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10240 Harvest Fields Drive
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HB 616 Testimony: FAVORABLE

Sponsors: Delegates Hutchinson, Adams, Hartman, Sample-Hughes, and Schmidt,

My name is Candy Warden. President of the Rosa Bonheur Society, Inc. (RBS), a volunteer, nonprofit group formed to protect the Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park, a Maryland human and pet cemetery with thousands of burials. The people with loved ones resting at our cemetery span across all the counties of Maryland.

Constituents in every jurisdiction are aghast at what happened at just one cemetery. It is happening at other cemeteries all over Maryland. In December 2023, the week before Christmas, the Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park suffered catastrophic removal and desecration of human and pet remains from multiple sites. These sites are owned by deed holders who invested in perpetual care. Heavy equipment damage in numerous locations! A backhoe dug up graves! Removed and plowed under human and pet remains, damaged memorial markers, and grave goods! Where are the remains!

More must be done immediately.

Stronger penalties must be enacted to deter the increasing disregard for the respect and honor of cemeteries and cemetery remains. Those causing damage must pay for ALL the damage and consequences of abhorrent misbehavior. Damages must include all proper procedures for interment, damage to markers, damage to cemetery grounds, administrative costs incurred by the Office of Cemetery Oversight, and ongoing costs of new protections. Extending the statute of limitations is essential for providing adequate time to effectively research and prosecute people that desecrate cemeteries.

Remains interred in a cemetery must at all times be treated with honor, dignity, and respect. These beliefs are normative and widely held by Constituents across Maryland. Cemetery legislation is critical to protect all Maryland gravesites.

A Case in Point

At the Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park graves were desecrated with human remains being exhumed and relocated without the permission of families and without the direction of a funeral services professional. Pet graves were also wantonly destroyed that surrounded the human graves.

The families that suffered disinterment(s) have never been notified of the location of their loved ones' remains by the desecrator(s). Are the human remains still extant? Have they been dumped in a mass grave somewhere? Have they been thrown away? Were the remains only partially exhumed or churned into the ground? Only the desecrator(s) know the answers to these questions.

Although families paid significant amounts of money for plots, caskets, vaults, memorial markers, and other services for human and pet burials and received deeds for their plots they have been victimized by their loved ones being violated.

Who is responsible for this desecration and damage? A developer that our group met with for three years in an effort to reach a mutual agreement to protect the cemetery. The developer is hiding behind LLCs, which even the Maryland Office of Cemetery Oversight has yet to untangle. It has been over a year since these tragic events were perpetrated and the person(s) responsible have not been legally identified; just the LLCs.

Benefits of HB 616

- Broadening the criteria for prosecution, time frame for prosecution, and penalties necessary for the deterrence of people that would knowingly desecrate cemeteries, such as, those who seek to hide behind LLC smokescreens to avoid identification and prosecution.
- Offers crucial support and reinforcement for existing legislation.
- Provides necessary legal protections for families and their diverse social, cultural, ethical, and religious beliefs and how they choose to honor their dead.
- Supports the cemetery industry by offering stronger legislation and making cemeteries less desirable targets for desecration.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this testimony, which is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Candy Warden

Rosa Bonheur Society, Inc. (founded May 2007)

2010 Periwinkle Award Winner, Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites