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Bill: HB0706
Title: Commission on LGBTQ Affairs
Date: February 5, 2020
Committee: Health and Government Operations
Position: Support

To the Honorable Shane E. Pendergrass and Esteemed Members of the Committee:

FreeState Justice is Maryland's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) civil rights advocacy organization. Each year, we provide free legal services to hundreds of LGBTQ Marylanders facing discrimination. We strive to create an equitable Maryland where LGBTQ Marylanders can live full lives with dignity and respect in all spaces.

While Maryland has made significant progress in including and affirming its LGBTQ citizens over the past 10 years, discriminatory and exclusionary policies and practices continue to permeate State institutions and public spaces. In fact, 13 states rank ahead of Maryland on the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) annual State Equality Index.

In 2016, FreeState Justice conducted a Needs Assessment of LGBTQ Marylanders, surveying and conducting listening sessions with over 500 LGBTQ Marylanders to better understand the barriers they continue to face in accessing basic services. We learned that street harassment, affordable and LGBTQ affirming healthcare, inclusive education, reliable and non-discriminatory employment and domestic violence and sexual assault continue to be significant challenges and concerns of the community.

On Maryland's streets, one participant explained "my partner and I have had bottles thrown at us, and someone even shattered our front windshield" while another detailed that "I have to run all my errands at night, because as a trans woman, if I go out during the day, I get harassed by the police." In Maryland's hospitals, one Wicomico participant told her doctor she was a lesbian and "the doctor responded, 'I don't know what you think you're doing here,' and I was asked to leave the office." In Maryland's schools, when one Salisbury parent talked about safety

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FreeState Justice, Inc. (formerly FreeState Legal Project, Inc., merging with Equality Maryland) is a social justice organization that works through direct legal services, legislative and policy advocacy, and community engagement to enable Marylanders across the spectrum of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities to be free to live authentically, with safety and dignity, in all communities throughout our state.

concerns for their child, “the principal told me just to move to a more metropolitan area.”

As demonstrated by the Needs Assessment, fear and exclusion continue to prevent LGBTQ Marylanders and their families from leading safe and healthy lives with full access to dignity and rights. A commission charged with collecting data across State agencies on the implementation of LGBTQ-inclusive policies and complaints alleging discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity can provide essential coordination and oversight functions, ensuring Maryland’s policies live up to our state’s principles of inclusivity, dignity and respect. In addition, it will provide critical knowledge to the state’s agencies and local governments by studying and establishing best practices for inclusion of LGBTQ individuals and communities across the State. Finally, its annual report including recommendations on policies for LGBTQ adults and youth that work to end discriminatory practices in the state will be a central source of knowledge for policy makers in the future.

Through its knowledge production, policy, and coordination functions, the LGBTQ Commission will play a supportive role for the state and local governments in ensuring equality, respect and dignity for LGBTQ Marylanders.

We strongly support this legislation and urge you to vote favorably.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Procopio
Executive Director