Testimony in Support of HB 1328 - End-Of-Life Option Act (The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings and the Honorable Shane E. Pendergrass Act)

TO: Delegate Joseline Peña-Melnyk, Chair, and Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee and
Delegate Luke Clippinger, Chair and Members of the Judiciary Committee
FROM: Laura Schrank
DATE: March 3, 2025

On March 11, 2025, my dear friend—a lifelong resident of Anne Arundel County, Maryland—will die. But she won't die at home, surrounded by the people who love her. Instead, she will spend her final 15 days in a strange city, in a strange bed, with only two family members by her side. Perhaps by the time you read this, she will already be gone.

My friend was diagnosed less than a year ago with a rapidly progressing case of ALS. Over the months, we have watched this cruel disease rob her of everything—her ability to speak, to move, to breathe freely. Last month, as her throat began to close, she texted me in a panic. Her doctors confirmed she had less than six months to live. And yet, in Maryland, she faced only two horrifying choices:

1. Be forced into a nursing home, have a feeding tube inserted, and wait helplessly as her body continued shutting down until she could no longer breathe.
2. Decline the feeding tube and slowly starve to death, sedated into oblivion.

Neither of these were real choices. They were prolonged, torturous endings—ones that would not only extend her suffering but that of her loved ones as well.

She knew she was dying. ALS is relentless, irreversible, and untreatable. She could not control what was happening to her body, but she wanted to control how she left this world. In Maryland, that was impossible.

So, she reached out to me. Together, we researched, called doctors, pharmacists, death doulas, hospice workers—anyone who could help. But at every turn, there were obstacles: months-long waitlists, limited resources, insufficient support. Time was running out. Her body was failing, and if she lost the ability to swallow, her chance at a medically assisted death would be gone.

Then, by sheer luck, through a Unitarian Universalist Church in Vermont, we found what Maryland refused to offer her: compassion, dignity, and a way to die on her terms. Thanks to the kindness of strangers, my friend now faces her final days not with fear, but with peace. And while I grieve the fact that I will never get to say goodbye in person, I am forever grateful to Vermont for giving her the dignity Maryland denied her.

This is who we need to be, Maryland. A place of compassion. A safe harbor. A state that allows its residents to face the inevitable with dignity, not fear. Instead, my friend is being forced to flee the only home she has ever known, dying far from her community, isolated from most of the people who love her.

I know what it's like to watch someone suffer unnecessarily at the end of life. In 2020, my father suffered a traumatic brain injury in a biking accident. My mother, my husband, and I sat by his bedside for eight agonizing hours after life support was removed, watching as he struggled for breath, gasping as his body slowly suffocated.

It was the worst experience of our lives.

Those who are terminally ill have already lost so much. Let us not take away their right to a peaceful death, too. Let's allow them to spend their final moments at home, in their own beds, surrounded by the people who love them. Let's give them the choice to leave this world on their own terms—with dignity, with grace, and without unnecessary suffering.

Maryland, it's time to do better. Please pass **HB 1328-End-of-Life Option Act** for Maryland.

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