



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

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Meredith L. Girard, Esq.

499 Idlewild Avenue, Suite 102
EASTON, MARYLAND 21601
PHONE: 410-690-8128
FAX: 443-385-0210

601-B Naylor Mill Road
SALISBURY, MD 21802
PHONE: 410.690.8128

WWW.MIDSHOREPROBONO.ORG

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HB760 – Maryland Legal Services Corporation – Affordable Wills, Life, and Estate Planning for Seniors Program

HEARING BEFORE THE HOUSE OF DELEGATES JUDICIAL COMMITTEE

Mid-Shore Pro Bono (MSPB) recommends a favorable report for HB760 with sponsor amendments. Establishment of an affordable way for seniors with limited means to obtain life and estate planning documents would truly be a game changer for our rural community. Access to these services makes a concrete difference in the ability of families to pass down hard-earned property, prevents housing instability, enables people to leave clear instructions for family members and loved ones, and can help families avoid unnecessary and potentially crippling costs.

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 to access free legal services through our network of volunteer lawyers who assist with elder law, family law, landlord/tenant, mortgage and tax foreclosure, and consumer debt.

In 2022 alone, over 630 older adults reached out to MSPB for help – a 30% increase from 2021. Our monthly elder law clinics, held in 6 locations across the Eastern Shore, are bursting at the seams. The majority of our Elder Law clients are seeking assistance with creating a will, power of attorney, and advance medical directive. Our panel of volunteer attorneys prepare and execute these documents free of charge for hundreds of clients each year.

Access to life and estate planning documents makes a difference for families in our rural community. One of our recent clients worked in agriculture, in the farm fields of the Eastern Shore, since she was 16. Now at age 81, she has finally retired from field work and lives primarily on her social security income. She came to us for her will, power of attorney, and advance medical directive because she wanted to make sure that her three children would know exactly how she wanted things to be handled. It was truly a love letter for her family.

We also see firsthand the very challenging situations that families face when people don't have access to these legal resources. Last summer we worked with a woman in her 70s who was in the middle of cancer treatments when she learned that the house that she had lived in her entire life, and where she had taken care of her mother until her mother's death last year, would have to be sold. Her mother didn't have a will – she had only told her daughter that she wanted her to have the house when she was gone. Our client was unable to qualify for a loan to buy out the other heirs, and her only option was to find a new place to live and move out of the only house, the only community she had ever known. This situation is all too common and leads to complex tangled title and heirs property problems that are too expensive and time consuming for most families to solve on their own.

Reducing barriers to life planning supports intergenerational transfer of homeownership, increases financial stability for families, and plays a role in closing wealth gaps across race and ethnicity. For these reasons, Mid-Shore Pro Bono urges the Committee's support for HB760 with sponsor amendments. 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.