



Maryland Defenders Union
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February 8, 2022

RE: SB 255- State Personnel Management System - Office of the Public Defender –
Placement and Collective Bargaining

Sponsored by: Senator Pamela Beidle

Bill Hearing: Senate Finance Committee
Thursday February 10, 2022

FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice-Chair Feldman, and Members of the Finance Committee:

My name is Casi O'Neill, and I am a social worker at the Maryland Office of the Public Defender (OPD), and an executive board member of the Maryland Defenders Union (MDU), AFSCME Local 423. I am writing in support of SB 255.

I have been a social worker in the Juvenile Division in Baltimore City for three years. Social workers at OPD help our clients access services, navigate the complicated legal process, and cope with some of the most difficult moments of their lives. We also provide in-depth psychosocial assessments and expert testimony to the Courts. While I am truly honored to have this job, I know we need to improve things at my agency. Gaining a voice through collective bargaining is the way we can do that.

Passing SB 255 is a matter of fairness, first and foremost. If I were employed as a social worker with any other State agency in Maryland, I would already have collective bargaining rights. OPD workers like me are unnecessarily excluded from the benefits that 30,000 other state employees have. Our assistant public defenders are *doubly* excluded, as their at-will status means they can be demoted, transferred, or fired at any time, without cause. When it comes to speaking out about health and safety concerns that impact ourselves and our clients, at-will employees have had to consider whether it could jeopardize their careers. SB 255 will allow *all of us* to have the same basic rights to due process as other State employees.

SB 255 is also a matter of values. Social workers believe in self-determination, empowering our clients, and ensuring that impacted persons have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. We want the same for ourselves! Social workers, core staff, and attorneys deserve to have a voice when it comes to our own working conditions. By passing SB 255, we will have an opportunity to weigh in on the things that concern us most.

While social workers are committed to our work, our high caseloads leave us stretched thin. I often feel I must “triage” my caseload based on whose situation is most serious or most time-sensitive. What I *want* to do is serve each client with the level of attention and care they need. It makes me feel guilty that I can never do enough, and I know I am not alone. It is routine for me and my colleagues to work late into the night to meet deadlines and respond to client crises. Many of us hear complaints from our partners and loved ones that our devotion to our work causes us to miss out on our own lives. Collective bargaining will let us negotiate for caseload limits, adequate resources, and the vital staffing we need to provide holistic defense services without sacrificing our own mental health.

Our jobs are essential to Marylanders. Our dignity and the dignity of our clients demands the right to collective bargaining. We urge the committee to provide a favorable report on SB 255.

Respectfully submitted,

Casi O'Neill
Social Worker
AFSCME Local 423