

February 23, 2024

Testimony on Senate Bill 797
Education - Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for
Special Education Program and Fund - Established
Senate Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

Position: Favorable

Maryland Nonprofits is a statewide association of almost 1800 nonprofit organizations and institutions, dedicated to promoting the values of diversity, equity and Inclusion through the work and advocacy of Maryland's nonprofit community. We urge you to support Senate Bill 797.

Access to appropriate placements and services for students with special needs or conditions in our public schools is a life-changing matter for both those students and their families. When access is delayed or not provided, parents' ability to seek redress and enforcement, often of federally protected rights, is a matter of equal educational opportunity, health equity, and social justice.

A family's ability to assert their child's rights, and pursue them effectively, if at all, through what may become an elongated or complicated process, is often a question of wealth and income. The cost of engaging the services of experts or consultants, or of legal representation, can be a prohibitive burden for low- or moderate-income families, who may face very unequal challenge on behalf of their student. The resources of nonprofits providing pro bono or subsidized assistance in these cases are clearly inadequate to meet the need.

Senate Bill 797 establishes the Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for Special Education (AAACSE) Program, and an AAACSE Fund, to be administered by the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service, to assist families with income up to 150% of the household income guidelines of the Maryland Legal Services Corporation. The bill also mandates an appropriation beginning in Fiscal Year 2026, of \$2,000,00 annually.

We urge you to give Senate Bill 797 a favorable report.