

TESTIMONY FOR SB0422

My name is Beryl Blecher and I am a Maryland resident living in Montgomery County. My written testimony is offered on behalf of many friends and former colleagues who like me share the values of Maryland and appreciate the opportunities offered in this state.

I am a retired Foreign Commercial Service Officer. Many people outside of the Foreign Affairs community don't realize that in addition to the State Department, the Department of Commerce and the Department of Agriculture have their own Foreign Services. While all of us work together overseas, we serve different functions and even have the distinct challenge of serving different bosses at the same time: our Ambassador at Post and our home agency back in Washington, D.C. As a commercial officer, my responsibilities included counseling US companies on overseas markets and business practices, identifying business opportunities and representatives for US firms and advocating for US firms bidding on foreign government contracts.

I spent close to 30 years overseas in a range of assignments – most of which were extremely demanding and some even dangerous. For two tours (totaling 6 years), I was in Moscow: first in the chaotic Yeltsin years when during the war in Kosovo, Zhironovsky rallied his tens of thousands of followers to march on the US Embassy compound and even shot RPGs into the grounds in retaliation for the NATO bombing of Belgrade; and then under Putin and his crony Medvedev when President Obama came to Moscow for what had been hoped would be a 're-set' of relations – one of the frostiest visits to Russia of any President. But I wasn't there to record history or snap photos of the mobs, my job was to help US companies win contracts, expand trade, repatriate their earnings and protect their assets from unscrupulous Russian partners, middlemen and government officials.

I also served three years in Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina not long after the Yugoslav war ended. The US believed that stability would come with economic and commercial progress and integration into the Western alliances. This was long before Croatia joined NATO or the EU. In fact, part of my work was to facilitate the groundwork for those alliances – to make sure there was a rule of law. While Croatia was anxious to move on into the 21st century, Bosnia was left after the Dayton Agreement as a divided country: Republika of Serbska (Serbian)

and the Federation of BiH (Croat and Muslim). And despite the dangers on the ground (the Serbian enclave viewed the US with great hostility), I traveled all over the country to meet business people and promote ties with US companies. In fact, I organized the first federal-level organization in the country – the American Chamber of Commerce in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Not all challenges are related to politics or defense, my five and a half years at the US Mission to the European Union were a lesson in what can be accomplished through patience, perseverance and strategy as I advocated for policies and regulations that protected US interests and kept the markets of the 27-nation bloc open to US business products and companies despite concerns over data privacy, chemicals, monopolies, etc.

The Foreign Service life is far from what is depicted on television or in movies, it is a demanding career serving our country overseas with continuous challenges and personal hardships as we juggle family demands and time lost with aging parents. For these reasons and others, we should be treated the same as military retirees. I urge you to support Senate Bill 0422, sponsored by Senator Jim Rosapepe, which would allow a subtraction modification under the MD income tax for up to \$12,500 of FS retirement income for individuals under the age of 55 and up to \$20,00 of FS retirement income for individuals over 55. This would move Foreign Service retirees closer to parity with military retirees.

This legislation will encourage FS retirees to settle in Maryland where they have natural ties to the social and political arenas and would be located close to many of the organizations, institutions and agencies that they have known over the years.

I thank Senator Rosapepe for sponsoring this bill and I hope my personal story explains the importance of recognizing the dedicated work of US Foreign Service retirees through this bill.

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