

BILL NO: House Bill 0675
TITLE: Public Safety - Rape Kit Testing Grant Fund – Alterations
COMMITTEE: Judiciary
HEARING DATE: February 11, 2025
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is dedicated to ensuring the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women throughout the state. We fully support any and all measures aimed at addressing the needs of survivors of rape and sexual assault and as such urge a favorable support for House Bill 0675.

Rape is on the rise in Maryland. FBI data gathered by the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) found over a 15% increase in reporting from 2021 to 2022. One out of every four Maryland women — about 664,454 — has been the victim of rape sometime in her lifetime, and half — about 1,180,150 — as well as more than one third of Maryland's men— about 722,571—have experienced other forms of sexual violence. According to the National Institute of Justice, approximately 68% of women in abusive relationships are also sexually assaulted during the course of the relationship.

Sexual assault forensic examinations (SAFEs) and sexual assault evidence kits (SAEKs) are vital to the investigation and prosecution of these sexual assaults. Testing kits have multiple benefits beyond simply identification. Kit analysis can help link crimes together, identify serial rapists, confirm a victim's report, and exonerate an innocent suspect. However, due to funding concerns and other variables, Maryland has backlog of an unknown number of rape kits. Original inventories of untested kits found over 6000 in evidence, with additional SAEKs having been found since then, increasing the inventory.

HB 0675 will ensure that Maryland's Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI) receives continued support until the rape kit backlog – including SAEKs collected prior to October 1, 2020 – is cleared. It will also assuage anxieties caused by recent federal funding cuts by amending the Rape Kit Testing Fund to fund existing investigative and victim notification if federal funds are not received. HB 0675 expands the purposes of the fund to include support for the Peer-to-Peer TeleSAFE project that allows a qualified health care provider with the survivor in one location to consult with a forensic nurse examiner in another location to provide a SAFE. This will expand access to exams and reduce burdens on survivors. HB 0675 will ensure that Maryland fulfills its promise to survivors to not only remove long-standing structural obstacles for forensic exams, but also test the rape kit backlog, investigate cases, consider prosecution, and support survivors.

Behind each and every kit is a sexual assault survivor who submitted to a long and invasive exam after being intimately assaulted. Their choice can help keep our communities safer and take sex offenders off the streets – but only if the kits are tested and cases investigated. It is clear that coordinated community efforts are the best way to stop violence against women and hold offenders accountable for their crimes. This includes addressing the forensic needs that will aid law enforcement and prosecutors.

For the above reasons, the Women's Law Center of Maryland strongly urges a favorable report for HB 0675.

The Women's Law Center of Maryland is a non-profit legal services organization whose mission is to ensure the physical safety, economic security, and bodily autonomy of women in Maryland. Our mission is advanced through direct legal services, information and referral hotlines, and statewide advocacy.