



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Official Sponsor Testimony for SB 924: Department of Social and Economic Mobility – Maryland Chamber of Commerce Grant Program – Established (Business Networks Access Act)

Senator Kevin M. Harris

Chair Beidle, Vice-Chair Hayes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

We are fortunate in Maryland to have over 50 chambers of commerce that serve our communities across the State. Chambers of Commerce are a valuable resource for business leaders statewide, providing access to resources and, importantly, networks. Membership connects entrepreneurs to industry trends, capital opportunities, peer collaboration, and marketing channels, and research shows it signals to the broader community that a business is reputable and community-minded.

However, for small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs, annual membership fees, which can exceed \$500, are often prohibitive. Additionally, Chambers' limited budgets make it difficult for chambers to host the inter-chamber events needed to break down local silos and build connections across communities. Each local chamber reflects the unique demographics of its community, and there is tremendous value in weaving these distinct networks together statewide.

SB 924 establishes a grant program through the Department of Social and Economic Mobility (DOSEM) with two components. The first covers one year of chamber membership fees for underrepresented individuals within a given chamber's community. The second funds events hosted collaboratively by two or more chambers, open to any participating members. A key feature of this program is its flexible definition of 'underrepresented.' Because each chamber reflects the unique demographic makeup of its community, who is underrepresented will look different in Garrett County than it will in Baltimore City as an example. Rather than imposing a statewide definition, the bill asks chambers to provide a brief justification in their application explaining why a prospective member is underrepresented in their community - empowering local chambers to make that determination themselves.

DOSEM's mission — to advance social and economic mobility for all Marylanders by removing barriers, investing in inclusive opportunities, and aligning state resources to support historically underserved communities and businesses — aligns directly with the goals of this bill, making them a natural fit for overseeing its implementation. By expanding access to networks and building social capital for aspiring entrepreneurs, this program creates pathways to economic opportunity for the next generation of business leaders.

I respectfully request a favorable committee report on SB 924.