

BILL NO: Senate Bill 568
TITLE: Courts – Civil Actions – Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation
COMMITTEE: Judicial Proceedings
HEARING DATE: February 20, 2024
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

Senate Bill 568 clarifies the exercise of constitutional rights to petition the courts, and exercise free speech, by amending existing law regarding SLAPP Suits – Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation. These lawsuits intentionally target survivors, whistleblowers, and advocates who speak out against powerful perpetrators, creating a chilling effect on other victims who may seek to do the same. They have become an all-too common tool at silencing criticism and intimidating victims.

As a statewide legal services organization, we strongly believe in the right to petition the courts. Yet, we also believe a balanced approach is necessary when individuals, particularly those wielding power, utilize the courts as a weapon against those who speak out against abuse. The Women's Law Center has received an alarmingly increasing number of inquiries and requests for support in cases where survivors across the country are facing lawsuits brought to discourage them from exercising their rights in college sexual misconduct proceedings, or for bringing protective orders in response to intimate partner violence. The result of those malicious lawsuits is to discourage survivors from continuing their pursuit of safety and recourse. While not all of these retaliatory suits will qualify as SLAPP suits, some will and SB 568 will help discourage this type of litigation abuse and allow victims access to justice.

Our courts and judicial system must not be allowed to be weaponized against victims. Because SB 568 will help prevent litigation abuse, the Women's Law Center of Maryland, Inc. SUPPORTS Senate Bill 568.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a private, non-profit, legal services organization that serves as a leading voice for justice and fairness for women. It advocates for the rights of women through legal assistance to individuals and strategic initiatives to achieve systemic change, working to ensure physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy for women in Maryland.