

January 28, 2022

HB181 - SUPPORT

Declaration of Rights – Religious Freedom, Religious Tests, and Oaths and Affirmations

Dear Chair Pendegrass, Vice-Chair Pena-Melnyk, and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

HB0181 serves the purpose of altering and removing references to God from certain provisions relating to religious freedom, religious tests, and oaths and affirmations by proposing amendments to the Maryland Constitution, Declaration of Rights, Article 36, 37, and 39.

My name is Laura Stewart and I am providing testimony as an individual and a Silver Spring resident. I often speak on bills that affect the children of our state, and this instance is no exception. Generation Z is the least religious generation. About one third have no religion.¹ The passage of HB181 will show that we value and benefit from their civil involvement, no matter their religious beliefs. We have raised two children in Maryland, one attends Einstein HS and the other attends the University of Maryland's A. James Clark School of Engineering. Both identify either as Atheist or Agnostic, as do I. When I first read the Maryland Constitution's language, which discriminates against non-religious citizens, I thought of my boys and their friends, who many times do not feel valued by society because of their gender, racial or religious identity.

Why would we want the Maryland constitution to enshrine discrimination, especially when the language has been shown to be unconstitutional for over half a century? We can finally fix this by putting this constitutional amendment on the ballot. This body has the chance to stand by Freedom of Religion and embrace the diverse electorate you represent. Many have said, "These provisions are not enforceable, so why does it matter?" I say if these provisions are not enforceable, why do we keep the language in our constitution? By inaction, we show bias towards the Religious vs. the non-Religious. We need ALL of our citizens to participate in our government, especially considering the challenges we face today.

I ask you to stand up for Freedom of Religion, and support HB181.

Respectfully,
Laura Stewart

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>