

Absa Fall Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Absa Fall

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Absa Fall and I appreciate you all taking the time to listen. I want to begin with invoking the First Amendment, and declaration of freedom of religion. And while I know that I am fortunate to live in a country that does not actively ban Islam, there is a lot of misunderstanding and stereotypes surrounding my religion that make it unsafe for me to truly be free.

As I seek to participate in my faith, I often run into the challenge when looking for a place to pray. If you do not know, Muslims are obligated to pray 5 times throughout the day. These prayers are done through following a series of movements that include me prostrating as a place my forehead on the ground. To someone that does not know, I can understand how witnessing this act of worship can feel foreign. But for me, and my peers in the Muslim community, it feels like the ultimate sign of love and grounds me.

Additionally, Maryland can be a dangerous place for Muslims due to Islamophobia and other hateful rhetoric that I have had the misfortune of experiencing. When I am completing my religious obligation, and in a vulnerable state, I need to know that the environment I am praying in is safe. When I attended the University of Maryland-College Park, I felt very fortunate that a musallah, or prayer room, existed for me to practice my faith with peace of mind. But I shouldn't have had to feel "fortunate," because being given religious accommodations should not be boiled down to "luck" so much as having my rights respected.

To be clear, this is not just an issue about me being able to find a space to pray. This is an issue about me being able to have my existence acknowledged and my right to religious freedom met. These are the reasons why I support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. You would be making a difference in the lives of thousands of students across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Absa Fall
Fmr. Student, University of Maryland College Park
absa.d.fall@gmail.com
301-312-1934

ICM Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Adileh Sharieff

Position: FAV



In The Name of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful

Islamic Center of Maryland

19411 Woodfield Road, Gaithersburg, MD 20879
(240) 912-4976 | bot@icomd.org | www.icomd.org

March 5, 2023

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Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Letter in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Respected Chair Barnes and Members of the House Appropriations Committee:

On behalf of the Islamic Center of Maryland (ICM), I am writing this letter in strong support of the House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero.

ICM, located in Gaithersburg Airpark area, is the largest Islamic Center in the Upper Montgomery County and provides a multitude of services to a diverse and large population of the Muslims residents in and around the area. In addition to the main center on the Woodfield Road, we also operate two other locations for Friday congregational prayers, altogether serving over thousand attendees every Friday. Our strong social services programs remain open for people of all faith and followings. Our two yearly events for Eid congregational prayers attract between five to seven thousand attendees, which have also been venues for the public officials at all levels of governance to come, meet and greet, and speak to the community.

The HB912 Bill in question here is an extremely important bill not just for the Muslim college students but for students of all faiths.

It will require public institutions of higher learning in the state to develop and adopt written policies providing reasonable accommodations for students to practice their sincerely held religious beliefs. This will also allow up to three excused absences per academic semester without penalty for observing religious holidays, reasonable, alternative accommodations for exams, projects and other assignments missed on those dates, and a process for reporting non-compliance.

Working with many young adults at our Center, we can confirm that pursuing academics at universities and colleges and being able to attend to the bare minimum required observations and practices of their faith is very challenging.

Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and reason with them in ways that are best and most gracious.....Glorious Qur'an 16:125

In The Name of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful

Islamic Center of Maryland

19411 Woodfield Road, Gaithersburg, MD 20879

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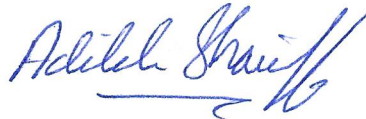
Students struggle to balance their academic responsibilities with their religious obligations, such as daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan. This has caused a sense of isolation and discrimination, which can impact both mental health and academic performance.

We are also aware of more than one instance of “denial of reasonable religious accommodations” cases for Muslim students on university and college campuses that were pretty much based on ambiguity about the institution’s policies, erroneous information and misunderstandings, and miscommunications resulting in undue stress for students that affected their academic activities and performance.

We find this bill extremely important in addressing these issues and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed academically while maintaining their sincerely held religious beliefs.

For the reasons mentioned above, we stand with the students who deserve to be able to freely practice their faith in our educational institutions. We strongly support this bill and request and urge for your support and consideration.

Sincerely,



Adileh Sharieff.

Trustee in Charge Social Services and Outreach Programs
Islamic Center of Maryland (ICM)

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Jamil Dasti

Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and reason with them in ways that are best and most gracious.....Glorious Qur'an 16:125

Afrah Mumtaz Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Afrah Mumtaz

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Afrah Mumtaz I am a student at the Community College of Baltimore County. We should all be able to access a welcoming, well-kept space where we can pray. Many students believe that having a prayer room is more effective in their mental health and education.

More students should be free to enroll on campus without worrying about having their beliefs scrutinized. There should be changes made, and it's very unfair that our values and belief should be pushed away because there's no safe place to pray. To me prayer is very important because it fosters a sense of connection and makes me feel more motivated and helps me engage better in class. Islam views prayer as meditation, which is why it is so essential to us.

These are the reasons why I support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. You would be making a difference in the lives of thousands of students across the state.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Afrah Mumtaz
CAIR Volunteer
Afrah.mumtaz28@gmail.com
667-770-0011

Arzoo Paracha Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Arzoo Paracha

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. I want to start off by giving a brief introduction of myself and my involvement in faith based organizations while an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland in College Park the past four years. My name is Arzoo Paracha. I joined the Muslim Student Association (MSA) as a freshman and later served as the Vice President this past year from May 2021- 2022, as well as various leadership roles in the founding class of Mu Delta Alpha, a professional and social sorority for Muslim women and the only chapter of this sorority in Maryland. I also served as a student advisor on the Vice President of Student Affairs' Advisory Council that same year, on behalf of the Muslim community at large at the University of Maryland, to help advise on policy related to the administration of the school and voice concerns of the specific demographic of Muslims on campus.

Given these roles, I have learned a lot about the administration's views of the importance of religious freedom and support for spiritual growth while on campus, as well as had a chance to understand how much Muslim students collectively believe in the value of everything this bill provides including excused absences for religious holidays and access to a religious space as these are things we have asked the school for as an MSA.

House Bill 912 calls for a space provided on campus for faith based practices. The University of Maryland in College Park is unique in the fact that the administration does work hard to listen to the community's interfaith needs for prayer spaces. We have a chapel on our campus where anyone is free to practice their faith and different chaplains of many faiths serve to provide spiritual guidance and advice to students. We also have an ample additional prayer space that we as Muslims tend to use for our five daily prayers, religious lectures, community socials, and much more.

We refer to this space as our campus Musallah which was established about 20 years ago using a repurposed women's locker room that we recently renovated to an even larger space in 2021. This space served as a spiritual home for me in my four years on campus. It is a space I have gone to for guidance, advice, support, healing, and friendship. Looking back to my freshman year, when I came in nervous and new, I met some of my first and closest friends in the Musallah. They welcomed me with open arms into the community and supported me as mentors throughout my freshman year to help me adjust to campus life. The Musallah was a space I could

come to when I was feeling low or stressed and gain healing spiritually, as well as physically gain support from other students.

This space allowed me to continue working on my spirituality in the midst of studying for my classes. In addition to it being a community space, a variety of MSA events were held in the Musallah such as a Jeopardy Night which have allowed me to create so many unforgettable memories here and develop an attachment to this space. Our newly renovated Musallah had the capability to be such an impactful space for UMD students, especially in post COVID-19 virtual times and in times of hardship, in reuniting the community and giving everyone a shine of hope.

Overall, the accessibility to this prayer space significantly improved my academic, spiritual, and social growth, and my mental health while on campus. I believe all students in Maryland of every faith should be granted a similar interfaith space to grow. I have heard horror stories from other Maryland schools where students are still fighting for a religious prayer space and have been ignored. Their religious freedom is not being met. As stated earlier, our prayer space was converted into a nice space from an old women's locker room, so I believe finding and renovating an old room or unused space to give students for prayer should not be such a difficult task- and passing this bill would help ensure all public institutions actively work to create this space.

The bill also calls for a written policy for academic accommodations for students to practice religious beliefs including up to three excused absences. Currently, at the University of Maryland College Park, allowing excused religious holidays is more so up to the discretion of the professor. Muslims celebrate two main religious holidays: Eid ul Fitr and Eid al Adha which the dates change for every calendar year based on moon sighting. We also observe the holy month of Ramadan, the 9th month of the Islamic (Lunar) Calendar where Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and practice late night prayers. We use this time for religious devotion and spiritual reflection.

Fasting can bring on increased stress and fatigue. Every year, as an MSA, we try to help Muslim students by providing them an email template to reach out to their professors to ask for excused holidays on Eid and offering appropriate academic accommodations for students fasting, such as assignment extensions, exam rescheduling, and permission to break fasts and pray after sunset. Although some professors were accommodating, others refused accommodations and some students were inevitably unable to celebrate Eid while isolated on campus, or failed exams/ assignments due to a lack of understanding of the physical/ mental toll fasting can take on a person.

Fasting is practiced by students of other faiths too. Examples include Lent in Christianity and Yom Kippur in Judaism.

Passing this bill would allow for students to focus on spiritual growth without the stress and anxiety of undue academic burdens. Passing this bill would allow students to celebrate and reflect with family and friends. Excused religious holidays would no longer be at the discretion

of the professor and have to be fought for, as they would be mandated by the public institution. By voting in favor of the bill, you are supporting students' well-being and allowing more appreciation for diversity and inclusion as students and professors gain knowledge of religious holidays. You are ensuring students' rights to religious freedom, and allowing an opportunity for a more improved academic journey. You would guarantee students of all faiths have this support to practice their faith in the future. Given these reasons, I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of House Bill 912 and help make a positive impact on student lives. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Arzoo Paracha
University of Maryland, College Park
arzoo.college@gmail.com

Dua Hussain Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Dua Hussain

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Dua Hussain. I'm a member of the freshman class of 2026, pursuing degrees in Anthropology, Writing Seminars and Pre-Medicine.

My faith, as a Muslim, is a large part of my life, but lacking accommodations makes it difficult to balance my religion with my education. I often struggle to find appropriate, safe places to pray in between classes, work, and club meetings.

I only know of one space on my university's campus where I can pray. That room is in a building that is furthest from my most frequented buildings, which leaves me praying in the corners of hallways, empty classrooms, and in empty offices. People don't usually realize that I am praying and will interrupt, making it far more difficult for me to take part in my religious practices.

Not only this, but when I require a day off for religious reasons and there is an exam on that day, my professors don't schedule a time for me to be able to take the exam. They simply remove it from the gradebook, which makes it much more difficult to get a good grade as most courses only have exams to determine the final grade. This lack of support makes it difficult for me to practice my faith on campus.

This is my testimony on why I support House Bill 912 and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. You would be making a difference in the lives of thousands of students across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dua Hussain
duahussainwriter@hotmail.com
3022905079

MGA HB912 Testimony (3).pdf

Uploaded by: Farah Helal

Position: FAV

Good afternoon Chair Barnes and Delegates of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Farah Helal and I am a junior at UMBC and a constituent of District 9B.

Though I am a Student Regent on the University System of Maryland, Board of Regents, I am not testifying on behalf of the Board or the System. I am here to testify in support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Acevero based on my understanding of the student experience at my own campus and on others across the state.

The Supreme Court ruled in *Widmar v. Vincent* that the first amendment protects students and student organizations' ability to freely and voluntarily exercise their religion at public institutions and that those same institutions cannot inhibit a person's ability to freely practice, yet in my experience there are not adequate accommodations for faith-based practices at several higher education institutions across the state. It is our state legislature's responsibility to remedy this deficiency.

As a Muslim I am required to pray 5 times during specific periods of the day. During our prayers, we cannot speak to anyone and no one should walk in front of us. It is disheartening that at times there are no places for me to fulfill this religious obligation without interruptions on campus. When designated prayer spaces are too far from my classes or being booked for other university activities like yoga sessions or staff meetings, I have had to pray in empty classrooms, stairwells, and hallways all while hoping that no one wanders in and disrupts my prayer.

Oftentimes, our major holidays fall during ordinary days in the semester and unexcused absences or an inability to make up assignments or assessments inhibits our ability to take the day off for religious services and obligations.

These are just some of my experiences as a Muslim student, but I could speak for hours about the experiences of students across the state and from different faiths. Most campuses are making an active effort to accommodate students' faith based needs with support from faculty and staff, but some campuses are lacking in basic necessities. Please vote in favor of House Bill 912 as it requires our higher education institutions to fulfill their constitutional obligation to protect students first amendment rights by addressing the unique needs of the student population on their campus.

Thank you.

Flematu Fofana Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Flematu Fofana

Position: FAV



March 6, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building Room 121
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Public Institutions of Higher Education – Faith-Based and Religious Beliefs – Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

On behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, I thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Acevero. CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. I am CAIR's Government Affairs intern in Maryland, Flematu Fofana.

For many students, religion is an essential part of their identity, and when teachers give ultimatums, students are forced to compromise on things they shouldn't have to: their religion and their education. HB912 will allow students to maintain both of these characteristics by letting students in higher education practice their religion without being penalized for their actions.

As a Muslim student who lives in a county where I am the minority, I have seen students pass out on the field during Ramadan because they were told if they didn't participate in a match they would be off the team. I have had teachers shame me for missing school during Eid and prevent me from leaving the classroom when I was on the verge of passing out while fasting. It's said that our actions have consequences, and we're old enough to take responsibility, but you take responsibility for something when you've committed a wrongdoing. Have I done something wrong for trying to peacefully practice my religion?

When a student is sick and misses an exam, 9 times out of 10 a teacher will let them make up the test the next day because they couldn't help it and life happens. The same should be said for religious accommodations as life does happen and students are not skipping school but solely exercising their 1st amendment right.

It's also important to mention that this bill is not just for Muslims, but all religious accommodations, for every religious student to have a right to not pick an identity but maintain both.

Passing HB912 is a meaningful way to show students in higher education that every part of your identity matters and that you have a right to keep that part near and dear to your heart. Therefore, we support this bill and respectfully urge your favorable vote. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Flematu Fofana
Intern, CAIR Office in Maryland
Council on American-Islamic Relations
Email: mdintern@cair.com

MD Catholic Conference_HB 912_FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: Garrett O'Day

Position: FAV



March 9, 2023

**HB 912
Public Institutions of Higher Education – Faith-Based and Religious Beliefs – Academic
Accommodations Policy**

**House Appropriations Committee
Position: FAVORABLE**

The Maryland Catholic Conference offers this testimony in support of House Bill 912. The Catholic Conference is the public policy representative of the three (arch)dioceses serving Maryland, which together encompass over one million Marylanders. Statewide, their parishes, schools, hospitals, and numerous charities combine to form our state’s second largest social service provider network, behind only our state government.

House Bill 912 would require each public institution of higher education to adopt academic policies for religious accommodation for its students. The policies would provide students with up to three excused absences per academic trimester for class time missed due to faith-based holidays or organized religious activities. The policies would also require accommodation for missed examinations during the same holidays or organized faith-based activities. Students would be required to inform course instructors of the need for such accommodation in the first two weeks of the academic semester. This bill would also provide space accommodations for faith-based or religious practices.

One suggestion to ensure the constitutional integrity of this bill would be to add clarifying language that a student’s failure to provide notice of an accommodation request within the fourteen-day period at the beginning of a semester does not render them ineligible for the accommodation. A provision such as approval upon request to an academic dean in instances of failure to request might ensure a lenient balance in individual accommodations commensurate with constitutional rights.

Our state is deeply rooted in religious liberty, founded as a bastion of tolerance over and above others from the outset. Maryland’s Catholic bishops have stated, “Religious liberty in this country began with the founding of Maryland. We must honor our state’s unique role in the preservation and promotion of this fundamental principle of government.” (*The Most Sacred of All Property: Religious Freedom and the People of Maryland*, Statement from the Catholic Bishops of Maryland, 2011).

As “(i)ndividuals who are free to exercise religious liberty are free to live out their faith in service to others and to build up the common good”, our state should strive to protect and respect the religious liberty inherent to, and guaranteed by, our Maryland State Constitution. (*supra*) House Bill 912 upholds these liberties through common sense accommodations, and it is for that reason that we request that this committee issue a favorable report on this bill.

Hadeel Aljbour Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Hadeel Aljbour

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Hadeel Aljbour.

I was an online student at Montgomery College. I feel that I had no choice but to be an online student since we didn't have a designated space to pray. Now that I am a mother of four kids, just like any parent in this room, I would do anything to have the best for my kids. Having a clean, safe space to pray is necessary many American Muslim students in order to be able to focus on their education and improving the future of our nation.

Students in our country deserve to not have to choose between their religious holiday and their academic assignments. It is important for our children to have at least 3 excused absences for religious holidays, as well as having alternative accommodations to make up assignments on missed days. There should be changes made to accommodate diverse beliefs and values in a way that doesn't interfere with our education and future. I respectfully encourage you to vote for this bill to help us grow our dreams and build our country.

This is my testimony on why I support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. You would be making a difference in the lives of my children and thousands of students across the state from all backgrounds.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Hadeel Aljbour
Haljbour0921@gmail.com
240-408-1842

HB912 - Haris Ansari.pdf

Uploaded by: Haris Ansari

Position: FAV

Hello,

I'm here to testify in support of HB912. My name is Haris Ansari. I'm currently a Medical Student at the Howard University College of Medicine. I've been a proud resident of this great state for over 2 decades of the 27 years of life. I'm blessed to call Maryland a home, and it has been nothing short of a welcoming and beautiful place for me and my family.

I am a product of the public school system and public university system of this very state. What makes Maryland unique is her care for residents and their needs. I served as the President for the Muslims Student's Association at the University of Maryland, College Park from the years 2017 to 2018 and represented over 1,000 Muslim students on campus. Every year concerns over missing classes, exams or assignments would arise throughout the year due to religious holidays. what were supposed to be religious celebrations and times of happiness became real times of stress for students in trying to receive reasonable accommodations.

Every year, in the month of Ramadan, the Muslim student body would send out a letter to the deans of every college at the University explaining Ramadan and the celebration of Eid. It would be up to the professors then to see if accommodations could be made.

The Muslim students (and this is not limited to Muslim students!) go through this difficulty every single year in this state. Having reasonable accommodations and the ability to make up exams, assignments, or classes missed due to religious holidays, as this bill states, would be instrumental in a healthier, confident, and supported diverse student body.

Again, I wanted to come here today and testify for House Bill 912, and to thank delegate Gabriel Acevero for his support.

Thank you,

Haris Ansari

Hassan Ansari Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Hassan Ansari

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero.

My name is Hassan Ansari and I'm a current Senior at University of Maryland Baltimore county. To give you all an idea of how much a Bill like this means to a student like me, I'd have to provide you with some background information. When i came to umbc 4 years ago as a freshman, I was horrified of the idea of having to start over. New friends to make, a new campus to get used to, UMBC seemed to be a place that I was extremely foreign to. That was until I learned about the interfaith center. You see, back then the interfaith center was a place on campus where any member of any religious group could come together to congregate and meet other religious students as well. When I began to come to the interfaith center more often I was not only able to complete my religious duties without a worry of not knowing where to complete them, but also being able to meet an entirely new community I could feel comfortable in and even find belonging in. For me, I genuinely believe that this was the reason I was able to succeed at UMBC. I was able to really find a place on campus I could call home. Now during the pandemic, because the campus over went some changes, we lost the interfaith center as it was a portable building. However, no matter what the nature of the building was on a physical level, it gave countless students a home at umbc; it gave them a place to feel like they belonged in; it allowed them to feel like they mattered, and that they were part of a larger community on campus, which i cannot emphasize how important it was for students like me to feel that way, especially as a new college student. Without the Interfaith Center it's no secret that we Muslims on campus have been struggling, and we are not the only Faith group to feel this as well. However, if the lawmakers here today were to understand the magnitude of this bill, and the change it could bring, it would literally revolutionize and better the lives of tens of thousands of college students. It would allow them to congregate safely without the fear of harm, it would allow them to build their own respective communities and build interfaith dialogue amongst each other, and lastly, it would allow someone to feel like they simply belong; which for many students in the USM system is a feeling that they desperately need, especially if we want every student to succeed at the highest level possible.

This is my testimony on why I support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. Again, you would be making a difference in the lives of thousands of students across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Hassan Ansari

443-783-3831

hassanansari2023@gmail.com

Testimony H Ziad HB912 March 9.pdf

Uploaded by: Hodayra Ziad

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Homayra Ziad. I care deeply about this issue as a practicing Muslim, as a scholar and professor of religion and the study of Islam at Johns Hopkins University, as a mentor to many college students who are committed to religious practice, as the board president of the ACLU of Maryland, and as a mother of two Muslim children in Baltimore public schools who may find themselves at a public institution in Maryland in the not so far future.

HB912 would require each public institution of higher learning in the state to develop and adopt a written policy that provides reasonable academic accommodations for students of diverse faiths to practice their sincerely held religious beliefs including a) up to three excused absences per academic semester without penalty for observing religious holidays, b) reasonable alternative accommodations for exams, projects and other assignments missed on those dates, and c) a grievance process to report non-compliance.

I have taught college students for fifteen years, and I know that the college years are uniquely turbulent, a period when student's identities and communities are being deconstructed and reconstructed, defined and re-defined. Faith and spiritual practice are key sources of comfort and guidance for students seeking a foothold in the uncertainty of their environment. While many campuses are moving the needle forward on issues of racial, ethnic and gender diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), religion is a deeply misunderstood category in the world of DEI. As noted by America Indivisible's guide to DEI and religion, "(m)any DEI professionals lack the knowledge and expertise necessary to incorporate religion into their training and to develop workplace policies on religious diversity and inclusion."ⁱ In the absence of adequate training on religions and religious identity on university campuses, I have found that religiously committed students (especially from minority religious communities) find it very hard to advocate for themselves with their professors when it comes to accommodation for religious practices and sacred days, sometimes facing not just resistance and misunderstanding, but outright discriminatory behavior. This bill supports students in accessing their constitutional right to adequately practice their sincerely held religious beliefs without fear of shaming, retaliation, or academic disadvantage, and offers them avenues for grievance if their rights are not respected.

The Harvard University Pluralism Project draws an important distinction between religious diversity, which is the simple numerical existence of people of different religious commitments in one community, and religious pluralism, which is how communities actively engage with and respond to religious diversity to seek understand across lines of difference and together promote the civic good.ⁱⁱ In requiring clear policies for religious accommodation, HB912 supports religious

pluralism on campus and cultivates campus communities that foster genuine knowledge of, respect for, and engagement between the diverse religious commitments that make up our nation.

I unequivocally support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. You would be making a difference in the lives of thousands of students across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dr. Hodayra Ziad
Sr. Lecturer, Islamic Studies, Johns Hopkins University
Board President, ACLU of Maryland
Email: hziad1@jh.edu
Ph: 571-594-3298

ⁱ *DEI and Religion: A Quick Reference Guide for Public Servants*, America Indivisible, February 2023, p. 1

ⁱⁱ <https://pluralism.org/about>

Huzzaifa Muhammad Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Huzzaifa Muhammad

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Huzzaifa Muhammad.

This bill would require public institutions of higher learning in the state of Maryland to develop written policies on reasonable academic accommodations. These policies would allow students to receive up to three excused absences for religious holidays during a regular semester with alternate academic accommodations for assignments and exams. These policies would also identify spaces on campus for faith based activities.

I am graduating in a couple months from the University of Maryland College Park, the flagship school of the State of Maryland, and I feel very blessed that we have a dedicated space on our campus for the purpose of practicing and carrying out our various faith obligations, either individually or with our faith based student organization, the Muslim Students Association. However, that is not the experience of every student who attends colleges and universities.

Faith is a core part of their identity for many individuals. It's what we look to for guidance, for inner peace, and most of all, for community. However, there have been issues with religious accommodation in schools, especially in this last year. In the age of unlimited information, some professors are still in the dark about religion, its significance and importance to students, and varying practices that may require academic accommodations, which is why we are here today.

Religious freedom is one of the main values that our country was found on, and it simply makes sense to pass this bill into law so campuses will not only be required to develop policies on providing reasonable accommodations to students, but also to be able to understand the tremendous significance and role that faith has in many students' lives. The measures in this bill would be beneficial to students, but they will also be helpful to instructors in navigating different challenges that may occur when a student's academic and religious duties overlap, which would make them more experienced instructors as a result.

Maryland is a diverse state, with many different people practicing many different religions. Public institutions of higher education are intended to be places of knowledge, and growth. Only when students' spiritual and faith-based needs are understood and met by an academic

institution can students reach their full potential in the environment of knowledge and growth that surrounds them.

This is my testimony on why I support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. Your vote in favor of House Bill 912 would make a positive impact in the well-being of many current and future college students in the State of Maryland.

Sincerely,

Huzzaifa Muhammad
University of Maryland College Park Class of 2023
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443-636-1809

HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Maheen Ibrahimi

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Maheen Ibrahim and I recently graduated from Johns Hopkins University.

In my four years as an undergraduate student at Johns Hopkins, students and myself struggled to obtain equal rights as Muslim students on a college campus. In my first year, although it was interrupted by COVID-19, we were not given a full-time chaplain that could assist with interfaith activities. Our needs as a Muslim student group were not met, and consequently, students on the Muslim Students Association (MSA) board were required to step up to fill the large role of a chaplain, while also attempting to balance their studies and other extracurriculars. We still do not have a full-time chaplain and it has been difficult to provide services to the hundreds of Muslim students on campus.

As the former President of the MSA, I experienced many occurrences of lack of support for faith-based events from faculty and even the other chaplains at our institution. During Ramadan, we were given barely any support. Iftars (meals to break our fast) were given either out of the pocket of current MSA students or through the limited Student Government funding through which we could only provide two iftars a week for about 30 students. Many students went hungry and there was barely anything that was being done about it. I recall one day where we had 30 iftars and one student came in at the end, after traveling from the city, to see if we could give them an iftar. We had run out and that student returned home empty-handed. Thankfully, other MSA students pitched in to purchase a meal for the student, but cases like these are common and students deserve to have reasonable accommodations for religious observances.

We also struggle with a lack of space. We have a small room in the inter-faith center that holds about 10 people, but our daily prayers usually require accommodation for upwards of 30 people. There was a mice infestation in the past year, but no updates were given to us about the condition of the room. It has been infested with spiders, filled with dust, and disrespected by other students utilizing the building where they have walked in on women praying and mocked their recitation. The door, although recently replaced, did not have a lock and could not close, and only after weeks and weeks of advocating for a door were we able to receive a fully functional door. We have to pray our Friday prayers in the chapel, which also does not hold us all and often have

students praying in the walkways. It has been extremely difficult to find rooms and the lack of support from staff and other chaplains has made it even more difficult.

By voting in favor of the bill, you guarantee the protection of our religious freedoms as students that are given to us within the Constitution. You will help raise awareness of faith-based holidays and celebrations and ensure students are getting to class without a worry of how they will manage to eat today amid their other activities. Not only will Muslim students benefit, but also students of other backgrounds who also struggle to obtain religious services on campus.

Faith is a major part of our lives, and we would appreciate being supported as students. It will set a precedent for the years to come and establish Maryland schools as inclusive and supportive and welcoming to all.

These are the reasons why I support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. You would be making a difference in the lives of thousands of students across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Maheen Ibrahimi
Johns Hopkins University 2022 Graduate
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7175744663

HB0912 Bill Testimony.docx.pdf

Uploaded by: Maryland Legislative Latino Caucus

Position: FAV



MARYLAND LEGISLATIVE LATINO CAUCUS

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DAVID FRASER-HIDALGO, CHAIR
JOSELINE A. PEÑA-MELNYK, VICE-CHAIR
GABRIEL ACEVERO, TREASURER
JESSE T. PIPPY, SECRETARY
MADELIN MARTINEZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

TO: Delegate Ben Barnes, Chair
Delegate Mark S. Chang, Vice Chair
Appropriations Committee Members
FROM: Maryland Legislative Latino Caucus
DATE: March 7th, 2023
RE: HB0912 Public Institutions of Higher Education –
Faith-Based and Religious Beliefs – Academic
Accommodations Policy

The MLLC supports HB0912 Public Institutions of Higher Education – Faith-Based and Religious Beliefs – Academic Accommodations Policy, 2023

The MLLC is a bipartisan group of Senators and Delegates committed to supporting legislation that improves the lives of Latinos throughout our state. The MLLC is a crucial voice in the development of public policy that uplifts the Latino community and benefits the state of Maryland. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to express our support of HB0912.

Although public higher education schools in Maryland acknowledge religious freedom, their academic accommodations are not comprehensive enough to allow students to sincerely practice their held faith-based or religious beliefs. For example, the University of Maryland College Park currently does not distinguish major religious holidays on the official university calendar.¹ Although over 5,000 students (more than 16% of the entire undergraduate population) at the university receive an excused absence for any missed work for upcoming Jewish holidays, they still need to rearrange their already-packed schedules to complete makeup work that never should have been assigned on a religious holiday in the first place.² Adding these dates would provide professors with the foresight to avoid scheduling exams or projects on certain dates, and it would ease unnecessary worries for students observing a religious holiday by eliminating the scramble to make up missed work.³

Current data tracking shows that nearly three in four Latinos in the United States (73%) agree that “faith is very important in my life.”⁴ Faith heritage is strong in Latino households, as 58% of Latino-practicing Christians agree that they carry on “unique or special Christian religious traditions” that they learned from their family.⁵

While the majority of immigrants in the United States practice Christian faiths, the estimated share of new legal permanent residents who are Christian is declining and shares of green card recipients who belong to religious minorities, such as Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, are

¹ Rosenberg, M. (2020, August 27). *UMD students shouldn't have to pick between classes and their religion*. The Diamondback. <https://dbknews.com/2019/09/30/umd-excused-absences-religion-inclusive/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *A snapshot of the values, Views & Faith of Hispanic Americans*. Barna Group. (2019, October 2). <https://www.barna.com/research/snapshot-hispanic-americans/>.

⁵ Ibid.

rising, with the population of Muslims doubling between 1992 and 2012.⁶ As these demographics settle and expand their families, there will be an increasing number of those who enroll in a Maryland public higher education institution needing comprehensive academic accommodations. This bill requires each public institution of higher education to adopt a written policy that provides reasonable academic accommodations for students to practice sincerely held faith-based or religious beliefs.

For these reasons, the Maryland Legislative Latino Caucus respectfully requests a favorable report on HB0912.

⁶ Wormald, B. (2020, July 27). *The religious affiliation of U.S. immigrants: Majority Christian, rising share of other faiths*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/05/17/the-religious-affiliation-of-us-immigrants/>.

MCheema HB912 Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Minahil Cheema

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Minahil Cheema, and I served as a legislative Page during the 2019 session, an undergraduate intern during the 2021 legislative session, and most recently spent my time in a public service year with the Maryland Department of Health's Secretary. I am a graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park, and will be attending medical school at the University of Maryland, Baltimore this summer.

During my time as an undergraduate at UMD, I struggled to receive reasonable accommodations for my religious practices. With no institutional policy protecting my rights, I was at the mercy of individual professors whose syllabi policies varied widely. For instance, last year, four out of five of my professors refused to excuse me from lectures on Eid. This left me and many other Muslim students feeling excluded from the campus community, and more work is needed to address this issue.

As a result, many of my Muslim peers and I have lost the sense of celebration during one of our most spiritually rejuvenating and sacred months of Ramadan, as well as our holidays. This has led to assimilation, where I stopped trying to speak out about practicing my faith openly in a country where I am visibly Muslim.

By voting on this interfaith bill, you are protecting religious freedom and sending a message to the community that diverse religious practices and beliefs are respected and valued in Maryland. By passing House Bill 912, you will be supporting the right of students to practice their religion freely, without fear of discrimination or prejudice.

Moreover, as a future medical student, I am acutely aware of how this bill will have a significant impact on the daily lives of students like myself, who face unnecessary challenges and barriers to balancing our academic responsibilities with our religious practices. It will provide clear guidelines for universities and colleges to provide reasonable accommodations for students to observe their religious holidays and practices, without fear of repercussions.

Religious freedom is a fundamental right that is enshrined in our Constitution. As a Muslim, my faith shapes every aspect of my life, and it is essential that I am able to practice it freely and unapologetically. By passing House Bill 912, you will be upholding the principles of religious freedom and creating a more inclusive and tolerant environment for all Maryland residents.

I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of House Bill 912, and help ensure that all students, regardless of their religious beliefs, have the right to practice their faith freely and without fear of discrimination. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Minahil Cheema
University of Maryland, College Park '22
minahilcheema@gmail.com
(410) 463-3705

Reference: <https://dbknews.com/2022/05/01/umd-muslim-community-ramadan-reflections/>

Sariyya Alima Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Sariyya Alima

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

My name is Surriya Alima and I thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. For far too long, too many students of different faiths have struggled to find ways to practice their religion at institutions of higher learning while pursuing an education. But Maryland lawmakers like you now have the opportunity to pass a new law in our state that could finally begin to help change that.

House Bill 912, introduced by Delegate Gabriel Acevero, seeks to make sure that institutions of higher learning that receive public funding develop policies regarding reasonable religious accommodations for students on their campuses. This includes up to three excused absences during regular semesters for religious holidays, as well as space(s) for faith-based activities.

As a junior at the University of Maryland College Park campus, I have personally witnessed the impact that a lack of faith-based accommodations can have in this environment. In my own family, my sister, a practicing Muslim, started her journey in higher education at Montgomery College's Germantown campus during the Fall 2019 semester, where she struggled with the lack of reasonable accommodations as a student.

On average, these daily prayers take about three to five minutes to complete. At this campus, the space made available for students to pray in 2019 was located next to the bathroom in the building for Higher Technology and Science Center (HT). Oftentimes, students who were performing their prayers were distracted by other students walking in front of them while they prayed, which is considered sacrilegious. The students were made to pray next to the toilets, which is unhygienic, in a small and cramped space capable of accommodating no more than two students at a time.

These daily prayers must be performed within specific windows of time. The circumstances facing my sister and other students trying to practice their faith forced them to have to choose between saying their prayers and being late to class, or skipping their prayers in order to make it to their next class on time. No student should ever be faced with such a difficult decision when choosing to pursue higher education.

In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when my sister and other students returned to in-person classes at the Montgomery College campus, praying at the HT building was no longer an

option. There were no further instructions on where Muslim students could perform their prayers. This left my sister with the impossible choice of either praying in her car, or waiting until she returned home to pray.

When my sister started attending classes at Montgomery College's Rockville campus, she discovered that there was no space for Muslim students to perform their prayers there either. A designated shared space for self-reflection was set up in such a way that students choosing to pray here had to do so while sitting on chairs, something that one is allowed to do only when experiencing specific health restrictions.

My sister and others had to defy that etiquette, because neither prayer mats nor adequate prayer spaces were available on that campus. Many students were forced to bring their own prayer mats and simply pray in whatever suitable space they could find, risking interruption and distractions, or waiting until they went home to pray.

It's very hard to watch someone you love and care about faced with this predicament. This reasonable, commonsense bill would not apply to online colleges and universities that have a one hundred percent virtual student population. It reduces the number of excused absences for abbreviated semesters from three to one, to factor in condensed lessons and assignments packed into a shorter period of time.

The fact is that faith plays an enormous role in many people's lives. It helps students navigate challenges in their academic careers. It is unacceptable that the State of Maryland currently does not have a law that requires institutions of higher education to develop policies for reasonable religious accommodations for students.

Regardless of their religion, no student should ever have to face a situation where they have to choose between it and their pursuit of an education. On Thursday, March 9, members of the House Appropriations Committee will be hearing testimonies on HB912. They will have the choice to help support students' success and defend religious freedom in our state.

On behalf of my sister, I join the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, in urging the committee to vote in favor of this long overdue bill. Thousands of students of different faiths and backgrounds are counting on Maryland lawmakers to take a stand for them by supporting this legislation.

I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of passing HB912. You would be making a difference in literally thousands of students' lives across the state. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Sariyya Alima
Junior, University of Maryland College Park
sariyyaalima@gmail.com

HB912 Testimony.pdf

Uploaded by: Shahd Alhadari

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. My name is Shahd Alhadari, I am a student at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and a cabinet member of the Muslim Student Association.

For some background about UMBC and our prayer space, before the coronavirus, there was the Interfaith Center, where every religious org had its own prayer space. But it was much more than a prayer space, it was a community where people truly felt at home. Time skip and campus reopens and the IFC is gone instead, we have the Center of Wellbeing, which has one singular room on the bottom floor, and a medical center on the top floor. This one singular room is what was given in replacement of the many different rooms in the old IFC, to be shared by the 25+ religious organizations. Well, I am a sophomore, and so sadly I was not present for the old IFC times many of my friends speak of when they reminisce on what used to be “the MSA”, so I’ll continue with my own narrative. Beginning of my freshman year was when everyone returned to campus from the two year hiatus that paused all of our lives. At the time, I was not aware of how bad our prayer situation was. But when I heard and witnessed how hard it was for students to pray the simple 5 prayers, and how the MSA was told that “we could just pray in the bathroom”, a quite disrespectful comment, I began to realize how embarrassing it was for a public institution to not even be able to provide adequate prayer space for their students. I mean its 2023, and we are standing here practically advocating for our first amendment rights. There are days where students come in between classes to pray quickly, and are hindered by the fact that the gathering space, the one room, is occupied and struggle to find a place to pray. There are days where you can find people praying behind the stairwell of the building. Or days where we as an organization have to pray in the lobby, with people talking and staring as they walk by. This is an issue that affects students of all religious backgrounds, and all across the state, and so I respectfully urge you to vote in favor of HB912.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Shahd Alhadari

UMBC Student
salhada1@umbc.edu
240-224-6177

Tahira Hussain Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Tahira Mussarat Hussain

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Honorable Committee Chair and Members:

I strongly support House Bill 912 and all the testimonies in favor. My name is Tahira Mussarat Hussain. I am a proud Marylander and am very active in advocacy and lobbying work in Annapolis and Washington, D.C. on the issues of domestic violence, gun violence, and human trafficking.

I'm sure some members in this room may recognize me as an activist and someone whose work has no boundaries, I advocate for everyone.

On behalf of the Muslim community and as a PTA mom of three daughters who went to public school in Howard County and are now attending the University of Maryland, I have experienced many things which could be modified to make the environment more inclusive for minority faith-based and immigrant communities.

There is no doubt Howard County and Maryland schools are excellent, but I believe students of all faiths should have a designated place to practice their religion and share a safe, spiritual space. For many, practicing one's faith gives them a sense of comfort.

This bill would not only allow our students to focus on their education without worrying about maintaining their faith, it also creates a stronger sense of cultural awareness in our diverse public institutions.

I humbly ask for a favorable vote on HB912 to give our children the ability to practice their faith freely while also ensuring it does not disturb their education.

Sincerely,

Tahira Mussarat Hussain
tahiram2021@gmail.com

Tehmeena Dar ISF Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Tehmeena Dar

Position: FAV

Mrs. Tehmeena (Tammy) Dar
11802 Piedmont Road,
Clarksburg, MD 20871

March 6th, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero.

As one of the founding principles of our nation; religious freedom is an important factor in the day to day lives of many Americans. Growing up, I remember struggling with the dilemma of religious obligations versus academic requirements. Now, as a parent, I have seen my children go through the same difficulties. In reality, the simple accommodations outlined in HB912 would alleviate a great deal of hardship and guilt for students. Beyond meeting religious obligations, these accommodations would greatly promote cultural awareness, respect and open-mindedness in the general community as well. By acknowledging and making reasonable space for people of faith communities, we create a more welcoming and tolerant society that benefits everyone. The direct benefactors of the bill will feel acceptance and respect and can practice their faith comfortably and without stigma or guilt, and those who see their fellow students pray, fast, skip a day for religious observation will come to appreciate and normalize diversity. By making a little space for some, we benefit all.

I support this bill and respectfully urge you to vote in favor of it. Let Maryland lead the way for this important change.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Tammy Dar

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919-888-9753

Yasmeen Elkoshairi Testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Yasmeen Elkoshairi

Position: FAV

March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero.

My name is Yasmeeen Elkoshairi. I am a junior attending the University of Maryland and am here today to urge you to pass House Bill 912. As Muslim students, we already have to face many challenges. In light of that, one of the big challenges we face is seeking accommodations for our religious holidays and prayers. As full-time students, we already have a lot on our plate and the additional stress of asking for an excused absence for a religious holiday that is meaningful to us, our religion, and our culture, should not be a factor.

I have had professors explain that I only have one excused absence for a religious reason or holiday, which demeans the significance of our holidays and disrespects my beliefs. Voicing my concerns brought about nothing but shrugs and the repeated "that's the policy" phrase. It is incredibly mentally draining being denied our constitutional rights while struggling to balance life as a student and in my case, an athlete as well.

This struggle is not prevalent only for Muslim students, but for many other cultures and religions whose holidays have not been recognized by the school calendar. For these reasons, I strongly and respectfully urge you to pass this bill, so that the wonderfully diverse student bodies of Maryland can practice their religions freely while excelling as students. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify, and for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Yasmeeen Elkoshairi
Junior, University of Maryland College Park
ywelkoshairi@gmail.com

Zainab Chaudry testimony HB912.pdf

Uploaded by: Zainab Chaudry

Position: FAV



March 9, 2023

Honorable Delegate Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
House Office Building, Room 121
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB912 Academic Accommodations Policy

Dear Chair Barnes and House Appropriations Committee Members:

On behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, I thank you for this opportunity to testify in strong support of House Bill 912 sponsored by Delegate Gabriel Acevero. CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization.

HB912 would require each public institution of higher learning in the state to develop and adopt a written policy that provides reasonable academic accommodations for students of diverse faiths to practice their sincerely held religious beliefs including a) at least three excused absences per Fall/Spring academic semester, and at least one excused absence per abbreviated Winter/Summer semester without penalty for observing religious holidays, b) reasonable alternative accommodations for exams, projects and other assignments scheduled on those dates, and c) a grievance process to report non-compliance. These policies would also include accommodations for faith-based activities including prayer, with the exception of online public colleges and universities, that have a one hundred percent virtual student population, and which would be exempt from including a policy on providing any physical space.

Especially in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic that claimed millions of lives, faith plays an important role in the lives of many Americans, including students. It provides a compass and framework to navigate challenging times. It helps shape moral values, and teaches respect for human dignity, the value of justice, and the importance of compassion.

In my work, I have seen firsthand the challenges that Muslim students face when it comes to practicing their faith on college campuses. Many students struggle to balance their academic responsibilities with their religious obligations, such as daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan. This can lead to a sense of isolation and discrimination, which risks negatively impacting mental health and academic performance.

Last year, my organization handled several "denial of reasonable religious accommodations" cases for Muslim students on Maryland college and university campuses. In each case, ambiguity about the institution's policies, unmet expectations, and misunderstandings and miscommunications combined to cause significant stress for students and disrupted their focus from coursework and studies.

The circumstances especially forced students serving in leadership positions in campus-wide organizations to bear the burden of scrambling to find solutions and direct valuable time and

attention towards appealing the administration for basic changes and accommodations to meet students' needs.

This bill is critical in addressing these issues and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed academically while also maintaining their religious beliefs.

Religious freedom is one of the foundational principles of a democratic society. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees that the government "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The Supreme Court has recognized that the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment protects the right of individuals to practice their religion. Thus, colleges and universities must make sure they are providing accommodations to students to be able to practice their sincerely held religious beliefs.

In the Supreme Court case of *Rosenberger v. University of Virginia* (1995), a student group at the University of Virginia requested funding to publish a religious newspaper. The university denied the funding, arguing that it would violate the Establishment Clause. However, the Supreme Court ultimately held that the denial of funding was a violation of the Free Speech Clause, as the university had funded other student publications and could not discriminate against a religious publication.¹ The *Rosenberger* case established the principle that public universities must treat religious groups and publications on an equal basis with non-religious groups and publications.

Public colleges and universities are diverse institutions with students from different cultures and religions. Religious accommodations help create a nurturing and respectful learning experience. They allow students to freely practice their religion and maintain their beliefs while pursuing their education without fear of discrimination, retaliation, punishment and other adverse consequences.

Religious accommodations create a welcoming and inclusive campus environment. They support students' success by allowing them to focus on their studies without worrying about how to maintain their faith, and they foster cultural awareness that inspires a more open-minded worldview in an increasingly inter-connected world. This helps create a positive learning experience.

For these reasons, in order to unequivocally support students who deserve to be able to freely practice their faith in our educational institutions, we support this bill and respectfully urge your favorable report. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Zainab Chaudry, Pharm.D.
Director, CAIR Office in Maryland
Council on American-Islamic Relations
Email: zchaudry@cair.com

References:

1. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/515/819/>

HB912_USM_FWA.pdf

Uploaded by: Zakiya Lee

Position: FWA



HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

House Bill 912

Public Institutions of Higher Education – Faith-Based and Religious Beliefs – Academic Accommodations Policy

March 9, 2023

Favorable with Amendments

Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share our position on House Bill 912. The bill requires each public institution of higher education to adopt a written policy that provides reasonable academic accommodations for students to practice sincerely held faith-based or religious beliefs.

The University System of Maryland (USM) is committed to providing welcoming and inclusive learning and workplace environments. Institutions that comprise the USM comply with USM policy concerning religious observance and the federal anti-discrimination policy. The USM prohibits discrimination, harassment, and retaliation on the basis of religion.

Together, these policies require institutions to develop written policies and procedures to provide accommodations to students, faculty, and staff who observe religious/spiritual holy days. In addition, the USM policy requires institutions to regularly publish information about accommodations in appropriate faculty and student media.

Consistent with Board of Regents policy, any student who is unable to attend classes on a particular day or days or at a particular time of day because of the tenets of a sincerely held religious practice or belief ***“...shall not be penalized because of observances of their religious holidays and shall be given an opportunity, whenever feasible, to make up within a reasonable amount of time any academic assignment that is missed due to individual participation in religious observances.”***

The Board of Regents entrusts that key university personnel and supervisors will consider religious accommodations requests by students, faculty, and staff, based on the totality of the circumstances. Additionally, it is the expectation of each USM president that faculty make available to each student who is absent from academic activities because of a sincerely held religious practice or belief an equivalent opportunity to make up any examination, study or work requirements which has been missed because of such absence.

The provisions in House Bill 912 would undermine the flexible nature of existing policies related to accommodations for students and set unnecessarily prescriptive requirements on faculty including requiring syllabi to include language about policies, a specified number of excused absences, and grievance procedures that already exist in student handbooks and on the institution website. House Bill 912 also requires institutions to provide a space on campus for faith-based or religious practices that could require reconstruction or renovation of existing spaces to comply. Furthermore, because the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) does not have academic facilities and their student instruction is online, the space requirements are impractical.

For these reasons, we request an amendment that reflects our existing policies and procedures and is based on federal law related to accommodations for students and strikes the requirement to provide exclusive spaces for religious observances.

Thank you for allowing the USM to share these thoughts on House Bill 912.



About the University System of Maryland

The University System of Maryland (USM)—one system made up of twelve institutions, three regional centers, and a central office—awards eight out of every ten bachelor’s degrees in the State of Maryland. The USM is governed by a Board of Regents, comprised of twenty-one members from diverse professional and personal backgrounds. The chancellor, Dr. Jay Perman, oversees and manages the operations of USM. However, each constituent institution is run by its own president who has authority over that university. Each of USM’s 12 institutions has a distinct and unique approach to the mission of educating students and promoting the economic, intellectual, and cultural growth of its surrounding community. These institutions are located throughout the state, from western Maryland to the Eastern Shore, with the flagship campus in the Washington suburbs. The USM includes Historically Black Colleges and Universities, comprehensive institutions, research universities, and the country’s largest public online institution.

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