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April 4, 2024

Testimony on House Bill 1526
Maryland Protecting Opportunities and Regional Trade (PORT) Act
House Economic Matters Committee
House Appropriations Committee

Position: Favorable with Amendments

Maryland Nonprofits is a statewide association of more than 2000 nonprofit organizations and institutions across our State. The nonprofit and philanthropic communities serve the panoply of health, social and economic needs of Maryland families suffering financial economic and social hardships. We urge your support for House Bill 1526, but we also urge you to assure that the assistance under this legislation, and the executive relief measures that may follow, are broadened in scope to recognize both the direct and indirect hardships and other impacts that last week's disaster will inflict on families, businesses, and in some cases nonprofit organizations throughout the State.

Specifically, both HB 1256 and SB 1188 provide for assistance from the Dept. of Commerce to businesses whose operations "rely on access to or operation of the Port" and whose operations are halted or disrupted. **But nonprofit organizations providing relief and assistance for people and communities impacted by the closure of the Port or the loss of the Francis Scott Key Bridge, have the opposite problem.**

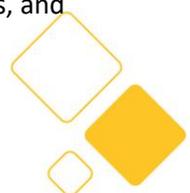
In a disaster demands on service nonprofits' resources and staff expand dramatically, often outstripping their capacity. The stress of lost or reduced family income often results in increased demands on food banks and feeding centers, housing instability and requests for housing placements or rental assistance, violence or abuse in the home, more requests for family counseling, referrals for mental health and or substance abuse interventions, job placement assistance, and job training for alternative employment. **We ask that the bill be amended to allow assistance to organizations providing relief and assistance to individuals and communities impacted by disaster-related income loss.**

Further, as our experience during the Covid-19 pandemic sadly demonstrated, lower-income individuals and families, communities of color, and our immigrant communities, suffer the most when the economy and services are disrupted by disasters or other public emergencies. For those not working at the Port itself, and whose employers choose to reduce employment, the Senate version has been amended to at least hasten their access to unemployment benefits. But for any undocumented workers among the 140,000 port-related positions this 'fallback' is not there. **We recommend that they be eligible for the Department of Labor program created for workers at the Port.**

Another lesson learned during the pandemic was the hardship imposed by lack of "language access" to the available public services and relief assistance. This too must be addressed in relief efforts, and permanently through legislation.



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Just as the closure of the Port of Baltimore will affect in varying degrees people, businesses and the economy across all of Maryland, the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge will create additional transportation and service hardships in the Baltimore and Central Maryland Region, extending well-beyond the re-opening of the Port. After almost 50 years of service, the bridge has become a critical part of the region's transportation infrastructure. For many in the area, ease of access to childcare, the time and distance of work's commute, and proximity to health care or education will be impacted. These and other effects will also have a disproportionate impact on those with fewer resources or fewer options for transportation.

The nonprofit community and organized philanthropy are already engaged, and we look forward to working in partnership with all levels of government to help our State and all Marylanders recover from this tragedy.

In the aftermath of catastrophic events, whether unexpected community tragedies, natural disasters, pandemics, or societal upheavals, the immediate focus often turns towards rescue and recovery efforts, securing basic necessities, and restoring infrastructure. Amidst these priorities, the crucial role of nonprofits and community services must not be overlooked. These organizations step into the breach, providing essential support and services to affected populations, often filling gaps that government and private sectors cannot. However, the ripple effects of such events can severely strain their resources and operational capacities.

Nonprofits and community organizations are uniquely positioned to offer specialized assistance, from mental health support to legal aid, thanks to their deep community ties and understanding of local needs. Yet, the increased demand for their services post-disaster puts a significant strain on their already limited resources. This is why relief efforts must include support for these vital entities. By bolstering their capacity with additional resources, we ensure that they can continue their critical work without interruption. Financial assistance, volunteer support, and material donations can help these organizations sustain their operations, adapt to the increased workload, and extend their reach to all corners of the community.

Moreover, investing in nonprofits and community services as part of disaster recovery plans is not just about immediate relief. It's also about building a resilient infrastructure that can withstand future crises. These organizations often lead initiatives in disaster preparedness, education, and resilience-building, which are indispensable in reducing the impact of future catastrophes. Supporting them in the wake of disaster, therefore, is a step towards a stronger, more prepared community. Their work ensures that the most vulnerable are not left behind in the rush to rebuild, making their inclusion in relief efforts not just beneficial, but essential.



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