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Dear Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee,

This letter serves as my testimony in support of Senate Bill 413, which would increase the Maryland Legal Services Corporation's (MLSC) annual distribution from the Abandoned Property Fund. I am grateful to Chair Guzzone for the opportunity to submit written testimony, and to all of the Committee members for their consideration of this vital enactment.

As the 2020-2021 president of the University of Baltimore Students for Public Interest (UBSPI), I have seen firsthand the impact of MLSC's work for public interest-minded law students in the Baltimore community and across the state. Funds awarded by MLSC through their host organizations ensure that law students have the means to support themselves while pursuing work in the public interest field. Law students' involvement in public interest is aimed at "helping the less fortunate and underprivileged obtain equal representation in the justice system." These words are borrowed from UBSPI's mission statement.

Through my time in law school and as president of UBSPI, I have helped facilitate the distribution of six MLSC Fellowships annually. I have personally benefitted from public interest funds awarded through a different source. Students who successfully apply for MLSC funds at UB use this money to support themselves while working 400 hours over ten weeks during the summer break. Beneficiaries of MLSC funds at UB have worked for Disability Rights Maryland, the Homeless Persons Representation Project (HPRP), Maryland Legal Aid, and the Tahirih Justice Center, among other crucial organizations.

While public interest organizations are critical to delivering legal aid to underserved communities, summer public interest opportunities for law students are often unpaid. This is an unfortunate reality that forces students to make difficult choices when considering their path through law school and future career goals, and has led to a decreasing number of law students who embark on a path to public service. Funds awarded through MLSC enable students to pursue their passion for the public interest by providing financial security through the funds awarded. MLSC has inspired law students on their path to careers in public service. The impact of MLSC is widely felt among students who they have helped and in communities that they have served.

It is critical that the General Assembly increase the amount of money allocated to MLSC so that UB can continue to offer paid public interest opportunities and to meet the legal needs of the underserved, especially in the wake of a pandemic. I urge the Committee to please consider increasing the annual distribution allocated to MLSC through the Abandoned Property Fund.

Sincerely,

Cooper Gerus
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