

SB 417 - Labor and Employment - Mandatory Meetings on Religious or Political Matters - Employee Attendance and Participation (Maryland Worker Freedom Act)

Finance Committee

February 18, 2026

Position: UNFAVORABLE

MHLA is the sole statewide organization dedicated to advocacy on behalf of Maryland's lodging industry. Our industry is a powerful economic engine - 765 hotels support more than 115,000 jobs statewide, generate \$7.2 billion in wages and salaries, contribute \$2.4 billion in state and local tax revenue, and drive \$10.6 billion in guest spending that strengthens communities across Maryland.

The Maryland Hotel Lodging Association (MHLA) respectfully submits this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 417.

SB 417 would prohibit an employer from discharging, disciplining, threatening, or otherwise penalizing an employee—or refusing to hire an applicant—because the individual declines to attend or participate in an employer-sponsored meeting during which the employer communicates its opinion regarding “political matters” or “religious matters.” While the bill does not prohibit employers from expressing their views or holding such meetings, it removes an employer’s ability to require attendance at meetings that fall within these definitions.

MHLA has several concerns with the scope and implications of the bill as drafted.

The bill defines “political matters” to include proposals to change legislation, regulations, or public policy, as well as the decision to join or support a labor organization. **These terms are expansive.** “Public policy,” in particular, is not defined and could encompass a wide range of issues affecting Maryland employers, including public health, workforce development, taxation, tourism promotion, and environmental regulations.

Because the bill applies whenever an employer communicates its “opinion” regarding such matters, employers may face uncertainty in determining whether a particular meeting falls within the statute. **This ambiguity creates litigation risk and may discourage employers from communicating with employees on important matters that directly affect their workplaces and industry.**

The definition of “political matters” expressly includes “the decision to join or support... a labor organization.” As a result, the bill would apply during union organizing campaigns.

Under existing federal law, employers have the right to communicate their views regarding unionization, provided they do not threaten or coerce employees. **Mandatory meetings have historically been one mechanism through which employers ensure that employees receive information and hear the employer’s perspective - without reprisal from coworkers - since everyone is required to attend.**

By prohibiting employers from taking action when employees decline to attend such meetings, SB 417 alters the practical balance established under federal labor law and may invite preemption challenges under the National Labor Relations Act. At a minimum, it creates uncertainty for employers operating in an area already governed by comprehensive federal regulation.

The bill authorizes complaints to the Commissioner of Labor and Industry, civil penalties of up to \$25,000 for

subsequent violations, injunctive relief, reinstatement, back pay, compensatory damages, and attorney's fees. Given the breadth of the statutory definitions, employers may face significant exposure based on disputes over whether a meeting constituted communication of an "opinion" on a covered topic.

The combination of broad terminology and substantial remedies increases the risk of costly investigations and litigation, even where employers act in good faith.

Only a small number of states have enacted similar legislation, and active legal challenges are pending in jurisdictions such as California and Connecticut. The unsettled legal landscape further counsels caution before adopting similar provisions in Maryland.

For these reasons, MHLA respectfully requests an Unfavorable Report on Senate Bill 417.

For more information, please contact:

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