



**2026 SESSION
POSITION PAPER**

BILL: SB 459 – Procurement – Advertising – Maryland News Organizations (Local News for Maryland Communities Act of 2026)

COMMITTEE: House – Government, Labor, and Elections

POSITION: Letter of Concern

BILL ANALYSIS: SB 459 would require a unit of State Government, including Local Health Departments, to ensure that at least 50% of advertising procurement monies are dedicated directly to Maryland news organizations that must meet certain criteria.

POSITION RATIONALE: The Maryland Association of County Health Officers (MACHO) respectfully submits a Letter of Concern for SB 459. MACHO values local and state media outlets for their focus on community but has significant concerns regarding the bill’s impact on the day-to-day capability of our Local Health Departments (LHDs) to effectively and efficiently reach Maryland residents with essential public health information and resources within procurement guidelines and budgets, while recognizing challenges for border jurisdictions.

SB 459 would severely limit advertising outlet options. Currently, most Maryland news organizations offer minimal, focused advertising strategies that typically do not meet LHD ad needs. Content is frequently behind paywalls, making the information unavailable to many groups LHDs must reach. LHDs require flexibility in advertising procurements to ensure strategies effectively reach intended, often high-risk, populations, many of whom do not regularly consume information from traditional news outlets. This means LHDs must supplement outreach via social media, local media, billboards, wraps, and other print outlets, for example, some of which are not Maryland-owned, to achieve LHD objectives. Jurisdictions bordering other states, especially in Western MD, where Baltimore media is not the focus, rely on out-of-state media outlets to reach their catchment areas. **Limiting LHDs to Maryland news organizations will translate into limited population reach, inefficient funding utilization, and compromise public health knowledge and access.**

To ensure clear and consistent adherence to advertising regulations, **LHD employees responsible for advertising procurement require clear definitions of which companies are eligible based on the services they provide.** The current definition does not provide clarity about billboards, public transportation vehicle wrapping, and various other advertising methods LHDs frequently use to reach their target populations.

Finally, SB 459 places a significant administrative burden on LHDs to ensure advertising procurement compliance and could conflict with locally established procurement procedures used by LHDs. Notably, LHDs may be unable to access information that this legislation requires, including the percentage of a news organization’s Maryland news coverage, intended audience ratio, and the receipt of specified grant funding sources. These requirements will create significant inefficiencies in LHD advertising procurement processes and serve as barriers to effective public health advertising and communication.

Concerns are further described on page 2. For these reasons, the Maryland Association of County Health Officers submits this Letter of Concern for SB 459. For more information, please contact Ruth Maiorana, MACHO Executive Director at

HOUSE HLT Committee

SB 459

MACHO LOC

Pg 2

Bulleted Lists of Concerns:

Operational & Emergency Risks

- **Emergency Messaging Delays:** The bill lacks exemptions for time-sensitive public health crises (e.g., disease outbreaks or vaccination drives) where procurement delays could cost lives.
- **Diminished Reach:** Mandatory local spending limits may prevent LHDs from reaching high-risk populations who do not consume traditional news or who live in border jurisdictions (like Western MD) served by out-of-state media.
- **Ineffective Strategy:** Public health campaigns are data-driven based on audience reach; a 50% mandate may force "wasted" spending on outlets that do not align with the target demographics.

Scope & Compliance Issues

- **Broadened Requirements:** The removal of "print or digital" language implies the 50% target now includes outdoor advertising (billboards, bus wraps) and broadcast media, which are essential to LHDs but often do not meet the bill's "local news" definition.
- **Unachievable Targets:** Because many high-visibility vendors (like transit shelter ads) will never qualify as local news organizations, LHDs may find it mathematically impossible to reach the 50% threshold.
- **Definition Ambiguity:** There is no clear verification process or central registry to determine which outlets qualify, leaving LHDs to make inconsistent and potentially incorrect determinations.

Procurement & Administrative Burden

- **Increased Costs:** Establishing a verification mechanism or hiring third-party consultants to track eligible news organizations would create significant, unbudgeted expenses for LHDs.
- **Procurement Conflicts:** It is unclear how the mandate interacts with existing small procurement thresholds (\$4,999) or long-term statewide term agreements typically used by some LHDs.
- **Data Inaccessibility:** LHDs are required to track data they cannot easily access, such as an outlet's percentage of Maryland-specific coverage or their grant funding sources.

Equity & Financial Impact

- **Inequity for Small Budgets:** LHDs with smaller budgets face a disproportionate burden, as fixed costs for outdoor media make the 50% local news target harder to hit.
- **Information Paywalls:** Many Maryland news organizations use paywalls, which contradicts the LHD's mission of providing free, accessible public health information to underserved communities.