

Written Testimony Supporting HB 1455

Appropriations Committee Hearing on March 19, 2026

By AFSCME Local 3399 President Brendan Smith

I am Brendan Smith, the president of AFSCME Local 3399 representing city employees in Takoma Park. Our union's Executive Board unanimously approved a resolution calling for the divestment of more than \$65 million in Israeli government bonds from the Maryland State Retirement and Pension System. On behalf of our members and all public employees in Maryland, we are calling on each of you to support HB 1455.

Union members across Maryland are required to pay into the state pension system, and we don't want our wages to support the far-right-wing Israeli government which engages in genocide, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, illegal detentions, theft of land, and other human rights abuses against millions of innocent Palestinian civilians living in Gaza and the West Bank.

North Carolina, Michigan, and Minnesota have already recognized their obligations to support human rights and have announced major divestments of Israeli bonds from their state pension systems. Maryland prides itself on being a progressive state and should divest as well.

The Maryland pension system's own investment policy manual recognizes the importance of human rights, and the current investment in Israeli bonds violates that policy.

The state of Maryland supported divestment from South Africa during the apartheid era. Nelson Mandela's grandson recently said the apartheid conditions in Gaza and the West Bank are far worse than they ever were in South Africa. Are the human rights of Arab Palestinians less important than Black South Africans? South Africa has recognized the parallels with their history and has been a leader in seeking sanctions against Israel.

Please don't be distracted by any false claims that divestment is anti-Semitic. That's a racist and Islamophobic tactic that has been used for decades to attack Palestinian activists and portray the Palestinian people as less than human and not worth saving.

This divestment is needed even more now since Israel has led the United States into a pointless war with Iran that has killed thousands of Iraqi civilians, including a school full of children, and is destabilizing the entire Middle East.

Please show some resolve that all people, regardless of their race or religion, deserve fundamental human rights by recommending HB 1455. Public employees and active union members across Maryland demand it. Thanks for your time.