
BILL NO: Senate Bill 778
TITLE: Maryland Medical Assistance Program - Children and Pregnant Women (Healthy Babies Equity Act)
COMMITTEE: Finance
HEARING DATE: March 8, 2022
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

Senate Bill 778 would require the Maryland Medical Assistance Program to provide comprehensive medical care and other health care services to non-citizen pregnant women, and their infants, who would otherwise be eligible for the program but for their immigration status. In other words, this bill would ensure that Maryland provides lifesaving and critical health care to pregnant women and their infants regardless of their immigration status. Because pregnant people deserve medical coverage during their pregnancies regardless of their citizenship status, the Women's Law Center of Maryland supports SB 778.

Among the free legal services the WLC provides is our MEDOVI project, which serves foreign-born victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking who are seeking immigration status independent of their abusers who typically threaten our clients with deportation or refuse to provide the documentation necessary to obtain legal status in an attempt to maintain control over their relationship. These foreign-born victims face unique challenges; cultural differences, language barriers, and fear of deportation frequently prevent them from seeking help. As mentioned above, victims are often sponsored for their green cards by the very same abuser who threatens to have them deported. The vast majority of our clients (96%) are women, and their children face similar challenges, including abuse and forced separation from their mother. Deportation is a particularly acute concern for victims who as a result may be separated from U.S.-born children.

Access to medical services is limited for these women and their children. Expanding medical coverage to non-citizen pregnant persons could lessen their risk of pregnancy complications and lead to healthier pregnancies and babies. We know that people with access to robust social services are more likely to feel empowered to leave their abusive relationships, especially compared to those with medical complications who are reliant upon their abusers for care or financial security.

For those reasons, the WLC urges a favorable report on SB 778.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit legal services organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal representation for individuals and statewide advocacy to achieve systemic change.