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Committee: Judiciary

Testimony on: HB 118 - “Vehicle Laws – Injury or Death of Vulnerable Individual - Penalties”

Position: Support

Hearing Date: January 14, 2021

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club supports HB 118, which would impose penalties when a vehicle driver is convicted of causing serious physical injury or death to a “vulnerable individual” when operating a vehicle in violation of certain provisions of the Maryland Vehicle Law. The bill defines a vulnerable individual as one who is on a sidewalk, footpath, crosswalk, or highway shoulder or who is providing emergency services on a highway. A vulnerable individual also would include someone who is lawfully operating a bicycle, motorcycle, motor scooter, tractor or farm equipment, animal-drawn vehicle, or wheelchair on a highway, shoulder, crosswalk or sidewalk.

Transportation is now the primary contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in our state. Tailpipe emissions from cars and trucks are also a major source of health-damaging air pollution. This means there is growing need to get individuals out of their cars, taking transit, riding bikes and walking more. However, doing so along busy roads isn’t as safe as it should be.

We live in a car-centric culture where transportation planning, road infrastructure and vehicle laws are largely focused on enabling vehicles to get to their destination as swiftly as possible. Unfortunately, this has resulted in some drivers feeling they have priority on the road, and that pedestrians and bicyclists have less priority. As a consequence, too many pedestrians, bicyclists and others lawfully operating on the side of the road are seriously injured or killed, and the potential penalty for a driver is minimal.

This bill could help bring about needed change. Any driver convicted of operating a vehicle in a careless or distracted manner that injured or killed a vulnerable individual would have to appear in court, pay a fine of up to \$2,000, and have their driver’s license suspended for 7 days to 6 months. They also could be ordered to participate in a motor vehicle safety course and perform up to 150 hours of community service.

In summary, this bill would address a significant problem with our motor vehicle laws, and we urge the Committee to issue a favorable report on it.

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Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club is America’s oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. The Maryland Chapter has over 75,000 members and supporters, and the Sierra Club nationwide has over 800,000 members and nearly four million supporters.