



JUSTICE FOR ALL

MARYLAND SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
TESTIMONY OF MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE

IN SUPPORT OF SB626 – BIRTH CERTIFICATION MODERNIZATION ACT

February 25, 2026

Susan Francis
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Chair Beidle and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 626.

My name is Susan Francis, and I am the Executive Director at the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS). MVLS is the oldest and largest provider of pro bono civil legal services to low-income Marylanders, and our mission is to reduce barriers to justice through free civil legal help, community engagement, and advocacy for equitable laws. Since MVLS’ founding in 1981, our statewide panel of over 1,700 volunteers has provided free legal services to over 115,000 Marylanders in a wide range of civil legal matters. In FY25, MVLS volunteers and staff lawyers provided legal services to 3,233 people across the state.

In our 45 years, we have assisted nearly 1,200 individuals with name changes, gender changes, birth certificate corrections, and other identification issues. Having accurate and current identification is critical to the basic needs that we’re all seeking to obtain including housing, employment, and accessing programs and benefits.

While accurate identification is essential to daily life, the process to obtaining those correct documents and records can be very challenging, particularly for individuals with limited income and resources. It is not uncommon that many of MVLS clients that receive legal help related to their identification don’t technically have a legal component, but they are unable to navigate the administrative barriers without having legal advocacy to get the issues resolved.

As noted, MVLS assists many low-income individuals throughout the state with identification and birth certificate issues, because it is such a substantial barrier. We particularly see identification and birth certificate issues regularly burdening Marylanders in our workforce development project, where having accurate identification is essential to employment opportunities, and in our Human Trafficking Prevention Project, where we assist many survivors

resolve their documentation and identification issues so that they may move forward with rebuilding their life by securing stable housing and employment.

I personally have assisted several clients with birth certificate issues and have seen first hand how challenging the administrative process can be. Even as an attorney, I have had to navigate challenging and frustrating barriers that took a significant amount of time and effort to resolve the issue for my clients.

One client I helped was Ms. W who needed a copy of her birth certificate and was given a flat out no by the Division of Vital Records. The ultimate resolution required my involvement, engaging with the Attorney General's Office, and filing a name change for her. In the interim, she struggled with not having sufficient identification for trying to rent a better situated apartment for her and to receive her medical care, as she had a number of chronic health issues. During the months it took to resolve the matter for her, she was forced to carry a letter from me explaining the situation so that she could have her basic needs met.

The Birth Certificate Modernization Act would streamline what is currently a burdensome process to ensure that birth certificates remain accurate. SB626 would make it easier for parents to change their names on their children's birth certificate, for individuals to change their gender marker on their birth certificate, and permit the use of a "X" gender marker on a birth certificate. It will bring the practice in alignment with existing processes for MVA and state licenses which were updated in 2019, reducing confusion and inconsistencies amongst government agencies.

For these reasons, we **strongly support SB 626** and ask you to do the same. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.