



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 5, 2026

Testimony in SUPPORT of HB 1356: Maryland Employee Civic Activity and Lawful Expression Protection Act

Summary: HB 1356 establishes clear, enforceable protections so Maryland workers can engage in lawful civic, political, and expressive activity outside of work without fear of retaliation, coercion, or blacklisting. The bill safeguards employees across public and private sectors while preserving employers' authority to address conduct that genuinely interferes with job performance or violates the law. By defining firm boundaries between employment and civic participation, HB 1356 strengthens democracy, protects workers, and provides clarity and stability for employers across Maryland.

Background: Across Maryland and the nation, employees increasingly report fear of professional consequences for lawful civic participation. [Research from the Economic Policy Institute](#) shows that workplace power imbalances allow employers to control lawful expression, chilling democratic engagement and limiting public participation to those insulated from economic risk. Employer authority over speech contributes to widespread self-censorship, reducing civic involvement and diminishing public discourse.

These chilling effects are evident in multiple surveys showing that many workers alter or withhold their political views out of fear of negative repercussions. [A nationwide poll](#) found that 74 % of employees adjust how they communicate at work to avoid conflict, and 68 % have held back political opinions due to concern about how their affiliation might be received. Additionally, 43 % of workers report having witnessed or experienced discrimination tied to political expression in the workplace. [A separate survey reports](#) that 60 % of employees believe discussing politics at work could carry negative consequences, and 54 % worry that sharing political content on social media could lead to adverse impacts at their job. These findings are [echoed by research showing](#) that about 20 % of U.S. workers say they have been treated poorly by coworkers because of their political views, and 13 % report that their political identity has limited their career advancement.

Scholarly research further illustrates the broader effects of self-censorship. [A peer-reviewed study published in *Current Psychology*](#) found that when employees perceive a mismatch between their political beliefs and their organization's dominant norms, they are more likely to withhold



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their views — and that this self-censorship is directly associated with lower job satisfaction, decreased social connection at work, higher burnout, and greater intent to leave their jobs. This research underscores how fear of expressing lawful views not only affects civic engagement but also harms workplace well-being and long-term organizational health.

Taken together, these data show that fear of workplace consequences — whether through formal discipline, social ostracism, or stalled opportunities — discourages employees from fully participating in civic life. Workers who feel compelled to self-censor are less likely to testify before government bodies, volunteer, protest, or otherwise contribute to public discourse. This dynamic concentrates civic influence among those insulated from economic risk, undermining the participatory democracy Maryland seeks to foster.

Recent high-profile cases illustrate the stakes. Employees have been disciplined or terminated after off-duty speech went viral, not because it was unlawful, but because public pressure mounted against their employers. For example, after the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk in 2025, [dozens of employees, from media analysts to educators and airline staff, faced suspension, firing, or disciplinary action for personal social media comments.](#)

These examples show how viral speech can trigger reputational pressure that results in employment actions unrelated to workplace conduct, fostering fear among employees about engaging in civic life online or in public.

HB 1356 will also benefit employers and this balance is critical. In an era of heightened scrutiny and rapid public reaction, businesses face reputational and economic risks when pressured to police lawful off-duty conduct. By establishing clear, consistent standards, the bill shields employers from conflicting demands and reduces uncertainty in the “court of public opinion,” allowing leaders to focus on their core missions with confidence.

Bill Overview: Current Maryland law does not provide comprehensive protection for lawful off-duty civic activity. HB 1356 addresses these gaps through a balanced and responsible framework:

- **Protects lawful civic, political, and expressive activity outside work.** Employees may participate in public life without risking their livelihoods.



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- **Prohibits retaliation and compelled political speech.** Employers cannot discipline workers for protected civic engagement or force ideological conformity.
- **Prevents ideological screening, surveillance, and blacklisting.** Employment decisions must be based on job-related criteria, not political beliefs or lawful activities.
- **Covers a broad workforce.** Protections apply to public and private employers and extend to interns, temporary workers, and other non-traditional employees.
- **Preserves legitimate employer authority.** Employers retain the ability to act when conduct materially interferes with job performance or violates the law, and must prove any exception.
- **Provides enforcement and accountability.** Employees may go directly to court, strong remedies deter retaliation, and waivers that undermine protections are prohibited.

Conclusion: HB 1356 reflects Maryland's commitment to a vibrant, participatory democracy and to fair, modern workplace standards. It ensures no worker must choose between a paycheck and participation in civic life, while providing employers with clarity, balance, and protection from undue pressure.