

Written Testimony in Support of SB 0721 — Ralph's Act
Senate Finance Committee
February 2026

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Victoria Hougham, and I am a licensed clinical social worker. I am submitting this testimony in strong support of SB 0721, Ralph's Act. I am here as both a professional who understands the toll of family caregiving systems, and as someone who has witnessed this legislation's namesake and his family navigate the very gaps this bill seeks to close.

Over the past several months, I have taken time away from my own work to help Ralph's sister and her husband care for him while they await the day programming and services he needs. I have seen firsthand what it looks like when a family does everything right—gathers documentation, engages attorneys, contacts elected officials, files appeals—and still cannot get the state to act until something truly catastrophic has already occurred. The toll on Ralph's sister, her husband, her children, and those of us in their support network has been enormous.

As a clinical social worker, I am trained to assess family systems under stress. Over the last few years I have witnessed a capable, resourceful family being worn down by a system that, as currently designed, creates a perverse incentive: wait for something awful to happen before providing help. The family was told, in various ways, that the crisis was not yet severe enough, even as Ralph's elderly father was hospitalized twice for cardiac emergencies and Ralph himself was left without a safe, capable caregiver.

I also bring a more personal perspective. I have a brother with a disability who lived in a group home in Massachusetts. For years, I thought about the future—about what would happen as our family aged, about whether I might one day soon need to bring him to Maryland to be closer to me. Watching Ralph's family go through this process made me think carefully about what that transition would look like, and whether Maryland's system would be navigable for us. My brother passed away in January, and that question is no longer one I have to answer. But many Maryland families are asking it right now, quietly planning for a future where they become the primary caregiver for a sibling or loved one with a disability. They deserve a clear and workable path.

Beyond the human cost, there is a compelling case for the state to pass this legislation. Early, planned transitions are substantially less expensive than crisis responses. When families are forced to wait until a situation becomes catastrophic, the state often ends up funding emergency placements, intensive behavioral interventions, and acute care that could have been avoided with timely services. In Ralph's case, months of delay without day programming have contributed to behavioral deterioration—the very thing that proactive services are designed to prevent.

There is also a workforce cost. Ralph's sister, her husband, and friends like me have taken leave from our jobs to fill the gap left by the absence of services. That is lost productivity—real economic impact—that ripples outward from every family left without support. Maryland benefits when caregivers can remain stably employed, and when families can plan transitions in an orderly way rather than responding to emergencies.

SB 0721 addresses a specific, identifiable gap: it protects long-term Maryland residents who are prepared to welcome a family member with disabilities from out of state, when that person's

current caregiver can no longer safely provide care. It is a targeted, commonsense fix that prevents families from having to choose between leaving a loved one in an unsafe situation and moving them into chaos. It recognizes that Maryland residents who have deep roots here—who pay taxes, raise families, and contribute to their communities—should be able to plan responsibly for their loved ones without the system working against them.

I respectfully urge this Committee to pass SB 0721. The families who need this protection are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for a system that allows them to do the right thing without being penalized for it.

Respectfully submitted,

Victoria Hougham, MSW, LICSW