



**Favorable Testimony
HB899 - General Provisions - Commemorative Months -
Muslim American Heritage and Jewish American Heritage Months**

**Rev. Lawrence E. Walker, Executive Director
Governor's Office of Community Initiatives**

March 13, 2025

Health & Government Operations

**The Hon. Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk, Chair
The Hon. Bonnie Cullison, Vice Chair**

Favorable Testimony of Executive Director Lawrence E. Walker, Governor's Office of Community Initiatives(GOCI), Regarding HB899

Chair Joseline Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Bonnie Cullison, and esteemed members of the Health and Government Operations Committee:

My name is Rev. Larry Walker, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Community Initiatives (GOCI). Our office houses the state's ethnic and the cultural commissions which include representation from several different faiths. I am here today to offer favorable testimony regarding House Bill 899, which proposes the annual proclamation of January as Muslim American Heritage Month and May as Jewish American Heritage Month.

The Governor's Office of Community Initiatives is dedicated to fostering inclusive communities and promoting mutual understanding across Maryland's diverse population. We believe that recognizing and celebrating the rich cultural contributions of our faith communities including the Muslim and Jewish American communities is essential to building a stronger, more united state.

HB899 aligns with the GOCI mission by,

- **Elevating Awareness:** By mandating annual proclamations, this bill ensures that the significant contributions of Muslim and Jewish Americans are consistently highlighted and celebrated. This

increased visibility fosters greater understanding and appreciation of their respective histories, cultures, and achievements.

- **Promoting Education:** The bill's emphasis on urging organizations to observe these heritage months with programs and activities encourages educational initiatives that can combat prejudice and promote interfaith dialogue.
- **Strengthening Community Bonds:** By recognizing these heritage months, we demonstrate our commitment to inclusivity and respect for all Marylanders, regardless of their religious or cultural background. This strengthens community bonds and fosters a sense of belonging for all.
- **Reflecting Maryland's Diversity:** Maryland is a state enriched by its diverse population. Recognizing the specific heritage months of Muslim and Jewish Americans reinforces the message that all communities are valued and contribute to the fabric of our society.

Our office understands that these designations are not simply symbolic. They represent a tangible commitment to acknowledging the lived experiences and enduring contributions of these vital communities within Maryland.

We believe that HB899 provides a valuable opportunity to promote cultural understanding, celebrate diversity, and strengthen the bonds that unite our state. We urge the committee to give this bill a favorable report.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Lawrence E. Walker Executive Director Governor's Office of Community Initiatives