

Ways and Means Committee – Tuesday, February 25, 2025

Sponsor Testimony: Delegate Aaron Kaufman

Main Entrance Accessibility Bill (HB 694)

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

I am requesting a favorable report on HB 694 - Main Entrance Accessibility and Emergency Planning – the Single Point of Entry Bill. This bill is being cross-filed by Senator Craig Zucker. This issue was brought to my attention by Lori Scott, a disability advocate and mother of a child with disabilities. I am also introducing this bill at the request of the Arc of Maryland.

There is precedent for this bill. SB 1265 - which was passed in 2018 by then Senator Kathy Klausmeier and signed into law by then Governor Hogan. This bill requires: MSDE must update the Emergency Planning Guidelines for Local School Systems by December 1, 2019, to reflect the initial findings from local safety evaluations. **By August 1, 2020, and regularly thereafter, each local school system must update the school emergency plan for each public school. The plans must conform to the MSDE guidelines regarding how the school will address behavioral threats, emergency events, and accommodations for students with disabilities.** In updating the plans, local school systems must work to correct any identified weaknesses.

School safety evaluations, emergency plans, and local law enforcement coverage guidelines and policies are not subject to inspection under the Maryland Public Information Act, except by designated State agencies, emergency management agencies, and local law enforcement in the performance of their official duties. (this is Lori Scott's concern) – this blocks parents and citizens from receiving any information about whether or not a school is complying with this regulation.

Lori Scott, put in FOIA requests to the Montgomery County Public Schools and to Frederick County Public Schools and received very little or no information regarding schools' evacuation plans and FCPS even stated *"FCPS does not have documents responsive to your request. FCPS would need to cross reference each school to determine the status of the doors which would require a significant amount of time and effort to compile the data..."*

HB 694 would require each county board of education to report the number of main entrances to public school buildings that are not accessible for individuals with disabilities and not in compliance with the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which was passed in 1990. Additionally, this bill would require each local school system to send their emergency plan to the State Department of Education.

Ten years ago, Lori Scott found out that her daughter, who is nonverbal and a wheelchair user, was left alone in a stairwell during a fire building evacuation. This is

unacceptable and is a threat to the lives and safety of individuals. As a kid in school with cerebral palsy, I was always overcome with fear when the fire alarm went off because I feared being dead by the time someone would come to get me. Sadly, this is still an issue today.

In an article published in the *Washington Post* on February 16, 2025 – the article discusses 10 year old Omari Woodland, who lives in Prince George’s County who is NOT in school because the school he is zoned for cannot accommodate his wheelchair. His 4 year old sister Aniya is in school in pre-kindergarten. However, in trying to find another school for both children, it was deemed that Rosa Parks Elementary nearby has a broken elevator and no Pre-K spots for Omari’s sister. As the delays continue, this is impacting Omari’s attendance, his achievement, his behavior and can affect his relationship with teachers and classmates and his attitude for school. The article states that Prince George’s County serves 16,000 students with special needs – however the school district is very behind in reviewing its facilities, determining which ones are ADA compliant and expediting in modernizing its schools. Half of the county’s schools are more than 50 years old. Omari misses school, his art class, recess and being with friends.

We need to hold school districts accountable for leaving students in areas that are unsafe. Students with disabilities shouldn’t feel dispensable or abandoned in emergency situations. We cannot normalize this treatment of vulnerable students who deserve the

equal opportunity to succeed in school as their peers. Students with disabilities have the right to feel safe and supported

We must make sure that we are advocating and fighting for all the students in our state, including students with disabilities. This bill advocates for students, parents, and staff. We need to ensure that students are heard and provided the resources they need to succeed, and we must make sure that main entrances are ADA compliant and that schools have proper emergency planning for individuals with disabilities.

New York, Connecticut, California, Indiana, Tennessee, New Jersey, and Massachusetts all have laws in place that address this issue. Maryland needs to follow suit on this as this is about protecting the rights and safety of our students.

I am requesting a favorable report on HB 694. Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.