

LAW OFFICE OF KARREN POPE-ONWUKWE, LLC

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February 18, 2021

RE: SUPPORT OF HB1261 and SB820

My name is Karren Jo Pope-Onwukwe, I live at 6001 43<sup>rd</sup> Street, Hyattsville, Maryland.

Since 2000, I have operated the Law Office of Karren Pope-Onwukwe where I am an Elder Law and Disability Rights attorney. I am a past chair of the Elder Law and Disability Rights Section Council of the Maryland State Bar Association and the past co-founder and chair of the Elder Law Section of the Prince George's County Bar Association. I am currently a member of the Prince George's County Adult Public Guardianship Review Board, a Commissioner on the American Bar Association Commission on Law and Aging, chair of the Elder Law Committee of the Senior Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association and Advisor to the Elder Affairs Committee of the Civil Rights and Social Justice Committee of the American Bar Association.

For the purposes of this testimony in support of HB1261 and SB820 the most relevant civic activity I have been involved in was as a participant in the Life and Health Planning Committee of the Maryland Attorney General's Access to Justice COVID-19 Task Force. Our sub-committee investigated civil legal issues that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulted in our recommendation of the legislation before you.

My personal testimony is that I have not been back to my law office since March 12, 2020. At that time, I felt as if my career was essentially over. I had sent draft documents to clients that we were not able to execute. Later as restrictions lifted, I explained to clients that I was not comfortable meeting them in a parking lot with staff to witness them sign documents.

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On April 10, 2020, the Governor issued an Executive Order authorizing remote witnessing of estate planning documents. I immediately set about understanding and creating a virtual law office. On April 29, 2020, I held my first virtual client meeting to witness the execution of estate planning documents. I have two virtual witnesses, my 86 year old mother and my 32 year old son.

As the pandemic continued and guidelines were given on how to safely return to in office document signing, I was not confident that I could ensure my safety and that of my clients. I have continued to use my GO TO MEETING remote platform. By way of example, I have been able to provide legal services to a 91 year old widow with cancer; a gentleman recovering from emergency heart surgery; a 75 year old with significant health care issues and no family members on the east coast. I have been able to virtually help families open the estates of their loved ones that have died even though the courthouses are closed. I have been able to assist families filing petitions for guardianships and representing them virtually at the required hearings. I believe that this "new normal" is actually an improvement to access to legal services for elderly people and people with disabilities.

Please vote in favor of HB1261 and SB820

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karren Jo Pope-Onwukwe', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Karren Jo Pope-Onwukwe  
Attorney at Law