

BILL NO: SB 471 / HB 575

TITLE: Victim Compensation Reform Act of 2024

COMMITTEE: Judiciary/Judicial Proceedings

HEARING DATE: February 6, 2024

POSITION: SUPPORT

Good afternoon, Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and Members of the Committee. My name is Lisa Sloyer, and I am an Advocacy and Resource Program Manager at TurnAround, Inc., a Baltimore-based organization that has been working with victims of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking for more than 40 years. We see firsthand the emotional, physical, and financial trauma that survivors of these crimes experience. We urge the committee to issue a favorable report on HB575.

The current system for compensating victims is not working. Too often, the survivors we work with are left without the financial resources they need to move forward after enduring horrific trauma. For survivors of intimate partner violence, for example, quick financial support is critical to establishing independence and not returning to an abusive partner. Some of our clients need expensive emergency relocation to stay safe from their abuser. Others need help to stay afloat before they find a job.

House Bill 575 ensures that victims are compensated fairly and quickly. The bill provides new transparency, makes it easier to apply for compensation, speeds up the approval process, and allows victims to appeal a decision. In addition, increased funding will allow for increased compensation to victims and their family members. This proposed legislation also reflects the reality of how trauma can affect a victim's behavior. Victims often choose not to report their victimization to law enforcement, so the proposed legislation no longer requires a police report to prove a crime happened.

These changes in the law would have made a huge difference to one of my clients. A survivor of intimate partner violence, she had no income when she left her abuser. Completing the application forced her to painfully recount her abuse in detail but she desperately needed the financial help. Six months passed before she received a response. Even then, there was no compensation, just a demand for additional documentation of her abuse, requiring her to recount her trauma yet again.

Fortunately, my client found work and was financially stable long before her compensation arrived. But for others, this kind of delayed response is too little, way too late, and doesn't recognize the traumatic effects of the process. Victims deserve a compassionate compensation process and swift financial help to rebuild their lives and move forward.

For these reasons I urge a favorable report on HB575. Thank you.