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HB 502: Office of Disability Employment Advancement and Policy and Maryland as a Model Employer Initiative - Established

Testimony of The Freedom Center

SUPPORT – Favorable

House Appropriations Committee, February 11, 2025

The Freedom Center is one of the seven Maryland-based Centers for Independent Living (CIL). CILs are created by federal law. CILs work to enhance the civil rights and quality of services for people with disabilities. CILs are located throughout Maryland and are operated by and for people with disabilities. CILs provide Information and Referral, Advocacy, Peer Support, Independent Living Skills training, and Transition Services to individuals with disabilities in their communities.

The Freedom Center submits this written testimony in **support** of HB 502.

HB 502 establishes the Office of Disability Employment Advancement and Policy within the Department of Disabilities to address the training, career readiness and employment of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, the bill establishes the Maryland as a Model Employer Initiative within the newly created Office to facilitate efforts that improve outcomes in the hiring, recruitment, retention, and advancement of people with disabilities in the State government workforce.

People with disabilities are underrepresented in the workforce. The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in December 2024 that the Labor Force Participation Rate for people without a disability at 77.7% while the same rate for people with a disability at 41.3%. This rate is calculated as the labor force (sum of employed and unemployed) divided by the entire population (civilian, non-institutionalized).

People with disabilities face significant barriers to employment. These barriers include but are not limited to lack of education or applicable training, lack of transportation, an employer's unwillingness to provide accommodations, attitudes of employer or coworkers, lack of job counseling and loss of government assistance.

The Office of Disability Employment Advancement and Policy will implement the strategies in the Maryland State Disability Plan and support statewide policies related to the training, career readiness and employment of people with disabilities.

The Council of State Governments has determined that state governments can play an important role in advancing the recruitment, hiring, retention and advancement of people with disabilities through their own employment policies. The Maryland as a Model Employer Initiative will generate policies and evidence of best practices that can be applied to other employers.

Increasing quality employment opportunities for people with disabilities will lead to more self-sufficiency and less reliance on government assistance and community resources.

The Freedom Center appreciates the consideration of these comments.

The Freedom Center strongly **supports** HB 502 and requests a favorable vote.

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