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## Judiciary Committee

100 Taylor House Office Building

Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**Wednesday, February 12, 2025**

### **HB0629 – Civil Actions – Immunity – Disclosure of Allegations of Sexually Assaultive Behavior (Stop Silencing Survivors Act)**

Position: **FAVORABLE**

Chair Clippinger, Vice Chair Bartlett, and Esteemed Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Lauren Pruitt, and I am the Legal Director at FreeState Justice, a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving LGBTQ+ Marylanders from diverse backgrounds. I am writing in support of **HB0629**, which seeks to protect individuals who disclose information about allegations of sexual assault in good faith from liability.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, reports of sexual assault to police increased from 21% in 2022 to 46% in 2023. Despite this increase, sexual assault remains one of the most underreported crimes in the United States, especially among types of violent crime. When victims do come forward, they may be met with retaliatory defamation suits from their abusers intended to silence them from speaking out, a trend that has been witnessed globally. **HB0629** addresses this by shielding survivors from liability for disclosing information about alleged sexually assaultive behavior in good faith.

A study by the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law found that LGBTQ+ individuals are nearly four times more likely to experience violent victimization than non-LGBTQ+ individuals. Additional research indicates a heightened risk for LGBTQ+ people of color and transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (The Trevor Project; National Sexual Violence Resource Center). In Maryland, transgender individuals report alarming rates of physical and/or sexual assault. A 2023 Maryland Trans Survey found that 46% of respondents reported at least one such experience, and 23% reported three or more. Given the concerning rates of sexual violence experiences among the LGBTQ+ community, **HB0629** is crucial to support LGBTQ+ victims in speaking out and seeking support.

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Economic insecurity leaves individuals more susceptible to experiencing sexual violence. Victims of sexual assault often struggle with maintaining employment, housing, and education following the experience, as well as struggles with mental and physical health. Such factors perpetuate a cycle of violence and insecurity, especially among LGBTQ+ individuals who face a unique risk of both economic insecurity and sexual violence. Sexual violence experiences often leave victims with little financial resources, making it more challenging to defend themselves against the potential legal and financial repercussions of speaking out.

As an advocate, I understand the struggle many LGBTQ+ individuals face when they are the victims of sexual assault. They often fear speaking out against their perpetrator out of fear of judgment and retaliation, while already experiencing extreme mental hardship. In this process, victims additionally worry about the potential legal repercussions they may face for speaking out on their experiences. **HB0629** is essential to support all victims of sexual assault in speaking out against their abusers.

I urge the committee to issue a favorable report for **HB0629**. By taking the step to protect all victims of sexual assault from liability when disclosing information in good faith, more victims may feel empowered to speak out on their experiences without fear of legal retaliation.

Sincerely,

Lauren Pruitt  
Legal Director  
FreeState Justice

#### Sources:

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3. Prevention Corner: Addressing Economic Instability to Prevent Sexual Violence Against LGBTQ+ Individuals, <https://mcasa.org/newsletters/article/prevention-corner-addressing-economic-instability>
4. Research Findings, <https://transmaryland.org/findings>
5. Sexual Violence & Individuals Who Identify as LGBTQ, [https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications\\_NSVRC\\_Research-Brief\\_Sexual-Violence-LGBTQ.pdf](https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications_NSVRC_Research-Brief_Sexual-Violence-LGBTQ.pdf)
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7. Weaponizing Defamation Lawsuits Against Survivors Violates International Human Rights, [https://equalitynow.org/news\\_and\\_insights/weaponizing-defamation-lawsuits-against-survivors-violates-international-human-rights/](https://equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/weaponizing-defamation-lawsuits-against-survivors-violates-international-human-rights/)