

Bill: SB0413: Maryland Legal Services Corporation Funding –  
Abandoned Property

Submitting Organization: Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, Inc.

Position: Support

Committee: Senate Budget and Taxation

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington strongly supports Senate Bill 413 and similar bills that will stabilize and enhance essential funding to the Maryland Legal Services Corporation to provide Marylanders overwhelmed by COVID-19, particularly low-income families and individuals, with access to legal services to help them begin to rebuild their lives. With this vital funding secured, legal services providers throughout Maryland will have the necessary resources to continue making a real difference, resulting in more just and equitable outcomes for the most vulnerable Marylanders.

In 1984, the Maryland General Assembly identified the Abandoned Property Fund as a source of funding for MLSC. The original allocation to MLSC made up about 17% of the Fund's revenue nearly 40 years ago. Even with the increase currently being proposed in SB0413, the new allocation would make up less than 7% of the Fund's current revenue. With a sharp decrease in court filings throughout the state over the last year and IOLTA funding significantly cut due to near-zero interest rates for the foreseeable future, two of MLSC's major funding sources have been greatly impacted. Coupled with the increased demand for civil legal services to resolve evictions and foreclosures, family law issues, consumer debt matters, access to public benefits, and immigration matters, the General Assembly must act to increase other sources of funding for legal aid providers to continue providing life-changing services, including an increased distribution from the Abandoned Property Fund.

Founded in 1928, Catholic Charities is one of the most comprehensive providers of social services, including legal services, to low-income individuals and families in Washington, D.C., and Montgomery, Prince George's, Charles, Calvert, and St. Mary's counties. Catholic Charities affirms and supports the dignity of all individuals, strengthens families, and empowers underserved communities. Our services are open to all those in need, regardless of age, race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, background, belief, or circumstance. Catholic Charities empowers vulnerable, low-income individuals and families to achieve personal and economic stability by providing high-quality, person-focused, and culturally-competent wraparound services. Two such programs, Catholic Charities Immigration Legal Services (ILS) and Catholic Charities Legal Network (CCLN), provide access to expert immigration and civil legal services to low-income individuals in Maryland communities.

As an established legal services provider in Maryland, Catholic Charities understands the importance that Maryland Legal Services Corporation funding makes in the lives of Marylanders. MLSC currently provides critical general operating funds to Immigration Legal Services, a long-standing grantee. These funds play a vital role in protecting and assisting low-income foreign-born residents of Maryland. Without this funding, ILS' ability to deliver legal services to Maryland residents would be severely curtailed.

Immigration Legal Services' legal staff, including attorneys and Department of Justice (DOJ) Accredited Legal Representatives, assist clients with family petitions, self-petitions for battered spouses and children, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) petitions, guardianship and custody orders for unaccompanied minors, applications for asylum, naturalization, Temporary Protected Status, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), "T" visas (for victims of trafficking), and "U" visas (for victims of crimes). In addition, staff represent clients in removal proceedings before the immigration courts and on appeals before the Board of Immigration Appeals and federal courts. Each year, ILS opens more than 2,000 cases for Maryland residents in matters ranging from consultations to full representation. ILS staff also provide educational outreach to the communities we serve through information sessions and radio programs to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information is being shared. ILS also recruits, trains, and mentors pro bono attorneys and matches them with especially vulnerable Maryland residents for pro bono representation. These services have been critical to so many who can now live in the United States without fear of being deported, work legally in the U.S. to support themselves and their families, leave situations of abuse, and obtain lawful permanent residence, U.S. citizenship, or other forms of immigration relief. The impact of our work, with the funding support of MLSC, has long lasting effects on the individual, his/her family, and our community.

Catholic Charities Legal Network has, for over 30 years, provided pro bono civil legal services to underserved communities, focusing on family law (custody and child support), housing (eviction and foreclosure defense), protection of seniors and those with special needs (guardianship and conservatorship), and consumer debt issues. In 2017, Catholic Charities opened the Susan Denison Mona Center in Prince George's County to better serve low-income populations in Prince George's, Charles, Calvert, and St. Mary's counties. The office is staffed with two CCLN lawyers who possess more than 60 combined years of experience working with low-income clients and building pro bono programs. Through the work of Catholic Charities' staff and pro bono attorneys, clients have resolved contentious custody matters to ensure children's stability, worked against unscrupulous landlords to protect their rights as tenants, and helped individuals facing mounting debt successfully obtain relief.

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington appreciates your consideration and respectfully urges you to support Senate Bill 413.