

OPPOSE

HB 1371

Public Safety - States of Emergency and Catastrophic Health Emergencies - Treatment of Religious Organizations

3/08/2022

Testimony presented by Rev. Kathy Shahinian

The Maryland Episcopal Public Policy Network strongly opposes HB 1371. The purpose of this reckless legislation is to require that an order issued by the Governor during a state of emergency or catastrophic health emergency authorize a religious organization to operate to the same extent that or to a greater extent than organizations providing essential services are authorized to operate.

We are very grateful for first responders, and they have a critical role in responding immediately (first) when there is an accident or emergency and providing prehospital emergency care. The essential services a first responder includes: fire, emergency medical services (EMS), law enforcement, emergency management and 911 telecommunications.

This proposed legislation would mandate that churches be considered as essential services during a state of emergency. Sadly, during this past pandemic, there were church leaders who insisted on the 'right' to gather during the pandemic, they felt victimized and put their rights' before the safety of others, claiming the church was "essential". No church is — at least not in the same way grocery stores are! The only way a church can be 'essential' is by the example it gives to others. To truly 'love thy neighbor,' people of faith must continue to find alternatives to in-person worship until the pandemic passes.

Responsible faith communities are reminding their members that the essence of a church is not the building, and that when people who don't yet seem sick are spreading a deadly pandemic, gathering for a church service is reckless.

We respectfully request an unfavorable report.