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ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND
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The Honorable Ben Barnes
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
Room 121, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Chairman Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and honorable members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 546, the SERVE ACT.

I've said before, and I believe deeply, that with all the challenges our state and nation are facing, it is service that will save us. From the first day of my administration, I have worked to make Maryland a state of service. My second executive order established the Department of Service and Civic Innovation with the goal of bringing together offices and programs that support service opportunities under one umbrella. And I know this goal of elevating service is a goal that the legislature shares, as you and your colleagues across the street did extraordinary work building the framework for a sister program to the service year, the Maryland Corps program. The SERVE Act would advance our shared goal of elevating service, establishing an opportunity for young people from across the state to engage in a year of service after high school.

In my inaugural address and the State of the State, I shared with you what service has meant to me. It has transformed me, strengthened me, tested me, and broadened my perspectives. My journey started with military school then expanded to serving in the armed forces, and running nonprofits focused on supporting underserved students and fighting poverty. And now the Service Year Option Program established by this bill will provide young people of every background in every jurisdiction the opportunity to serve our State and gain real-world skills and experience.

The service year serves as a bridge to a participant's next steps in employment or education, whether it be a new career, public service, technical training, an apprenticeship, postsecondary education, or another service program. Not only does the service year provide the participant valuable work experience, expanding our commitment to the Service Year Program can bring people together in these divisive times and increase civic engagement and participation. For the many young Marylanders who complete high school but may not know what to do next, this program will give them access to real world experience, to mentoring, and to career development.

House Bill 546 sets up a framework for the Service Year Option Program that will be implemented by the Secretary of the Department of Service and Civic Innovation. Students who have received a high school diploma, certificate of completion, or equivalent level of education within the last two years are eligible to participate at the discretion of the Secretary. Participants will be paid, they will partner with a mentor, and they will participate in opportunities for personal growth beyond their work. At the successful completion of a service year, participants will also be awarded a \$3,000 stipend. The intent is to be expansive with employers partnering with us in the Program, so we are looking for both public and private sector parties to engage with us. The end goal is to create a network of service year opportunities throughout the State while also building up and working with our existing service opportunities and apprenticeship programs.

We have an opportunity with this bill to continue our shared work to elevate service. To make Maryland a state of service. To engage thousands of Marylanders in the work of building a stronger state. I look forward to working alongside you in this effort.

I urge a favorable report on House Bill 546.