

Written Testimony of Virginia Canter, Chief Ethics Counsel,
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Submitted to the Maryland House of Delegates
Health & Government Operations Committee to
Support Maryland HB 152, the Public Advocate Act of 2022

January 21, 2022

Chair Pendergrass, Vice-Chair Pena-Melnyk and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of [HB152](#), the Public Advocate Act of 2022, which would establish the newly-created Office of the Public Advocate to serve Maryland citizens. To that end, the publicly-elected, statewide Public Advocate would perform critically necessary functions to help restore and maintain public trust in Maryland state government.

Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) is a non-partisan non-profit organization committed to ensuring the integrity of our government institutions and promoting ethical governance. I write on behalf of CREW to express our support for the Public Advocate Act of 2022.

The bill gives the Public Advocate three primary mandates that will promote good governance and strengthen public trust in Maryland: serve as an independent liaison between the citizens of Maryland and the state government; facilitate democratic engagement in state government; and investigate ethics complaints in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of state government.

Citizen engagement is critical to building public trust in government. This is particularly so in a state whose population resides in a range of geographic and economic communities, with varying degrees of access to income, justice, health care services, housing and education.

With the ability to convene public forums and conduct public awareness campaigns, the Public Advocate will be able to engage with a broad range of Maryland citizens. By exploring creative solutions including the use of cutting-edge technology and innovative practices, the Public Advocate's Office will be able to more effectively identify and help address critical issues affecting all Marylanders, or particular communities. The Public Advocate will be able to help shine a spotlight on, and seek solutions to address, government failures, including when necessary, gathering forces to advocate for systemic improvements.

The Public Advocate's independence is an essential feature for holding state officials accountable for ethical transgressions. Its independence assures Maryland citizens that credible ethics complaints involving the executive, legislative and judicial branches of state government will be independently conducted and reinforces the Public Advocate's role to serve as an impartial and trustworthy liaison between Maryland citizens and the Maryland state government.