



March 8, 2023

SB516 – Cannabis Reform
HEARING BEFORE THE SENATE
FINANCE COMMITTEE
SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS

Mid-Shore Pro Bono (MSPB) recommends a favorable report for SB516 with amendments. Dedicated funding generated from cannabis tax revenue to an existing special fund administered by the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) is a critical step needed to repair the damage to communities disproportionately and unfairly impacted by cannabis prohibition. This funding is especially critical in rural communities such as the Eastern Shore where investment in legal assistance helps families to end generational poverty.

Mid-Shore Pro Bono, Inc. is a Maryland nonprofit that connects people on the Eastern Shore with limited financial means to legal representation and essential community resources. Each year, MSPB helps over 3,000 people in our community access the legal system in times of need. We serve 8 Eastern Shore counties (Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's Somerset, Talbot, Wicomico, and Worcester). Our staff attorneys and network of volunteer lawyers provide free legal services for elder law, family law, landlord/tenant, record expungement, mortgage and tax foreclosure, and consumer debt. These services help families gain financial and housing stability and create safe, secure homes for children. MSPB provides free legal services to people with a household income of up to 50% of Maryland Median income. Most of our clients are working families who otherwise would not be able to afford to hire their own legal representation.

MSPB assists many clients with criminal record expungement, a relatively straightforward petition process required to have court and police records permanently removed from public inspection. Criminal records related to cannabis charges can create serious barriers, including preventing someone from obtaining housing, employment, and professional certifications. Having a clean record helps keep insurance bills low and enables people to volunteer in their communities. MSPB had a spike in requests for record expungement during the pandemic due to changing employment conditions and many people needing to seek new or different housing situations. One of our clients is a young father of two children who was offered a position as a teacher in a local school, but his employment was held up due to an old cannabis possession charge. Expungement of his record enabled him to move forward with his new job and provide financial stability for his family.

MSPB's ability to provide consistent, high-quality civil legal assistance is contingent on sufficient and continuous funding. Here on the Eastern Shore, trust and reliability are valuable currencies, and without ongoing financial support, MSPB cannot provide consistent access to counsel that people with limited financial means need. For these reasons, Mid-Shore Pro Bono urges the Committee's support for SB516. If you have any questions regarding our position on this bill, please contact Meredith Lathbury Girard, Esq., executive director, at 410-690-8128 or mgirard@midshoreprobono.org.

Connecting Individuals and Families who need Civil Legal Services with Volunteer Attorneys and Community Resources

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