

MSBA_FAV_SB528

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To: Members of The Senate Finance Committee

From: MSBA Estate & Trust Law Section

Date: February 28, 2020

Subject: **SB528** – Public Health – Disposition of Remains – Authorizing Agent

Position: **Support**

The Estate and Trust Law Section of the Maryland State Bar Association (MSBA) **supports Senate Bill 528 – Public Health – Disposition of Remains – Authorizing Agent.**

Sections 5-408.1 and 5-509 of the Health – General Article of the Maryland Code (and parallel provisions of the Health Occupations Article) allow any individual to designate someone, through the individual’s last will and testament or otherwise, to make decisions regarding the disposition of the individual’s bodily remains (or, alternatively, to leave instructions for such disposition). Section 5-509 also sets forth the order of priority for determining who may make such decisions; this section was amended in the 2019 legislative session to provide that, under certain circumstances, a person’s right to direct the disposition of a decedent’s remains may be forfeit.

Funeral directors and morticians desire clear, practical rules that may readily be followed. The existing language of the statute invites confusion, resulting from the interplay between subparagraph (c)(6) and paragraph (a) of § 5-509, as to whether the decedent’s designation of an authorizing agent (if made in an instrument other than a last will and testament) supersedes the right of certain family members to make decisions regarding disposition of remains. In practice, Marylanders are often including disposition-of-remains instructions in their advance medical directives (AMDs). The AMD often includes provisions specifically designating someone (an “authorizing agent”) to make decisions regarding disposition of remains—in fact, the suggested form found in Health – General § 5-603 contains such a provision, leading consumers to believe that this is the appropriate way to make such a designation.

The AMD can often be a more practical place than the last will and testament to include disposition-of-remains instructions: it is an instrument that stakeholders are looking at in the final days of the signer’s life, and its validity is necessarily determined prior to death (whereas the will may not yet have been found and certainly has not yet been admitted to probate at the time decisions must be made regarding disposition of bodily remains); many people have AMDs who do not have wills; and the AMD’s “authorizing agent” section is specifically intended for the purpose. Funeral directors and morticians routinely rely on this language in an AMD, and they would like reassurance that their reliance on an AMD’s designation of an authorizing agent is proper.

Further, the existing statute fails to make clear whether an authorizing agent may disregard, or is bound by, any pre-need contract that the decedent may have entered into with a funeral home, or arrangements the decedent may have made with a crematory or cemetery.

SB528 would revise both § 5-408.1 and § 5-509 of Health – General (and parallel provisions of the Health Occupations Article) to provide that a decedent’s designation of someone to act as authorizing agent will control; such designee will have first priority to serve as authorizing agent, whether the designation is made under a will, an AMD, or any other document that has been properly signed and witnessed. This will enable funeral directors and morticians to rely on the AMD and provide Marylanders with assurance that their designated authorizing agent will have priority to serve.

In addition, SB528 makes clear that the authorizing agent is bound by the terms of any pre-need contract entered into by the decedent with a funeral director or mortician (or other signed and witnessed expression of the decedent’s wishes with respect to disposition of the decedent’s bodily remains).

Finally, SB528 clarifies confusing language of subparagraph (c)(6) of Health – General § 5-509 (and parallel provisions of the Health Occupations Article), relating to the order of priority of persons who may have the right to arrange for final disposition of a body, to make clear that it does not contradict paragraph (a) of that section.

SB528 provides needed clarification of the ordering rules that determine who has authority to make disposition-of-remains decisions, bolsters the usefulness of the suggested-form AMD provided to Marylanders in Health – General § 5-603, and recognizes the increasingly prevalent practice of naming an agent for these decisions in an AMD rather than in a last will.

For the reasons stated above, the MSBA **supports SB528 and urges a favorable committee report.**

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February 28, 2020

Senate Finance Committee
The Honorable Delores G. Kelley
3 East Miller Senate Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401-1991

RE: SB 528 – Public Health – Disposition of Remains – Authorizing Agent

Dear Chair Kelley and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to introduce Senate Bill 528 was brought to me by the Estate and Trust Law Section of the Maryland State Bar Association.

Current law allows a person to designate someone, through the individual's last will and testament or otherwise, to make decisions regarding the disposition of the individual's bodily remains or to leave instructions for such disposition. Current language in the statute is confusing. In particular, there is confusion as to whether direction contained in an advanced medical directive supersedes the right of certain family members to make decisions regarding the disposition of remains.

Funeral directors and morticians desire clean practical rules that may be readily be followed in the brief period after someone's death. Senate Bill 528 clarifies this situation by revising both 5-408.1 and 5-509 of the Health – General Article to provide that a decedent's designation of someone to act as authorizing agent will control; such designee will have first priority to serve as authorizing agent, whether the designation is made under a will, an advanced medical directive (AMD), or any other document that has been properly signed and witnessed. This will allow funeral directors and morticians to rely on the AMD and provide Marylanders with assurance that their designated authorizing agent will have priority to serve. Additionally, this bill will make clear that the authorizing agent is bound by terms of any pre-need contract entered into by the decedent with a funeral home or mortician.

I have with me Ann Coventry who will expand more on this legislation. I ask the committee for a favorable report.