

BILL NO: HB 575
TITLE: Criminal Procedure -Victim Compensation - Alterations
Victim Compensation Reform Act of 2024
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: February 6, 2024
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

The Women's Law Center of Maryland strongly supports HB 575, which will create 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 as a result of being a victim of crime.

The Women's Law Center provides direct legal services for thousand of victims of domestic violence every year. Many of our clients are victims of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and economic abuse. Maryland law currently requires a victim of crime to report the incident within 48 hours to law enforcement and cooperate with law enforcement. That requirement is not realistic in so many of our clients' lives. Victims of intimate partner violence have many conflicting circumstances that may cause them to remain in an abusive relationship. Identifying a pattern of abuse and making the decision to leave can be incredibly difficult. Barriers may include financial stress, having no where else to go, and the threat of violence. Family and social/cultural expectations may also create pressure to stay, especially when children are involved.

Victim Compensation is about public safety. The current victim compensation process disproportionately disqualifies and alienates applicants of color and their families from receiving compensation. Maryland has one of the lowest 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.

HB 575 removes requirements that bar victims from eligibility for victim compensation, including the requirements that a victim report a crime within 48 hours and that the victim must cooperate with law enforcement. This bill also reconstitutes the Criminal Injuries Compensation board to include more members with lived experience and members that work directly with victims.

For the above stated reasons, The Women's Law Center strongly urges a favorable report on HB 575.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a non-profit legal services organization whose mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. Our mission is advanced through direct legal services, information and referral hotlines, and statewide advocacy.