

January 20, 2021

Maryland House Health and Government Operations Committee
Legislative Services Building
90 State Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee:

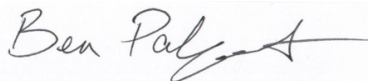
Partners for Dignity & Rights is pleased to endorse HB0152, the Public Advocate Act of 2022, as a critical measure to advance transparency and accountability in government, deepen democratic engagement and protect the rights and interests of the people of Maryland.

Public Advocates are an effective, well-proven model. They help everyday people engage in democracy between elections by convening public forums in which people voice their values, needs and priorities directly to legislators and public agencies. Through this public engagement and by researching and issuing reports, they also help lawmakers better understand how their constituents are faring and what their political priorities are. They also provide constituents who might otherwise call legislative offices with complaints with an alternative channel through which to engage state government.

New Jersey and New York City have highly respected public advocate offices that serve as critical spokespeople for residents' needs and rights, sources of public information and sites of public engagement. Maryland already has very successful public advocates and ombudsmen in specific sectors. The Office of People's Counsel, for example, has been protecting the rights of residents to electricity, gas and other utilities since 1924, the Attorney General maintains a Health Education and Advocacy Unit to assist patients experiencing billing problems, and since 2015, the Public Access Ombudsman has been protecting the public's right to information about government activities. These are important offices, but the challenges residents face and the realities of governance span multiple sectors and multiple agencies' jurisdiction.

By creating an at-large public advocate's office, the Public Advocate Act of 2022 would advance transparency, accountability, and deeper public engagement across government and across the state. This is especially important as we live through a time in which people are widely frustrated with and distrustful of government, yet are looking to state government to deliver solutions to the pandemic, inequality and other public problems. On behalf of Partners for Dignity & Rights and the people of Maryland, I strongly urge you to pass this bill.

Sincerely,



Ben Palmquist
New Social Contract Program Director, Partners for Dignity & Rights

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90 JOHN STREET, STE. 501
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212-253-1710

DIGNITYANDRIGHTS.ORG
INFO@DIGNITYANDRIGHTS.ORG

 @PARTNERSFORDIGNITYANDRIGHTS
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