

BILL NO: HB 575/SB 471
TITLE: Criminal Procedure - Victim Compensation - Alterations
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: February 6, 2024
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

The University of Maryland SUPPORT, ADVOCACY, FREEDOM, AND EMPOWERMENT (SAFE) Center for Human Trafficking Survivors (“SAFE Center”) provides survivor-centered and trauma-informed services that empower trafficking survivors to heal and reclaim their lives. The SAFE Center is an initiative of the University of Maryland Strategic Partnership: MPowering the State, a collaboration between the University of Maryland Baltimore and University of Maryland College Park. The SAFE Center supports survivors of sex and/or labor trafficking of all nationalities, ages, and genders through bilingual case management, mental health, economic empowerment, legal, and crisis intervention services.

The SAFE Center strongly supports HB 575/SB 471, 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 mission of the SAFE Center is to provide survivor-centered and trauma-informed services that empower trafficking survivors to heal and reclaim their lives, better support them through research and advocacy, and help prevent trafficking. Access to funds for the effects of crimes committed against our clients is a critical step in them reclaiming agency and receiving compensation for the hardships they endured.

Victim Compensation is about 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, crime scene cleanup and more, 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. 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.

HB 575/SB 471 removes numerous requirements that bar victims from eligibility for victim compensation, including the requirements that a victim cooperate with law enforcement and report a crime to law enforcement within 48 hours, which have precluded our clients from seeking compensation. It also helps clarify and expand which relatives are eligible to receive compensation and what types of expenses are eligible for reimbursement to more accurately reflect family structures and the needs of victims. The bill also strikes the concept of the “perfect victim” who may have “contributed” to their own victimization. A large body of evidence and

lived experience demonstrates this has not been effective at helping people heal and preventing future victimization; rather, it has too often exacerbated the trauma victims experience in the aftermath of violent crime.

In addition, 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 in HB 575/SB 471 to reduce the unacceptable delays victims currently experience if they engage in the victim compensation process. Enhanced program reporting requirements are included to improve transparency and accountability. Finally, HB 575/SB 471 removes the counterproductive reliance on criminal justice fines and fees to fund these benefits, creating greater program stability.

For the above stated reasons, the UMD SAFE Center **strongly urges a favorable report on HB 575/SB 471.**

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