

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,

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