



Date: Feb. 6th, 2024

To: Chair Smith and Vice Chair Waldstreicher, Judicial Proceedings Committee

Reference: Senate Bill 471- Criminal Procedure - Victim Compensation - Alterations (Victim Compensation Reform Act of 2024)

Position: Support

Dear Chair Smith and Committee Members,

On behalf of LifeBridge Health's Center for Hope we thank you for this opportunity to comment and **urge your support for Senate Bill 471**. Center for Hope provides intervention and prevention for: child abuse, domestic violence, community violence, and elder justice for survivors, caregivers, and communities. At LifeBridge Health, we recognize the devastating impact of violence in our communities, and the growing number of victims of all ages. Senate Bill 471 will improve an accessible, non-discriminatory victim compensation process to support all victims of crime, or their family members left behind. It will provide prompt and crucial financial support when it is needed most and remove unnecessary and arbitrary denials of financial relief for applicants for expenses incurred because of being a victim of crime.

Our team's experience with the CICB program has not always resulted in positive use of the fund due to the current process and requirements that creates a long, stressful process for victims and their loved ones. It is often seen as a **resource of last resort**. The intricate process and the length of time it takes for the claim to be processed has been the greatest barrier. There are additional barriers including documentation that limit whether the victim can receive compensation and/or impacts the amount of compensation a victim is able to receive. MD CICB is a payer of last resort and will often deny claims if victims have other means of resolving whatever the claim is that they are seeking compensation for. This causes victims financial distress in leaving no choice but using other funds they've allocated to other needs relating to their victimization and is retraumatizing.

CICB is critical to public safety, by assisting with the destabilizing expenses that come with the trauma of violent victimization, such as medical care, mental health care, lost wages, funeral and burial expenses, and crime scene cleanup to name a few. Compensation helps reduce the risk of future victimization and perpetration of harm, and the long-term costs of violence to the state. The current victim compensation process disproportionately disqualifies and alienates applicants of color and their families from receiving compensation at alarming rates, especially Black men and youth impacted by gun and other forms of community violence.

Maryland has one of the lowest grant rates of victim compensation in the country. Over 60% of all claims were denied victim compensation in Maryland as ineligible or closed without any compensation in FY23, with no victim of domestic violence related crimes awarded compensation.

SB 471 removes numerous requirements that bar victims from eligibility for victim compensation, including the requirements that a victim must report a crime to law enforcement within 48 hours and that a victim must “cooperate” with law enforcement. It also helps clarify and expand which relatives are eligible to receive compensation and what types of expenses are eligible for reimbursement to reflect family structures and the needs of victims more accurately. The bill also strikes the concept of the “perfect victim” who may have “contributed” to their own victimization. This bill reconstitutes the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board to include more members with lived experience and those that work directly with victims. The claims process is streamlined to reduce the unacceptable delays victims currently experience if they engage in the compensation process. Enhanced program reporting requirements are included to improve transparency and accountability.

For all the above stated reasons, we request a **Favorable report on SB471.**

For more information, please contact:

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