



**House Ways and Means Committee
HB 785- Freedom to Read Act
February 19, 2024 -- Support**

Dear Chair Atterbear, Vice Chair Wilkins and Committee Members,

I am writing **in support of HB 785, the Freedom to Read Act**. This bill not only protects library collections and librarians from censorship and personal attacks, but safeguards marginalized communities and our democracy.

It's hard to imagine that censorship and attacks on librarians are happening in our state but over the last five years, more than half of Maryland's public libraries have faced book challenges or far worse. In fact, in that same period, libraries have experienced a 600% increase in staff threats and 11 bomb threats related to this issue. HB 785 would protect not only Marylanders' access to the books they want but the librarians who serve our communities.

Overwhelmingly, book bans target titles featuring or written by LGBTQ+ people as well as stories on racism and gender identity. These stories of diverse perspectives, accurate cultural histories and underrepresented voices need to be shared. All people deserve to see themselves represented in books. Not only does it matter on an individual level but for the betterment of our society.

Proponents of censorship often use the argument that their efforts center on protecting children. Indeed, parents have every right to guide their children's reading, but a parent or small group of parents should not dictate what books other people's children can read. Successful book bans, like many we've seen across the nation, remove access for all members of the community and threaten freedom of thought and speech -- values that underpin our republic.

We respectfully ask for your support of HB 785 to ensure Marylanders have access to the materials they want, library staff have the protections they need to keep delivering outstanding service, and our democracy remains intact. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Skip Auld, AACPL Chief Executive Officer

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