

Testimony in Support with Amendments Senate Bill 459 - Local Newspapers for Maryland Communities Act of 2026

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is The Honorable Dr. Cashenna A. Cross, Councilwoman at Large for the City of Glenarden, United States Air Force veteran, and longtime municipal and community advocate. I respectfully offer testimony in support of Senate Bill 459 with targeted amendments to ensure the legislation strengthens local journalism while preserving responsible procurement practices for state and local government.

Local news organizations serve as one of the last remaining trusted connectors between government and community. In municipalities like mine, local reporting informs residents about public safety, economic development, youth opportunities, and civic participation. When local journalism declines, transparency declines, misinformation increases, and civic engagement suffers. This bill recognizes that public communication dollars should help sustain credible local reporting that directly serves Maryland residents.

From a municipal governance perspective, clear and accessible communication is essential to public trust. As a public servant who has worked across military, local government, and community leadership roles, I have seen firsthand how local publications provide accountability and ensure residents understand how policies affect their daily lives. Supporting Maryland based news organizations helps keep information local, relevant, and responsive.

While the intent of the bill is strong, several provisions require refinement to avoid unintended impacts on procurement flexibility and operational efficiency. A mandatory fifty percent procurement goal, without implementation safeguards, may create compliance challenges for agencies whose outreach needs vary significantly depending on mission, audience, or emergency communication requirements.

Recommended Amendments:

- 1 Provide phased implementation over multiple fiscal years to allow agencies to adjust procurement planning.
- 2 Allow a waiver or hardship exception when agencies demonstrate that specialized outreach requires broader advertising markets.
- 3 Clarify reporting standards so agencies measure outcomes based on audience reach and effectiveness, not only spending percentages.
- 4 Ensure small and minority owned local media outlets have equitable access through transparent procurement guidance.
- 5 Require periodic legislative review to evaluate effectiveness and fiscal impact after implementation.

With these amendments, Senate Bill 459 can both strengthen Maryland local journalism and maintain responsible stewardship of public resources. This balanced approach supports transparency, protects taxpayer value, and reinforces the role of trusted local media as a pillar of democratic engagement. For these reasons, I respectfully urge a favorable report with amendments.

Respectfully submitted, The Honorable Dr. Cashenna A. Cross Councilwoman at Large, City of Glenarden Municipal Advocate United States Air Force Veteran