

**Written Testimony Submitted for the Record to the Maryland House of Delegates  
Ways and Means Committee - For the Hearing on  
Declaration of Rights - Religious Freedom, Religious Tests, and Oaths and Affirmations (HB871)  
March 8, 2023  
SUPPORT**

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

My name is Laura Stewart and I am providing testimony as an individual, a Maryland resident, a mom and children's advocate. I am here to support HB871 which is a proposed constitutional amendment that removes numerous references in the Maryland Declaration of Rights that require a belief in God. Additionally, the proposed amendment eliminates provisions in Article 36 of the Maryland Declaration of Rights stating that nothing must prohibit or require the making of certain religious expressions in specified public contexts.

I often speak on bills that affect the children of our state, and this instance is no exception. Generation Z is the least religious generation. More than one third have no religion. <sup>1</sup> The passage of HB871 will show that we value and benefit from their civil involvement, no matter their religious beliefs. My husband and I have raised two children in Maryland, one attends Albert Einstein High School and the other attends the University of Maryland's A. James Clark School of Engineering. Both identify either as atheist or agnostic, as do I. When I first read the Maryland Constitution's language, which discriminates against non-religious citizens by requiring a belief in God to serve, I thought of my sons and their friends. They do not always feel valued by society because of their gender, racial or religious identity.

Why would we want the Maryland constitution to enshrine discrimination, especially when the language has been shown to be unconstitutional for over half a century? We can finally fix this by putting this constitutional amendment on the ballot. This body has the chance to stand by Freedom of Religion and embrace the diverse electorate you represent. I have heard legislators communicate to me that these provisions in the constitution are not enforceable, so why does it matter? I ask if these provisions are not enforceable, why do we keep the language in our constitution? I also believe recent actions by the Supreme Court gives us impetus to enshrine non discrimination in our constitution. By inaction, we show bias towards the religious vs. the non-religious. We need ALL of our citizens to participate in our government, especially considering the challenges we face today.

I ask you to stand up for Freedom of Religion, and issue a favorable report for HB871.

Respectfully,  
Laura Stewart

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>