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February 10, 2022

Honorable Delegate Vanessa Atterbeary
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
House Office Building, Room 131
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB515 Inclusive Athletic Attire Act

Dear Chair Vanessa Atterbeary and House Ways and Means Committee Members:

I am grateful to be able to provide written testimony in support of HB515 and am grateful to the representatives who have introduced this legislation in response to both difficulties experienced by student athletes in Maryland Public High Schools and Community Colleges and the potential for challenges in the future. When I encountered the stories of Muslim young women denied the right to play in headscarf or to modify their uniforms to reflect standards of modesty it was, frankly, surprising to me that these religious freedoms were not already enshrined in Maryland law. It has been many decades that specifically within the Jewish community the issue of students, athletes, members of the military and many others have successfully turned to the legislature and the courts in order to protect the freedom of those who choose to wear religious garb (kippah/yarmulkeh and tzitzit/fringes among others) as well as dress in religiously-defined modest ways while participating freely in the full spectrum of our society.

In my own experience, I made the decision to wear a kippah full time in public later in life, when I was already in my 20s. However, there certainly have been times that I have been made to feel excluded or singled out in a negative way by doing so. It has also made me the target of direct harassment and anti-Semitism over the decades. However, my choice to wear a religious symbol that immediately identifies me as a member of the Jewish people is more precious to me than avoiding any amount of discrimination that could be directed at me.

In my work as the rabbi of Temple Isaiah, a Reform Jewish congregation of 600+ families in Fulton, MD serving a wide geographic swath of membership throughout central Maryland, I have repeatedly heard from high school students about the types of anti-Semitic bias and harassment they face within our schools. While I have not directly heard from student athletes who were denied the right to wear religious symbols or modify their uniforms for religious and modesty reasons, I imagine this has been the case for my own students and I know this has been the case for many of our neighbors of varied faith traditions.

Standing with a broad assembly of interfaith leaders and organizations, I am proud to call for the passage of HB515 and have read and reviewed the proposed legislation. It is well-researched, sound and necessary. It also has taken into account the idea that there must be appropriate restrictions on these rights as they connect to specific real safety concerns for the player and their teammates. Additionally, the burden of making these modifications falls on the player themselves and not on the team or the school.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to protecting the religious freedom of our varied and beautiful Maryland community.

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