

House Judiciary Committee
Sponsor Testimony: Delegate Aaron Kaufman
HB 187 – Benefits Exploitation
Date: January 28, 2025

Good afternoon Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Barlett and esteemed colleagues. I am Delegate Aaron Kaufman, representing District 18, Montgomery County.

I am requesting a favorable report on HB 187 – Benefits Exploitation. This issue was brought to my attention by former Baltimore Councilman Kristerfer Burnett. HB 187 would reclassify the exploitation of an individual for their benefits and expand Maryland Statutes – Criminal Law 8-524. I appreciate Delegate Tomlinson and Delegate Todd Morgan signing on as co-sponsors to this bill; and for Senator Chris West serving as the Senate cross-file, thus showing bi-partisan support for this issue.

In the previous legislative session, this bill passed out of the House Judiciary Committee with a vote of 20-0, with no unfavorable votes. HB 892 from the 2024 legislative session passed on the House floor 137-0 with bi-partisan support. HB 187 also has the support of Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott who has submitted testimony in support of the bill, Legal AID, the Maryland Department of Aging, Maryland Department of Human Services, and several others.

Benefits Exploitation is the systematic recruitment, harboring, neglect, and financial exploitation of elderly and disabled individuals who receive government benefits, such as SSN, Veterans Benefits, Medicaid, Medicare, SNAP, TANF, pension benefits, public assistance to adults, disability or other government benefits. Individuals who offer to provide care for elderly and disabled adults in an in-home setting often pose as kind-hearted individuals. Elderly and disabled individuals are often stripped of their government benefits, held against their will, moved from location to location, and denied basic needs such as food, clothing, and adequate shelter.

Benefits Exploitation is a growing public health issue and a civil rights violation. Victims of benefits exploitation are often unhoused, have no social support system, or have fallen through the cracks of various mental health systems (Source: *National Institutes of Health*).

This bill would prohibit a person from knowingly recruiting, harboring, or transporting a person for the purpose of taking their government benefits through force and/or underhanded practices. Benefits exploitation causes detrimental harm to individuals and is deceptive and predatory behavior. This needs to be stopped. The State of Georgia has already passed legislation regarding this crime in 2018. 23 other states have reported instances of this crime. Let Maryland be a leader and pass this bill to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

Attorney General Anthony Brown has proposed legislation that is similar to this, but his bill would: focus on people over the age of 65, persons who live in long-term care facilities to improve transparency and accountability in skilled nursing and assisted living environments; and protecting the trust relationship between patient and provider by holding caregivers, whether facility staff or family members, to a higher standard in their financial interactions with vulnerable adults.

My bill differs from this because it covers all persons and covers a wide range of federal government benefits.

I ask for a favorable report on HB 187 – Benefits Exploitation. Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.