

February 20, 2020

Testimony on SB 283
Ethics and Accountability in Government Act
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports SB 283 and appreciates the attention to ethics reform this legislative session. Recent events have led to a loss of trust in and respect for the legislative process and we believe the renewed focus on ethics will send a message to Marylanders that their concerns have been heard and illegal behavior will not be tolerated.

Strong ethics and transparency laws are essential to building a strong foundation of trust in government action and provides the public with the tools for oversight. SB 283 provides a variety of straightforward ethics reforms that we believe will help to build greater accountability within the General Assembly.

- SB 283 provide for increased minimum and maximum penalties for bribery, the minimum fine being increased from \$1,000 to \$10,000, and the maximum fine increased from \$10,000 to \$100,000. Maryland is fortunate that ethics violations, such as bribery or acting for personal gain, are rare in the Statehouse. When corruption or collusion occurs, it deserves a strong, and we believe the increase in fines will help to dissuade this unethical behavior in the future.
- SB 283 authorizes the State Ethics Board to impose maximum fines for violations to public ethics laws, helping to address disregard for our ethics laws and moving us toward creating an ethical and clean government that works in the public's interest.
- SB 283 expands the definition of qualifying crime as applied to forfeiture of pensions to include any felony or misdemeanor committed in the course of public duties or responsibilities, while in a role of authority, or when a crime of moral turpitude is committed.
- It also ensures former officials or employees are prohibited from using confidential information for personal economic benefit or for the benefit of another.

While we take no position regarding the forfeiture of legislative pensions of any member or former member found guilty of a crime, we do support providing voters with the opportunity to decide what should happens in these instances. Over the last few months, we have heard from a number of members of the public who have expressed frustration and anger after discovering that those officials who have engaged in unethical behavior and are no longer in office still have their pensions. If this legislation is passed, we urge the administration to ensure a robust public education plan is put in place to ensure voters understand the constitutional amendment before voting in the general election.

Legislators and officials at all levels must be held to the highest standards of public conduct. SB 283 is an important reform for our ethics code and overall accountability in Maryland.

We recommend a favorable report.

