCISE CLAUSE OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION.

(D) “GOVERNMENTAL ACTION” MEANS A LAW, A REGULATION, AN
ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER, A DECISION, A PRACTICE, OR ANY OTHER EXERCISE OF
GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY.

(E) “GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY” INCLUDES:

(1) THE STATE, A COUNTY, OR A MUNICIPAL CORPORATION OR ANY
SUBDIVISION OF THE STATE, A COUNTY, OR A MUNICIPAL CORPORATION; AND

(2) ANY OFFICIAL OR OTHER INDIVIDUAL ACTING WITHIN THE SCOPE
OF THE INDIVIDUAL’S EMPLOYMENT BY ANY ENTITY DESCRIBED IN ITEM (1) OF THIS
SUBSECTION.

(F) “PERSON” INCLUDES:

(1) AN INDIVIDUAL; AND

(2) A RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION, ASSOCIATION, OR CORPORATION.

20–1302.

1 THIS SUBTITLE APPLIES TO A GOVERNMENTAL ACTION TAKEN BY A
2 GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY ON OR AFTER JULY 1, 2026, INCLUDING A
3 GOVERNMENTAL ACTION TAKEN PURSUANT TO A LAW, REGULATION, POLICY,
4 GUIDELINE, OR OTHER AUTHORITY THAT WAS IN EFFECT PRIOR TO JULY 1, 2026,
5 UNLESS STATE LAW EXPRESSLY EXCLUDES THAT GOVERNMENTAL ACTION FROM
6 COVERAGE UNDER THIS SUBTITLE.

7 **20-1303.**

8 (A) EXCEPT AS PROVIDED IN SUBSECTION (B) OF THIS SECTION, A
9 GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY MAY NOT SUBSTANTIALLY BURDEN A PERSON'S
10 EXERCISE OF RELIGION EVEN IF THE BURDEN RESULTS FROM A RULE OF GENERAL
11 APPLICABILITY.

12 (B) A GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY MAY SUBSTANTIALLY BURDEN A
13 PERSON'S EXERCISE OF RELIGION ONLY IF THE GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY
14 DEMONSTRATES THAT APPLICATION OF THE BURDEN TO THE PERSON IS:

15 (1) IN FURTHERANCE OF A COMPELLING GOVERNMENTAL INTEREST;
16 AND

17 (2) THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE MEANS OF FURTHERING THAT
18 COMPELLING GOVERNMENTAL INTEREST.

19 **20-1304.**

20 (A) A PERSON AGGRIEVED BY A VIOLATION OF THIS SUBTITLE MAY OBTAIN
21 APPROPRIATE RELIEF IN A CIVIL ACTION IN A COURT OF COMPETENT
22 JURISDICTION.

23 (B) SUBJECT TO SUBSECTION (C) OF THIS SECTION, APPROPRIATE RELIEF
24 UNDER THIS SUBTITLE MAY INCLUDE:

25 (1) INJUNCTIVE RELIEF; AND

26 (2) COMPENSATORY DAMAGES INCLUDING REASONABLE ATTORNEY'S
27 FEES.

28 (C) A PERSON AGGRIEVED BY A VIOLATION OF THIS SUBTITLE BY AN
29 OFFICIAL OR EMPLOYEE OF AN ENTITY DESCRIBED IN § 20-1301(E)(1) OF THIS
30 SUBTITLE MAY SEEK:

(1) INJUNCTIVE RELIEF AGAINST THE OFFICIAL OR EMPLOYEE OR THE ENTITY BY WHICH THE OFFICIAL OR EMPLOYEE IS EMPLOYED;

(2) COMPENSATORY DAMAGES AGAINST THE ENTITY BY WHICH THE OFFICIAL OR EMPLOYEE IS EMPLOYED; AND

(3) IF THE OFFICIAL OR EMPLOYEE WAS ACTING CLEARLY OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF THE OFFICIAL'S OR EMPLOYEE'S EMPLOYMENT, COMPENSATORY DAMAGES AGAINST THE OFFICIAL OR EMPLOYEE.

(D) THE RIGHTS ESTABLISHED UNDER THIS SUBTITLE MAY BE RAISED BY A PLAINTIFF IN AN ACTION FOR RELIEF UNDER THIS SECTION OR AS A DEFENSE TO AN ACTION.

(E) A CLAIM FOR DAMAGES BROUGHT UNDER THIS SUBTITLE IS SUBJECT TO:

(1) THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT TORT CLAIMS ACT UNDER TITLE 5, SUBTITLE 3 OF THE COURTS ARTICLE; OR

(2) THE MARYLAND TORT CLAIMS ACT UNDER TITLE 12, SUBTITLE 1 OF THIS ARTICLE.

20-1305.

(A) (1) IN THIS SUBSECTION, "PROVIDING" DOES NOT INCLUDE THE DENIAL OF FUNDING, BENEFITS, OR EXEMPTIONS.

(2) THIS SUBTITLE MAY NOT BE CONSTRUED TO PROHIBIT ANY GOVERNMENTAL ACTION PROVIDING FUNDING, BENEFITS, OR EXEMPTIONS TO THE EXTENT PERMITTED UNDER THE MARYLAND DECLARATION OF RIGHTS OR THE MARYLAND CONSTITUTION.

(B) THIS SUBTITLE MAY NOT BE CONSTRUED TO AFFECT, INTERPRET, OR ADDRESS IN ANY WAY THE SUBSTANCE OF THE MARYLAND DECLARATION OF RIGHTS OR THE MARYLAND CONSTITUTION.

(C) THE PROTECTION OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY PROVIDED UNDER THIS SUBTITLE IS IN ADDITION TO AND DOES NOT REDUCE THE PROTECTIONS PROVIDED UNDER THE MARYLAND DECLARATION OF RIGHTS OR THE MARYLAND CONSTITUTION.

SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect July 1, 2026.