

February 20, 2020

Testimony on SB 348
Public Ethics - Officials and Lobbyists - Reporting of Ceremonial Gifts and
Awards of Insignificant Monetary Value
Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Position: Unfavorable

Common Cause Maryland opposes SB 348 which would roll back transparency and oversight of the legislature.

Strong ethics and transparency laws are essential to building a foundation of trust in government action and provides the public with the tools to provide oversight. Under current law, an official must file an annual financial disclosure statement with the State Ethics Board and that statement must disclose gifts received that are of a value of \$20 or more. Semiannually, lobbyists must include on their reports the name of each official, employee, or immediate family member of an official or employee who has benefited from one or more gifts with a cumulative value of \$75.

These disclosure thresholds ensure gifts are designed to impair impartiality and independent judgment of officials are not being accepted and this information being made available to the public gives them faith that officials are acting in their best interests. Ceremonial gifts and awards under these thresholds do not currently have to be disclosed. Those ceremonial gifts and awards over \$20, while possibly not of much greater value compared to this threshold, should be disclosed. Standardized disclosure reporting ensures thorough disclosure in the legislature.

SB 348 reduces ethical oversight and increases the avenues through which wealthy interests may influence elected officials. This would be a step backwards for ethics and transparency in Maryland when we should be building voter trust and confidence in the political process.

We respectfully urge an unfavorable report on SB 348.