

Testimony in Support of HB 524 With a Small Clarifying Amendment

Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the committee,

Good afternoon. My name is Fatmata Barrie. I am a commissioner on the Governor's Commission on African Affairs and chair of the Commission's African Heritage Month Working Group. I am here today to testify in support of HB 524 with a small clarifying amendment to ensure the language recognizes the contributions of African immigrants and their descendants in Maryland.

Maryland is home to one of the largest and most vibrant African immigrant communities in the United States. Today, more than 200,000 Maryland residents were born in African countries, and Maryland ranks fourth in the nation in the size of its African immigrant population. When we include the children of African immigrants who were born and raised here in Maryland, the size and influence of the African diaspora community grow even larger.

Our region, particularly Montgomery County and Prince George's County, has become one of the most significant hubs for African diaspora communities anywhere in the United States.

African immigrants in Maryland come from dozens of countries across the continent, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Cameroon, Sierra Leone—where I am from—Liberia, and Kenya, as well as growing communities from Southern Africa and Uganda, among many others.

Across Maryland, African immigrants and their families are small business owners, healthcare professionals, educators, engineers, lawyers like me, entrepreneurs, public servants, and community leaders. Like so many Marylanders, African immigrants and their families are taxpayers, business owners, and active participants in the civic life of our state.

Montgomery County was the first local jurisdiction in the country to officially recognize African Heritage Month, and the celebration has continued for more than 15 years.

As a member of Montgomery County's African Affairs Advisory Group and co-chair of the Cultural Working Group, I worked with the All Cameroonian Cultural and Development Foundation and other African community organizations to help plan African Heritage Month celebrations, including PanAfest at the Silver Spring Civic Center, a major cultural event that brought together communities from across the African diaspora and drew more than 15,000 attendees. Events like

this not only celebrate culture and heritage, but they also bring communities together, support local

businesses, and demonstrate the significant role the African diaspora plays in Maryland's economic and civic life.

I also want to thank Governor Wes Moore for being the first Maryland governor to proclaim September as African Heritage Month statewide in 2024. That proclamation recognized the important contributions African immigrants make to the cultural, economic, and civic life of Maryland, and this bill would ensure that recognition continues every year.

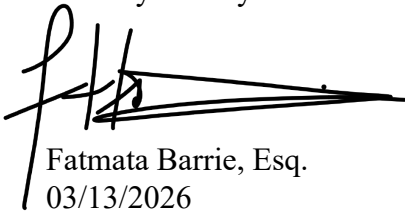
African immigrants and African Americans share deep historical and cultural ties and recognizing African Heritage Month provides an opportunity to celebrate the broader global African diaspora and the many ways our communities contribute to Maryland.

For these reasons, I respectfully support HB 524 and request consideration of the following amendment:

“THE GOVERNOR ANNUALLY SHALL PROCLAIM THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER AS AFRICAN HERITAGE MONTH IN RECOGNITION OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS THAT AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS HAVE MADE TO THE STATE OF MARYLAND.”

By recognizing African Heritage Month statewide, Maryland can lead by example and acknowledge the lasting contributions that African immigrants and their families continue to make to the cultural, economic, and civic life of our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



Fatmata Barrie, Esq.
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