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Written Testimony

Senate Bill 797 - Education – Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for Special Education Program and Fund – Established Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee – February 23, 2024 Support

Background: Senate Bill 797 would establish the Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for Special Education Program and respective Fund; require certain information to be provided to the parents of a child with a disability; and require the Governor to include in the annual budget bill an appropriation of \$2,000,000 to the fund beginning in fiscal year 2026.

Written Comments: The Baltimore Jewish Council represents The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore and all of its agencies. This includes the Jewish Connection Network, which has an entire department dedicated to ensuring that every member of our community, regardless of their background or abilities, can fully embrace Jewish life.

Millions of individuals with disabilities and their families depend on a wide variety of public benefits for education, income, health care, and food and housing assistance. According to the 2020 Community Study, 14% of our community has a disability or medical condition that limits their ability to work or attend school. By establishing and funding the Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for Special Education program, we will be able to provide direct resources and services to students eligible for assistance during a time of great stress for both the student and the parents.

There are many times where a parent or guardian may feel that their child is being treated unfairly in a school setting. This is especially true in the case of children with disabilities. If a student is eligible, having the ability to work with an attorney, advocate, or consultant can make a true difference in the course of action taken to address an incident/incidents in the classroom.

By delaying the funding of the Program until FY26, we are allowing time for the Program to be set up while also recognizing that there is a current budget deficit and not adding strain to our current financial situation.

For these reasons, the Baltimore Jewish Council asks for a favorable report on SB797.

The Baltimore Jewish Council, a coalition of central Maryland Jewish organizations and congregations, advocates at all levels of government, on a variety of social welfare, economic and religious concerns, to protect and promote the interests of The Associated Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, its agencies and the Greater Baltimore Jewish community.