

DANA JONES
Legislative District 30A
Anne Arundel County

Appropriations Committee

Subcommittees

Vice Chair, Health and Social Services

Oversight Committee on Pensions

Joint Committee on Administrative,
Executive, and Legislative Review

Vice Chair, Anne Arundel
County Delegation



The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 161
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3211 · 301-858-3211
800-492-7122 Ext. 3211
Dana.Jones@house.state.md.us

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony of Delegate Dana Jones
Before the Ways and Means Committee**

**In Support of HB 785
Freedom to Read Act
February 21st, 2024, 1 PM**

For the record - I am Delegate Dana Jones.

Chair Atterbeary, Vice Chair Wilkins, and members of the Ways and Means Committee, I come before you today to proudly introduce HB 785, the Freedom to Read Act. HB 785 will protect Maryland's library collections and the librarians who curate them. This crucial and timely legislation will safeguard our libraries from becoming the next frontier of censorship, protecting literature and the freedom for readers to choose for themselves. I am honored that the Freedom to Read Act is the first bill introduced in Speaker Adrienne Jones's Decency Agenda that will prevent intolerance and hate from taking root in our institutions and schools.

I have authored HB 785 because the freedom to read is about freedom of choice. It's about freedom of information. It's about allowing individuals to decide what books they want to read, and not having that decision made for them.

Maryland's libraries provide an outlet for knowledge and self-discovery crafted by certified professionals who are committed to maintaining a collection of literature that is representative of the world we live in and the communities they serve. Their collections provide people of any background access to visions of themselves, both real and fiction, that are critical for healthy development. Unfortunately, Maryland has seen a significant increase in attempts to ban books from our libraries' shelves.

According to the Maryland State Library Agency, since 2019 Maryland's public libraries have seen a 133% increase in formal challenges to their collections, and a 263% increase in informal

challenges.¹ Maryland has experienced at least fifteen public library system jurisdictions with book challenges, some significant, including: Allegany, Anne Arundel, Baltimore County, Calvert, Carroll, Charles, Enoch Pratt, Frederick, Garrett, Howard, Kent, Prince George's, St. Mary's, Talbot, and Wicomico. This increase is not exclusive to our public libraries.

In a September 2023 survey by the Maryland Association of School Librarians (MASL), over 70% of respondents reported book challenges at their school districts.² These challenges attempt to ban certain titles like *Water for Elephants*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and even a book by renowned children's author Judy Blume.³ These challenges overburden our librarians and prevent them from doing their work.

The Freedom to Read Act establishes a set of State Standards for Libraries which enshrines into law that libraries exist and are operated for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all persons the library serves. Additionally, that libraries should not exclude material from its collection because of the origin, background, or views of the author, or for partisan or doctrinal reasons. The legislation also protects our dedicated library professionals from punitive actions for their commitment to upholding these standards. As outlined in the survey by MASL, 52% of public school librarians reported not purchasing books which they were afraid would be "controversial." Others stated that they "second-guessed" their decisions when it came to purchasing books because of a sense of fear of repercussions and losing their jobs.⁴ HB 785 also safeguards Maryland's public library collections from planned attempts to take or damage materials by increasing the fines already in code for offenders. Finally, the bill then directs any library, school library, resource center, or any other library to adopt and follow a written policy consistent with these State Standards.

Collection decisions are not made lightly. From public schools to local library systems, collection policy and decision making is an extensive process with numerous levels of review and scrutiny. This includes book review and challenge processes that allow books to stay on shelves while they are evaluated. The librarians making collection decisions hold advanced degrees in library science that have provided them the necessary training to understand how to curate an appropriate collection that serves the needs of their students and communities. This system works, and we must trust these professionals, not individuals who often haven't read the material. Tragically, some librarians have started self-censoring by not ordering books that may cause controversy. An understandable reaction when according to the survey by MSLA, from

¹ [Book Challenge Survey, MSLA, Retrieved 1.12.24]

² [Book Challenge Survey, MSLA, Retrieved 1.12.24]

³ [[Carroll County Public Schools Challenged Books List](#), Carroll County Public Schools, as cited in The Baltimore Banner, 9.13.23]

⁴ [[Maryland Book Challenge Impact Survey](#), MASL, 10.10.23]

2019 to 2023, there was a 600% increase in threats to staff and eleven incidents of bomb threats to library branches.⁵

As efforts to ban books grow exponentially in Maryland and nationwide, we must act proactively to prevent them. We must trust our library professionals to make collection decisions, and we must actively protect them in doing so.

Growing up in Western Maryland, the Washington Street Library, in the heart of downtown Cumberland, was the cornerstone of my intellectual growth. It sparked my imagination and offered endless access to knowledge. Within those stacks, I discovered the keys to my future. As a Mother, I have quite literally spent hundreds of hours in our Anne Arundel county public libraries with our child, participating in preschool story time, Summer Reading Challenges, and outdoor programming during the pandemic. While I thought the magic of the library was given to me in my childhood education - it was participating as a parent with our child that the library grew to mean so much more to me.

The library was a wondrous treasure bestowed upon me as a mother; it was the spark that aided in my child's educational growth. Witnessing those moments in our child was amazing and I am forever grateful. The profound impact that libraries have had on me and our child drives me to present this legislation to protect them and our librarians for other families.

No matter what library you are in, one thing is always the same. In every library, no matter who you are, you are accepted and you are never alone. I'm introducing The Freedom to Read Act to keep it that way.

I respectfully urge a favorable report on HB 785.

Sincerely,



Delegate Dana Jones

⁵ [Book Challenge Survey, MSLA, Retrieved 1.12.24]