

Testimony Opposing HB0356
Human Relations – Protection of the Free Exercise of Religion
UNFAVORABLE

February 13, 2026

Delegate Melissa Wells, Chair; Delegate Kenneth Kerr, Vice Chair; and esteemed members of the House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee:

I am writing to ask you to return an unfavorable report on House Bill 356. This bill would prohibit a governmental entity, such as the State, a county, or a municipality, or an individual employed by a governmental entity, from burdening an individual's free exercise of religion unless the authority demonstrates that doing so is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest and that it is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest. The bill also authorizes civil penalties in the case of violations.

This bill seeks to elevate religious freedom rights at the expense of other rights, particularly those of LGBTQIA+ Marylanders. Although the protection of religious liberty is an important right all Americans enjoy under the U.S. Constitution, laws purporting to preserve religious freedoms have been applied harmfully in the past to discriminate against vulnerable people. Specifically, businesses have relied upon religious freedom laws to deny goods and services to LGBTQIA+ individuals, women, and religious minorities.

HB0356 would undermine Maryland's existing well-established discrimination laws and is simply unnecessary. In addition to potentially being used to detrimental effect by denying goods and services to disfavored groups based on religious objection, the bill's penalty provisions could authorize dubious legal actions that would waste government resources to defend. We should not create a license to discriminate, or to create exemptions from nearly any existing law under the guise of religious freedom, as this bill would do.

For these reasons, I urge the Committee to report unfavorably on HB 0356.

Respectfully Submitted,

Melinda Littell

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