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BILL NO: House Bill 0502  
TITLE: Office of Disability Employment Advancement and Policy and Maryland as a Model Employer Initiative - Established  
COMMITTEE: Appropriations  
HEARING DATE: February 11, 2025  
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

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The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a non-profit legal services organization whose mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. One of our programs provides the only free hotline in the state to consult with a plaintiff (i.e. labor-side) employment law attorney. Demand greatly outpaces our ability to staff the hotline with volunteers, and disability accommodations/termination/etc. is a top concern each shift. We support House Bill 0502's establishment of an Office of Disability Employment Advancement and Policy as well as the Maryland as a Model Employer Initiative because every indication – including our own call statistics, U.S. Department of Labor data, etc. – signals that the number of working-age disabled Americans is growing, and with federal employers ending their “DEI” (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) practices, we see this bill as creating a unique advantage for the state of Maryland to attract some of the nation's top talent and investment.

Disabled people in this country were denied employment on the basis of their disability until the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Despite the legal protections afforded by the ADA, disabled adults still face significant employment discrimination. In 2024, the labor force participation rate for Americans with disabilities was less than half that of their able-bodied peers (24.7% vs. 67.8%), and unemployment rates were double (7.3% vs. 3.7%) according to data from the U.S. Department of Labor. Recent CDC Data on Disability Impacts (from Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Data – BRFSS, 2022) revealed that 24% of adults in Maryland reported having a disability in 2022. Older Americans, women, and particularly women of color are both more likely to be disabled and face discriminatory hiring practices due to this and other protected statuses (age, race, sex, etc.). Maryland invests so much in our highly-skilled workforce – ranking #2 in human capital investment per the Milken Institute, State Technology and Science Index, 2022 – that the Maryland as a Model Employer Initiative can only improve our ranking by eliminating barriers for job seekers and employees with disabilities.

Today, advances in assistive technology such as web-based systems, artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, and more have created new flexible employment options for people with disabilities, and Maryland must capitalize on this opportunity for both economic and social justice in promoting the recruitment, hiring, retention, and career advancement of people with disabilities across the state government. The Maryland Department of Commerce's website boasts an equitable, robust and competitive economy, citing #1 rankings across categories including best state for gender equality, minority employment, minority-owned businesses, and more. We want to see Maryland rank #1 in employment for persons with disabilities as well.

National trends point to U.S. demographic changes towards a more aged and disabled population. HB 0502 positions Maryland to capitalize on these shifts by creating an Office of Disability Employment Advancement and Policy and launching the Maryland as a Model Employer Initiative to create not only an enabling environment for disabled workers, but one that results in the most talented and merit-based employment pipeline in the nation.

*The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a non-profit legal services organization whose mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. Our mission is advanced through direct legal services, information and referral hotlines, and statewide advocacy.*