

**Written Testimony Submitted for the Record to the Maryland House of Delegates
Health and Government Operations Committee - For the Hearing on
Declaration of Rights - Religious Freedom, Religious Tests, and Oaths and Affirmations HB822**

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk and Members of the Health and Government Operations Committee,

My name is Laura Stewart and I am providing testimony as an individual, a Maryland resident, a mom, a children's advocate, and an elected official. I am here to support HB822 which is a proposed constitutional amendment that removes numerous references in the Maryland Declaration of Rights that require a belief in God.

I have often spoken on bills that affect the children of our state, and this instance is no exception. Generation Z is the least religious generation. More than one third are not affiliated with a religion.¹ The passage of HB822 will show that we value and benefit from their civic involvement, no matter their religious beliefs. My husband and I have raised two children in Maryland, one attends Albert Einstein High School and the other attends the University of Maryland's A. James Clark School of Engineering. Both identify either as atheist or agnostic, as do I. When I first read the Maryland Constitution's language six years ago, which discriminates against non-religious citizens by requiring a belief in God to serve, I thought of my sons and their friends. They do not always feel valued by society because of their gender, racial, or religious identity.

Since I learned about our Maryland constitution's discriminatory language, this issue became even more personal since I am now an elected member of the Montgomery County Board of Education. I took an oath to "support the Constitution of the United States; and that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the State of Maryland, and support the Constitution and Laws thereof." Yet, the language in the Maryland Constitution has been determined to be federally unconstitutional.

Why would we want the Maryland constitution to enshrine discrimination, especially when the language has been shown to be unconstitutional for over half a century? We can finally fix this by putting this constitutional amendment on the ballot. This body has the chance to stand by Freedom of Religion and embrace the diverse electorate you represent. I have heard legislators communicate to me that these provisions in the constitution are not enforceable, so why does it matter? I ask if these provisions are not enforceable, why do we keep the language in our constitution? I also believe recent actions by the Supreme Court gives us impetus to enshrine non discrimination in our constitution. By inaction, we show bias towards the religious vs. the non-religious. We need ALL of our citizens to participate in our government, especially considering the challenges we face today.

I ask you to stand up for Freedom of Religion, and issue a favorable report for HB822.

Respectfully,
Laura Stewart

¹ <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>

